



## Episode Fifty-Two

### **Boxer Falls: Episode 52**

By: Damon Suede

A wedding cake doesn't happen by accident.

Adam had only wanted a trip to City Hall, a modest get-together, and a quiet honeymoon, but Zach had pushed and pushed. With only a few days until they tied their knot, his nutty fiancé had called in every favor owed to the Boxers and the Cottens to make sure Adam got the fairytale Berkshires wedding that neither of them had ever wanted.

So... as usual, Zach had made a big mess out of love and enthusiasm. But as usual the specifics had gotten away from him and with only a week until the "I dos" a quick trip to the Justice of the Peace had become a royal wedding patch-worked together out of borrowed tents and rented tuxes.

Phil's death should have scuppered the whole deal, but unaccountably, Grady became fixated on the idea that this wedding was what Phil needed to rest easy. The town had rallied 'round to support him and these nuptials had taken on a monstrous life of their own. Zach and Grady had to be in shock, but both were so anxious about disappointing each other, and Adam, that he didn't have the heart to pull the plug.

Illusions are terrible things. In the week before Christmas, Adam had found himself stepping in to save the hullabaloo he didn't want, to please the only person he cared about.

The original date had been pushed forward so that they could get married on New Year's Eve. The simple ceremony in front of their close family had become a massive groom-a-palooza with a hundred and fifty guests. Zach still blamed Grady for the accident, and Grady blamed himself. Adam just wanted to say the vows and have done.

Adam knew he could cope; food was what he did and he excelled at planning events. And then, on New Year's Day, they'd be off on a honeymoon that would get them clear of Boxer Falls and all its bullshit.

What he wanted to do was conk Zach on the head, stow him in a steamer trunk, and load him onto a plane headed for Montreal.

But Zach wanted him to have this big, stupid wedding. And he wanted to make Zach happy, so they were both going to have a wedding that neither wanted.

All because neither of them had the heart to speak up.

*Ah, marriage.*

Instead of flipping out, Adam had put all of his frustration into the cake. He wasn't a *pâtissier*, but the towering fondant edifice was a dessert fit for a Kennedy. *Nothing traditional need apply.* He knew Zach liked strong flavors, so he'd gone overboard; he'd

prepared a kiwi mousse with peppered mocha gâteau. The cake itself was so delicate that he'd built an elaborate structure with the icing to support its weight.

Every time he started to freak out about the invitations, the flowers, or the suits, he just came back to the kitchen and elaborated further. Though no one would know but him, the final product looked like a tower of angelic luggage. If nothing else, the pictures would end up in a magazine somewhere.

Adam tried to look on the bright side. In a week he'd be married and all this craziness would die down. The Boxers could grieve, Zach and Adam would start making plans about their futures outside Boxer Falls, and life would go back to pretty damn happy.

As long as he could keep his groom from surprising him.

\* \* \*

What's grimmer than a corpse on Christmas?

Conrad had never thought that spending this particular morning in the morgue would feel so festive, but he wouldn't have been anywhere else.

*Poor Phil.* The big moron had filled his stocking to overflowing. *Couldn't be helped.* Conrad hadn't seen or spoken with Grady since that horrible night.

Trip's insane ultimatum had jeopardized their chance at a stable life. Conrad couldn't risk those photos falling into the Sheriff's hands. In the past, he'd have been able to grease the wheels of justice but if the last year had taught him anything, it was that the cover-up always got you caught.

In a few hours, Phil's body would be transferred to the medical examiner's office. There would be an inquest and a funeral and then the rest of their lives together. Grady was almost free... and then the future.

Grady was a beloved figure in Boxer Falls and Phil had stuck his key into plenty of locks around town: adulterous husbands experimenting on the down low, tradesmen looking to get their ashes hauled, even tourists who figured a vacation entitled them to a fling with a hunky, inbred local. Apart from Grady and the boy, not many people would vouch for Phil's character. He'd be mourned, but only some of the tears would be wet.

Grady had been careless enough to call him before the cops; Trip had his balls in a vice; so Conrad had done what he did best: He'd gambled. *Better to lose big than win small.*

He knew he'd need law enforcement on their side. Sheriff Neale had a small-town mushiness that made deals hard to broker, but maybe Diego Sanchez. For a local cop, he'd shown an uncommon attention to detail.

So Conrad had made a call and Sanchez had agreed to hear him out. Meeting at the old observatory after ten, they'd spoken in hypotheticals: *If Conrad was being blackmailed, if Grady hadn't called the police immediately, if there was a serious physical threat to the town and its people, if Trip Whitlock had returned for retribution...*

In the shadow of the old planetarium, parked under the pines, Conrad had rolled the dice and bet that this ambitious cop could see the sense in picking a side in someone else's fight. To his credit, Diego hadn't laughed. He'd listened patiently and taken notes and then left Conrad to do some checking. Diego suggested they visit the morgue. Twelve hours later, he'd agreed by texting two words: "quick trip."

And nearly a week later, Conrad had received another text: "CHRISTMAS MOURNING" which let him know when and where they'd speak next... The U was no accident, it pointed to the morgue and the time of day. Today's follow-up with Diego was a terrible risk, but he was running out of cards to play.

The side door was open and the halls were dark. A thin slice of lamplight drew him back to the mortuary where he found Officer Sanchez standing over Phil's cold corpse.

Conrad stopped in the doorway. "Jesus. I don't need to see him." He felt an uncomfortable sense of triumph. The greatest single obstacle to his happiness had removed himself. Phil had dealt himself out of the game.

"No need is there?" Diego didn't pull back the sheet covering the big body. "You can imagine what's under here. Hypothetically, of course."

Conrad stared at the speckled violet foot where the sheet had tugged back; a manila tag hung from one squat toe. *Phil had ugly feet.* That knowledge gave him a weird sort of relief. "Then you believe me. About Trip and...everything."

Diego cracked his neck, theatrically, as if demonstrating how much all this double-time would be costing, as if Conrad cared about the price tag. "I don't need to believe you, Mr. Cotten. I spent most of Christmas Eve dismantling the explosives you reported. This Trip Whitlock character spent quite a bit of time and money to damage your name."

*Price tag.* Again he glanced at the tag on the ugly toe and its thick nail, blaming himself for making the wrong choice all those years ago. "Impossible."

"No...Improbable. Mr. Cotten...With all due respect, the problem with most criminals isn't evil, it's stupidity. Setting off that much C4 requires a signal. Signals can be tracked."

"And you located the charges?"

"Most of them." Diego leaned back against the drawers wearily, resting an arm on Phil's metal slab. "Blake Hartnett has some demolition experience. I have friends with

Homeland Security. We spent two days combing the real estate and businesses associated with the Cotten family."

"That's it?"

"Sir, that's a significant slice of the property in town. What we don't know is what he plans to do to your family?"

Diego flipped back the sheet to show Phil's mottled face and the steel-grey buzz cut. Aside from the unhealed scrapes across his nose and brow, he looked almost asleep except for an odd tilt that made his neck look too long for his head.

"Oz and Rider know how to protect themselves."

"And Zach?"

Conrad worked his mouth helplessly until the words came. "Has suffered plenty already. And I've promised I'll attend the ceremony – I promised his father and him. Zach asked me to serve as his best man because of well, the circumstances."

"Of his birth, or now." Diego toyed with the sheet as if about to reveal the sucking wound where Phil's heart had been.

*Yes, please.* Conrad shook the thought out of his head. "I'm sure Trip wished the Boxer boy no harm."

"Are you willing to take that risk?"

Conrad nodded. "Aren't you?"

"Not my family, is it?" Diego raised his dark eyes suddenly. He looked smarter than he had a moment ago.

"Lucky man." He tipped his head to Diego and Phil's blotchy purple-grey face. "Grady blames himself. The boy blames him, too. And all of this is my damn fault. Merry Christmas."

"Or something." Diego shrugged. "What has Trip told you?"

Conrad paced a moment, shaking his head at the floor before answering. "Cozumel. I'm flying with him to Cozumel late on New Year's Eve."

"After Zach's wedding?"

"Mmph. A car service will meet me at the church. "

"Mexico? Trip Whitlock can't be that stupid. Why not Saba?" Diego sneered and rolled his eyes. "News flash: Catholic churches aren't exactly gay-friendly. *La mordida* can't buy everything down there."

"Not bribes." Conrad shook his head, and rolled his eyes in answer. "Not for the ceremony. After Zach Boxer marries the Parish boy, I'm supposed to meet Trip in Boston."

"He's trusting you?"

"No need for that. He has it in writing. I've met with my lawyers to alter my will and the family trusts, but besides those documents...No luggage, no itinerary, no questions allowed."

Diego's eyes searched the floor, as if he were solving a puzzle.

Conrad continued. "We're flying to Miami and the ship's captain will do the honors on some fucking boat to Mexico."

The sun was starting to come up. Windows high in the wall glowed with the early morning glare.

"We're running out of time, Sanchez."

"I'm going to make a suggestion." Diego spread his strong fingers. "Go through with your 'date' on the 31<sup>st</sup>. Boston at least. Accompany Trip on this elopement, without apprising him of the change in plans. Better for you that we handle him out of town. And I got friends in Beantown."

"I'm not going through with it. I won't marry that twisted shit."

"I didn't say you'd marry him. I said you'd go see him. We'll be seeing him, too. Far the fuck away from this place. Think of us as wedding guests."

"And what about...?" Conrad gestured vaguely at Phil on his long steel bed.

Diego rolled the drawer back into the wall. "An unfortunate holiday accident."

Conrad's hands shook but his heart soared. Was it possible he'd finally be able to undo the worst mistake of his life?

Diego nodded and stood up.

Conrad stood as well, keenly aware of the wall of cold steel drawers, the rows of corpses eavesdropping on their plan. *Could he pull this off?* He wiped his damp hands on his trousers. "You're not going to include Neale on this, I trust."

"Hardly." Diego snorted. "Vic will be on drunk duty. The renters get rowdy. Besides, I'm officially on leave through the new year. Tony and I had plans..."

"I'll make it up to you."

Diego tipped his head slightly in agreement. "I have every confidence, sir."

"Maybe you'll take Sheriff Neale's place."

"Mmmkh." Diego squinted and pursed his lips sourly. "I don't think so. I think I've outgrown law enforcement."

Conrad offered his hand and they shook firmly. "I don't know how to repay you, Mr. Sanchez."

"You know." The swarthy cop leaned back against the door that hid Phil from sight.

"I honor all my debts." He'd drive to Boston to clean up the loose ends and then he'd be free. Who said you can't buy happiness?

The room was brighter now; Christmas morning was upon them.

Diego nodded and his eyes calmly lingered over Conrad's face. "I expect you to. When this mess has been cleaned up, we'll have a conversation about my future in the Cotten organization." Diego crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm expecting your memory to be good."

Conrad considered Grady's last words to him, the decades it had taken him to get to this moment when everything was within reach, and at risk. "My memory is better than you can imagine."

Then Diego held the door open for him so he could step through into bitter air. The snow under the pine trees was a deep blue; the first tickle of sunrise fanned across the sky. Boxer Falls hadn't woken up yet.

"Well, Mr. Cotten." Diego raised his hand in a mock salute. "See you in church."

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At the last minute, Grady had forgotten which grave belonged to him.

"It doesn't matter," he'd said. And it didn't: Phil could take his pick of the plots they'd bought at Grady's insistence. *So practical*. Sitting in the funeral director's lumpy chair, he signed the releases and told the anxious man to honor whatever arrangements they'd made when they were being so sensible and optimistic. Phil had always been no-nonsense about death, so the insurance would cover it.

Still bruised and shaky, he'd met with the funeral director on his own, submitted the obit on his own, made the calls on his own. For the first time in his life, no one stood beside him and to fight that empty space took every ounce of effort he could muster.

At the hospital, Zach had refused to speak to him, maintaining the glacial silence when he stopped to pack a bag before moving into Adam's rough and tumble home in the days leading up to the wedding.

Grady had tried to explain, and he knew that Conrad had tried as well the next day, trying to be a temporary father at least... but Zach was so angry and full of blame that he couldn't see past Phil on the slab, going into the dirt. Zach had even asked Conrad to be his best man.

If Grady had ever doubted that Zach had a favorite among all his possible fathers, at least now Grady knew he was at the bottom of the list.

Today, light snow sifted from the dull sky as half the town came to watch Phil go into the ground. Getting dressed, driving over, Grady teetered close to collapse and in some petty corner of his mind, he wondered how many ex-lovers and fuckbuddies stood in the black-coated crowd around him. The self-righteous gloated, the old tricks sneered, and the rest had never understood his attraction toward Phil in the first place.

Grady swallowed a mouthful of sour spit. He tried to picture the ragged hole in Phil's chest he'd seen at the hospital, and wondered if they'd bothered to bury the heart or thrown it away.

Zach steered clear of him from the moment he'd arrived, keeping to the other side of the coffin and holding Adam's hand in a pitiless grip. He looked handsome and uncomfortable in the suit Phil had made him buy last summer, for his cousin's christening. Aside from the overwhelming grief, Zach's anger and disappointment toward Grady made standing in one spot almost unbearable.

He stood right at the edge of the dark hole, swaying. For once, he understood why widows threw themselves onto pyres and into graves. It wasn't for the person they'd buried, but for self-preservation.

A slim hand on his arm pulled him back into himself. He took a step back.

"So sorry for your loss," Cathy from the Beltane said. She wore a black wool cape and a brittle smile.

"Thank you," he said, the words meaningless syllables with the repetition. How many times would the same sounds come out of his mouth today? *A thousand? A million?*

The minister mumbled the usual empty nonsense, and then Phil was...gone, sealed into his box in the hard ground. *Heads he wins, tails I lose.* The mourners had lined up to comfort Zach and shake Grady's hand, Adam had steered Zach over, and whispered in his ear.

Zach stared at the ground, his frozen face slick with misery. Grady stared at his son, unsure what to say. Phil's death *was* Grady's fault and the entire town knew it.

Seconds passed.

Finally, Adam patted his shoulders and gave him a hug. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Boxer."

Grady nodded. "He was so happy for you. Both." Maybe the wedding would help. Adam would help Zach find his way home once they were married. "

"We've decided to postpone. —"

"No!" Grady looked up sharply, his face suddenly hot. "He wouldn't want that. You mustn't —"

"Good." Zach squinted at him, judging him. He turned, touched his father, and walked away, leaving Adam too shrug and fake a smile.

Grady patted the boy's shoulder. "It'll take time. I'll be there for the ceremony. And Adam, if you...If Zach needs..."

"We will. Take care of yourself." He hugged Grady hard, with surprising strength, and whispered, "I promise I'll take care of him."

Grady nodded and stepped back, looked at the floral arrangements and how the mourners scattering like hungry crows. He shivered.

"You cunt," came a choked voice behind him. "He's dead because of you."

Grady turned to face Tony, his eyes reddened. "He cared for you, Tony. I know he did"

Oddly, the ugliness relaxed him. His shoulders dropped and his breathing slowed as if he'd taken another Xanax. If Tony wanted him to feel more like shit, no problem. *Better than booze.*

"Cold comfort, huh?" A dumpy couple tugged at Tony trying to drag him towards the parked cars. They couldn't seem to look Grady in the eye. "I mean, after all, he was stupid enough to care about you *more.*" He yanked his arm free but then stomped away, with the couple trailing him.

Dot came up and snaked her arm through Grady's, as Ira walked up onto his other side. They'd flown back from Florida on Christmas night. Their tanned faces and weary eyes

relaxed him a little more. Suddenly, he was exhausted, so sleepy that his legs felt like they might give out.

"We're done here, kiddo," Ira said. "Let's get you somewhere safer."

Ira took his other arm. Flanked by his parents, Grady tried not to lean on them as he crunched away from the hole in the ground that held half his life.

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The façade of the First Presbyterian Church had been uplit with pale blue so that it shone a little in the dark pine and live oak that surrounded it. Quickly knotted bunting lined the walkway leading to its front doors. Some kind of holly and fir bough wreath snaked around the lit sign that read "Congratulations Adam & Zach." Some genius had projected an intertwined A and Z, and an overlapping P and B on the sidewalk around the church, so now all he could think was encyclopedias and peanut butter.

*Ugh. Small town queens.*

Out front, a muscular Hispanic man in a two-hundred dollar suit gave Trip the stink-eye, but lost interest as he retrieved his invitation. What was his problem? Maybe a security guard? The vestibule was scattered with a few locals so Trip widened his eyes and pretended to greet someone across the room.

Trip tugged the stolen invitation out of his inside pocket, rolling his eyes at the embossed champagne glasses. He handed it to the usher at the door.

The holidays were bad enough but a wedding on New Year Eve? He bit back his loathing of sentimental kitsch. He'd treat the entire event as an exercise in camp. Lord knows he'd developed an unhealthy sense of humor in the past twelve months stalking the Cotten family. Easy to do when God is a joker and you've spent your life as the butt. Conrad waited inside, along with his slice of sweet revenge.

The middle-aged man who thumped Trip on the back obviously had no clue who he was. "So glad you could make it!"

"Me too!" Trip double-gripped the offered hand and shook it firmly. "I wouldn't have missed it."

But the conversation stopped there as the chalky smile swung to the next dimwit entering the foyer. Trip stepped past twin brunettes in matching velvet dresses. Halfway up the redheaded bartender from the Bear and Bones stood, in a kilt, chatting with people.

"Groom or...Groom." The teenage usher at the door grimaced awkwardly. "I mean, Boxer or Parish." He jutted his chin to the right and left of the aisle.

"Well, neither. That is, *both* actually." Trip winked at the boy and then waved at an invisible friend to get himself inside the doors.

The families were down front and unaware that anything was wrong. At the end of the aisle, Conrad Cotten's silvery hair and beard bobbed above the crowd as he pressed hands and held court as if his life hadn't ended already. As if Trip didn't own him, body and soul.

About ten feet away, Grady Boxer was seated down front on the left, in a black suit, still presumably "mourning" for the lecherous lout he'd watched die. They'd buried the man on Boxing Day, but Zach Boxer's wedding waited for no man. *Heartless*. The Cotten blood obviously ran thick in that hoodlum's veins.

He seated himself in the back of the church. As each new guest arrived in their strip mall best, Trip struggled with the urge to either physically attack them or crow in exultation. Instead, he sat savoring the abject disgrace of Conrad Cotten and the

murmuring throng that would make that humiliation possible. All his friends, colleagues, and neighbors had come to suck at the fabled Cotten tit...

Trip smiled to himself and checked his watch. Eighteen minutes and then the fireworks would start. Easy enough for Trip to stand and take several steps. Best part, he'd be down the aisle before anyone realized what he'd done. Conrad would be trapped in front of all those eyes and before he could talk his way out of it, the deed would be done.

Trip wouldn't be able to burn Whispering Ridge to the ground yet...but he'd set the fuse and struck the match.

The pews were nearly full and the minister down front looked agitated, probably because he couldn't find hide nor hair of the two grooms.

*Slight change in plans, padre.*

What none of these yahoos knew was that the two grooms were already in a limo headed to Logan International Airport with tickets to Mexico and ten thousand dollars spending money. A half hour ago, Trip had made Zach Boxer an offer he couldn't refuse, waved money and tickets under his nose and bought this backwoods tack-fest for himself. *Instant gay marriage, just add faggots.* By the time he and Conrad were married, Zach and Adam would be on a plane to Cozumel, on their way to the honeymoon he would have preferred. *Next time.*

Still, Cozumel was their only wedding present. The gift Conrad had given him couldn't be wrapped and he'd get to open it for the rest of his life: the devastation of the entire Cotten family.

Looking back over her shoulder, Dot Boxer caught his eye and nodded in greeting, half-smiling as if she recognized him. She looked away again, which meant that she hadn't recognized anything out of the ordinary.

Listening to the organ, Trip allowed himself to spin and savor his imminent revenge and the ways he could force Conrad to participate. Oz would lose that ginger cocktease and with no explanation, his own father would be forced to blackball him from any respectable firm. Rider would probably end up turning tricks in Boston with sleazy shareholders to pay rent. *If only*. Trip's cock hardened at the thought.

Maybe for the honeymoon, he'd take Conrad to Beacon Hill and they could watch his boys whore and ruin themselves until Conrad had a nervous breakdown and had to be committed to the loony bin in Gstaad where Trip's mother still rotted.

*Happy New year!*

Conrad looked confused.

Oz hadn't seen Trip enter, seated in the back row.

Fucking hell, half the damn town had turned up. Of course, all these freeloaders knew that they'd be partying on Cotten's dime at Whispering Ridge. *Free shit always draws flies*.

All was going according to the plan. He'd seen Conrad's new will, the deed of trust, and the power of attorney. Once they were wed, the rules would change and he'd claim Whispering Ridge in *his* family's name.

Trip stood up, then strode down the aisle.

"Dearly beloved." He raised his voice to fill the church.

Conrad turned and watched him in horror.

"We are gathered here today..." He took Conrad by the arm and tugged the old man to his side.

"For a change of plans." Trip pushed him to stand in front of the bewildered minister and the silent guests.

Oz turned towards him, and Rider stood up in the second row; they both looked more embarrassed than afraid.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Fear swam in Conrad's watery blue eyes as they flicked over the guests, he tugged free.

The redhead clenched his fists. "Oi, what's your damage, princess?" But Conrad shot him a look and whatever violence he'd been about to offer settled. "Where the fuck is Adam?"

Conrad's voice shook. "Quinn, why don't you have a seat with... Grady. Mr. Boxer, rather."

Quinn glared at Trip but ambled to the front row. He sat beside the gray-faced Grady in a black suit. Oz slid into the seat beside him and held his hand, still looking baffled.

Trip squeezed Conrad's shoulders roughly and smiled. "Conrad and I didn't know how else to spring our little surprise on you. The boys have been so generous, putting all this together, keeping our secret." He pointed at the ceiling. "They're halfway to Chichen Itza by now."

Conrad stared at the wide eyed, muttering assembly. Grady looked ready to vomit. "It's okay. Everything is under control."

"The thing is, we wanted to share the happy news with you, and Adam and Zach had already done so much work, it seemed a shame to let it go to waste."

Trip noticed someone he'd seen in the parking lot; the burly Hispanic man in the cheap suit stepped through the doors at the back. *The hell is that?*

"Twat." Rider sneered and shook his head from his seat behind the redhead and Oz. A few folks had risen and the rustling turned into confused murmurs.

"We figured Conrad would be old." Trip climbed a step, and pulled Conrad along. "I'd be new." Another step. "The ceremony is borrowed." He turned to the Grady in the front row. "And you'd be blue."

A few gasps. People were rubbernecking but no one fled. *Everything under control.* After all, every inch of Trip said "nothing to be scared of"; he was tall, dark, handsome, and wearing a suit that cost more than several of the cars out front. Who would question him?

Conrad held his hands up. "If everyone would just have a seat."

"Thanks, hon." Trip flashed him a shark's smile. "The thing is, we wanted the whole town to witness our nuptials."

Blake Harnett appeared on the left aisle and nodded at the Hispanic man. *Wait a second. Isn't that guy a cop?*

An old woman in a grey suit gasped from the third row...Zach's granny no doubt. Another biddy tried to sneak into her jacket without standing.

The minister leaned over to hiss, "I'd like to know what the...*heck* you two busters think you're playing at." His jowled, pink face shook as he spoke.

Trip reached into his pocket and more people stood up. Did they think he was going to pull a weapon? What was panicking them? He pulled out the ring box. "Look, honey."

He popped the box open. Inside was a simple gold band. His mother's actually. Seeing Cotton shackled by this particular thin strip of metal would give him pleasure for the rest of his fully-financed life.

Several people in the back of the church stood up and gathered their children against their bodies as if about to exit.

"Mr. Cotten, it looks like this genius jumped the gun." The Hispanic man sounded oddly calm. He nodded at Conrad, who sagged in obvious relief.

"Sanchez." Conrad descended two steps as he backed away from his intended. "Trip, I'm afraid I've had second thoughts." He made some kind of signal to the cop at the back.

"Afraid not, dear." Trip spun and spat. "You have to have at least *one* thought to have a second." He felt the first slither of doubt between his shoulder blades. The Cottens couldn't have known, but maybe someone else had.

"That's more than enough, Whitlock." Sanchez opened a button on his ugly suit and started walking up the aisle.

Harnett edged up the side and another four men came through the doors headed towards the altar. Harnett chimed in. "Afraid not, son."

"You should be afraid." Trip climbed the short rise of stairs, sneering down at his would-be groom and the sweaty minister and the whole town he needed to ruin..." I've got some photographs that you might find very upsetting."

With a seasoned crack, the back doors swung open and a few of the guests slipped out. Conrad watched as the shoddy suits approached the altar.

*Tap tap.*

Big fingers on his shoulder made Trip spin like a scalded cat.

Sheriff Neale stood behind him, a wall of muscle in the uniform. "Do we have a problem?" Snow dusted his shoulders.

"No problem, officer. Wedded bliss." Trip glared at Conrad. Was he insane? Didn't he know what was at stake?

Sanchez nodded at him. "No problem at all, sir."

Trip snapped. "Conrad, I don't think these gentlemen understand how much I mean to you. How happy we're going to be."

"Trip Whitlock, I am arresting you for the murder of Phil Boxer."

In the front row, Grady Boxer stood up. "What?!" He opened and closed his mouth, supporting himself against the back of the pew.

"Grady, it's okay." Conrad held out a placating hand. "Stay back."

Next to grey-haired man, the kilted bartender stood up, leaning towards Trip, braced to attack. Behind him, the pews were starting to empty as snow swirled in through the open doors.

Trip shook his head, ruefully. "Conrad, you are making a terrible mistake. Have you forgotten my wedding presents." Surely Conrad wasn't selfish enough to see the entire town blown to smithereens just to see him framed.

"Why?" Conrad stood below him. He raised his eyes, with a cruel smile shared only with Trip, "Why did you do it?"

From the front row, Grady asked in a shaking voice, "Do what? What did he do?"

Sanchez was only ten feet away. "We understand perfectly, son."

"I'm not your son."

Sanchez stopped and planted his legs squarely beneath him. *Watch that one.* "We got the charges, Whitlock. All twenty one."

"Well, darn." Trip popped the button on his own suit, (*Dior, two grand, thank you*). "There goes most of my surprise."

Conrad backed away, determined to get far away from Trip.

The redhead hustled Grady to the side aisle.

And cops ringed Trip, no weapons yet, but soon...soon... their hands hung too loose at their sides.

"Aw, guys." Trip grinned. "Luckily, I was raised right. I never come to a wedding empty-handed." Trip flipped open his jacket, to reveal the C4 cummerbund beneath. He held up the trigger cylinder, his thumb over the blinking button.

A girl screamed. A man screamed. Then...pandemonium, as the church burst into frantic scrambling towards the open exit. Hundreds of legs thumped towards the cold night and the cars outside.

When Conrad barked something harsh and permanent-sounding at Grady, he stood as if startled awake and then slowly backed toward the doors.

"Whitlock." Sanchez looked nervous.

To the left, Harnett shook his head almost imperceptibly, some kind of signal again. Sheriff Neale probably. They were going to rush him.

*Not so fast, chief.*

"Conrad, I warned you." Trip came down the steps calmly. "You'll all be blue."

"Boys!" Conrad shouted at his sons. The redhead tugged at Oz, who kept turning back towards his father. Rider just hauled ass. In ten seconds, they'd be out the door, free and clear.

The cops and security inched towards Trip.

Trip looked down at Conrad, who stood frozen in the middle of the aisle...old man Cotten shaking his head, shaking his head *NO*.

"Kid?" Behind him, the Sheriff asked in a stern voice, "Do you understand what's going to happen to us if you press that?"

Trip nodded. "I do."

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Outside in the parking lot, the well-dressed families who huddled around their cars felt the blast as the stained glass windows blazed with color for one thunderous moment, then faded.

Overhead a plane arced past, headed somewhere warmer, but no one noticed.

Some folks screamed, some whimpered, some muttered into their phones in the dry crisp air. And faraway, under the fragile drift of snow, the shivering guests could hear the pack of sirens finding their way to the wedding party. *Better late than never*.

As the old year gave up the ghost, the blue and red glimmer in the dark grew brighter and what help there was crawled towards them through the narrow streets of Boxer Falls!"

**AUTHOR BIO:** Damon Suede grew up out-n-proud deep in the anus of right-wing America, and escaped as soon as it was legal. Though new to M/M, Damon has been writing for print, stage, and screen for two decades. He's won some awards, but counts his blessings more often: his amazing friends, his demented family, his beautiful husband, his loyal fans, and his silly, stern, seductive Muse who keeps whispering in his ear, year after year. You can get in touch with him at [DamonSuede.com](http://DamonSuede.com).



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

We, the organizers of *Boxer Falls*, would like to thank our readers and everyone associated with the Goodreads M/M Romance group, for a wonderful first season. A special thank you goes to all of our authors, who applied their talents to our continuing series and the Goodreads moderators who shepherded each broadcast.

Missed out on some of the episodes? Soon, all 52 of them will be available on the [Boxer Falls website](http://Boxer Falls website) as easily downloadable PDFs. It's been a helluva ride!

Our plans for *Boxer Falls* at this moment are unfixed, but we will take a brief hiatus to consider several possibilities for the show's evolution and a slightly different format for next season.

As always, you can find us on our website: [www.boxerfalls.com](http://www.boxerfalls.com). Check the site in February for details and exciting news. If you'd like notifications, [sign up for our newsletter](#) by clicking the link provided... or on our [website](#) and [Facebook](#) pages.

Thank you again for getting soapy with us this past year in *Boxer Falls*!

**Remember: What goes up *always* comes down.**