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Boxer Falls: Episode Fifteen

By: Jaime Samms

Adam hung back at the door to the Bear and Bones. What was he going to say to Dot?

*Sorry. I just had a moment. But I'm okay now. But I'll be leaving again soon...maybe...*

Right. Because *that* would go over well. He bit his lip and adjusted the strap of his gym bag , reluctant to move forward. Coming back had seemed like such a good idea when Max had said it in the bus stop. Now it just sounded like a page out of Zach's book. Adam was supposed to be the responsible one. The together one. He was supposed to be the one who made everything work.

Except that was a fat-ass, laugh a minute, joke. If he could make things work, he and Zach would be set up in a nice place, a shared bed, and a dog curled up on the rug somewhere far, far away from Boxer Falls. He ran a hand through his short hair and sighed.

“Hey.” Max had walked in ahead of him and he came back out now to peer at Adam. “Second thoughts?”

“Third or fourth or fucking eight millionth by now,” Adam admitted, once again spilling shit out of himself he hadn’t told anyone before. What it was about this guy, he had no idea, but finally, he looked up from the cracked concrete pad outside the Bear and Bones door and looked into eyes full of steady patience. “She’s going to be pissed.”

“Well.” Max put a hand on his back and lead him away from the doorway to allow a stomping, muttering couple through the entrance, and give them a little more privacy as he continued. “Here’s the thing. You have to figure your shit out. You want something, you go after it. You do it. If you want to cook, this is what you need to do. You need money, you need stability.” He shrugged and something hard passed over his face and was gone. “This Zach person clearly needs stability, if you’re going to get him.”

“I—“

“Shush.” Max softened the admonishment with a smile. “Trust me on this. You need this job and I need you around for when I’m ready to open. I need you accessible to consult with. I can run a business, but I need someone, a partner, who can run a kitchen. You go in there and talk to your boss. Make it up to her. Show me you have what it takes to run my place. This is the first step.” He patted Adam on the back and winked. “Own your own shit. That’s all.”

*Own my own shit.*

Adam nodded. He could do that. He’d screwed up, then tried to run away. He couldn’t leave Zach behind, or leave Dot and Ira in the lurch. Maybe he didn’t need a better job or a better place, or even a boyfriend. Maybe he just needed a plan. A thought-out one, that got him what he needed and he could worry about what he desperately *wanted* later. A plan that was about him and not Zach.

That thought left a hole the size of a fucking Mac truck in his gut. Everything was about Zach. Always had been. And maybe that was his problem. Even running, hell, even being in jail, had been more about Zach than about himself.

“Look where you are, Adam,” Max advised, once more placing that comforting hand on his back. “Is it where you thought you’d be now?”

Hell no. He and Zach were supposed to be long gone...

“You want something,” Max said again, “You have to take it. *You*. No one else is going to do it for you, and you can’t do it for anyone else. That way leads to people sitting at bus stops with their world packed up in a gym bag and everything they wanted spilling out of a broken heart.”

Some fucking guru this guy was. Adam chewed his lip, wincing at the raw edges where his teeth had worried away the top layer of skin.

But he was right. How long now? Ten years? And he was still where he’d been in high school, waiting for Zach to notice him. Waiting. Wanting something that was never going to happen. The hand on his back felt warm. Comfortable, steady, and he gravitated a step toward the man offering those things.

“Why are you doing this?” He asked, knowing he’d already put an unwarranted amount of faith in the word of a complete stranger.

“Because it’s my job to see potential. My mission is to fix broken things.”

Adam blinked at him.

“You’re both. There’s nothing wrong with letting someone help, is there?”

Adam studied the older man’s face, studied that thing in himself that wanted the comfort—the safe feeling curling around his fears and containing them securely where they couldn’t hurt him—to be real. Finally, he nodded, squaring his shoulders as he straightened. “Okay.”

Adjusting his bag one more time, he opened the door to the Bear and Bones and plastered a smile on his face over the hollow hole in his gut where Zach had been for so long.

“Hey,” he announced as he stepped inside. “Guess what?”

\* \* \* \*

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!”

“What?” Zach looked up from his contemplation of the linoleum on the waiting room floor to glare at Grady.

“It’s after three.”

“Yeah, and?” He couldn’t see how the time of day mattered. Phil didn’t know them any more now than he had an hour ago, or than he would an hour from now. He’d kicked everyone out of his room hours ago, but Grady refused to leave the hospital, in case something changed.

Zach sighed, pulled out his cell, and glanced at it. Grady was right. It was almost half past. And Adam hadn't called. Or texted. The euphoria he'd felt standing next to the soda machine was wearing off.

"We had guests checking in today," Grady said. He was slumped against the wall staring at the floor.

"Oh." Zack fingered the note in his pocket, imagining his best friend on a bus, speeding as far away from him as he could get. He closed his eyes, trying to hold back the churning in his gut. What had he done? Why had he...?

Fuck. Everything he touched, everything he thought was a good idea, turned to complete shit the moment he laid a hand on it. Maybe it was best that Adam was gone; escaped the Touch of Zach.

He pushed the phone back into his jeans pocket and stood. He should go by Adam's place and see. Maybe Adam had put the stash somewhere out of sight. The note was just to scare the shit out of him. Glancing around for his jacket, Zach tried to for a plan. He needed to see Adam. To grab another of those little joy-pills and then grab

Adam. There was nothing like that shit. Better than any other lay, ever, and they hadn't even done much. Yet.

And after, he could just be there, with Adam, and maybe not feel like his entire world was falling to shit. Because Adam was always there to hold him together and pick his shit up and put him back together. He could count on that.

Except that Adam had gone, left a note and hidden the pills, and the tabs Sam had given him. What was he supposed to do when that bastard came back looking for the money Zach wasn't going to have from selling them?

Every. Fucking. Thing. He. Touched.

Including Adam, and that was the worst part. Because Adam was supposed to be untouchable.

"Place is locked up tight." Grady said, drawing him back to the waiting room. His voice was flat, the words dull, but factual. "Maybe I could call Conrad."

“No!” Fury sliced through Zach, for the moment carving away thoughts of Adam and everything else. He turned on. “You can fucking go back in there and talk your fucking husband!” He pointed at the door to Phil’s room.

His entire body shook with the force of his emotion, backed by panic that Grady was about to walk out on them both, too. “And leave Conrad fucking Cotten out of this!”

He slapped a hand over his mouth. His eyes went wide as his father slowly turned to look at him. He never talked to Grady like that. Not ever. Bracing for the wrath only this stern man could muster for him, he swallowed hard.

The anger never came. He just got a look—so lost, so frightened, that Zach’s throat closed. Grady looked exactly like *he* usually felt. Out of his depth. Alone. He took a step forward and the next thing he knew, his father was collapsing into his arms, sobbing.

This was not how these things were supposed to go. Stumbling them both over to the uncomfortable chairs, he sat them down and stroked a hand over his dad’s back, unsure of what else to do.

Of course, that's when Conrad Cotten had to come around the corner. Zach shot him a scathing look.

"What's wrong?" Conrad asked, coming a few steps closer. "What happened?"

"Fuck Off," Zach spat, drawing his broken father closer and turning their bodies so Grady was somewhat shielded from the older man.

"I just want to help—"

"We don't need you," Zach growled. "*He* doesn't need you. He has his own family. Go back to your own screwed up life and leave us alone."

God. He sounded like a six-yr-old. Grady shuddered in his arms, and Zach held on a little tighter.

After a few moments, feet shuffled and he sensed that he and Grady were alone again.

“Dad?”

Grady sniffled but didn't otherwise move.

“Okay.” Drawing in a breath, Zach fought off the shaking fury, the doubt, and reached for his phone again. He didn't have to look to dial Adam's number. He didn't have to let go of the pieces of his family to call his best friend. Adam would know what to do. He always knew what to do.

He got only voice mail. “Damn. Adam? I need you. Where are you? Call me? Please?”

\* \* \* \*

Pandemonium greeted Adam's announcement. In fact, he realized that probably no one had even heard it.

Disgruntled patrons poked at their plates, grumbling loudly over the quality of the food. Quinn practically ran from one end of the bar to the other serving drinks to pushier-than-normal customers, and, curiously, not taking any money for them. *Odd.*

The couple who had stormed past Adam and Max on the sidewalk stood next to Dot. The woman glowered and crossed her arms over her expensive ski coat, and the man shouted, leaning slightly forward, spittle flying into Dot's face as he hollered.

Quinn jumped the bar and grabbed his arm. "Back off, asshole!" He hauled the man back and a few other men in the bar stood, or shoved their chairs back.

"I'm s-sorry," Dot stammered. "Please, you'll have to forgive the Boxers. It's been a very difficult few days..." she trailed off, clearly flustered.

"What's going on?" Adam moved into the room, Max at his side, and Dot did a double take.

"Adam, dear." She frowned slightly. "What are you doing here? I thought you had a bus..."

“Change of plans, Mrs. Boxer.” He turned to the belligerent man in Quinn’s grasp. “What’s your problem?”

“We had reservations at the Boxer’s B&B.” He made a face. “Place is locked up like Fort Knox. No one answering the phone. What kind of business do they run in this town?”

“We had reservations,” his wife muttered, still frowning.

“Okay.” Adam drew in a breath and let it out, thinking fast and settling back into his familiar place in the flow of the Bear and Bones. Front of house wasn’t his forte, but he’d been doing it long enough to know the ropes.

“Mrs. B, maybe I should get back in the kitchen.” He glanced around at the tables and the plates of picked at food. “Sort this mess out,” he muttered under his breath. “If you want to go to the B&B and get it straightened out, I know Zach’s folks would appreciate it.”

He turned all his tired, shaky charm on the bully still in Quinn's grasp. "I'll fix you a nice, hot meal, and a drink on the house?" He managed a smile. "Quinn, want to give these folks a table?"

Quinn grinned at him. "Yes, sir!" He saluted and winked and led the annoying, belligerent tourists off to a table in the corner, took their drink order and got back behind his bar.

"Adam?" Dot looked up at him. "Honey, what's going on?"

Adam gave her a weak smile. "I thought things over. Do you mind if I go back to the kitchen and start cooking?" Chairs shuffled against the floor as everyone settled back to their meals, though no one really appeared to be eating anything. "Looks like things need a bit of salvage work." How he would manage to feed a room full of grumpy, hungry customers with no prep done and a kitchen Dot had been cooking in, he had no idea.

"A bit?" she raised her eyebrows and at last, her usual smile broke across her face. "You know me, dear." She untied her apron and handed it to him. "Welcome back."

“Dot—Mrs. Boxer—“

“For tonight,” She interrupted, giving him her best, stern expression. “Get these folks fed, and then we’ll talk.”

“Right.” It was fair.

“If it’s all right with you, Ma’am,” Max spoke up and Adam almost jumped, having nearly forgotten his unobtrusive presence. “I can go on back and help out. Clean dishes, cut veggies. I know my way around a kitchen well enough. No need to pay me. I’ll just help Adam out for tonight.”

Dot’s brow creased. “And you are?”

“Name’s Max. Max Woolsworth. I’m a friend of Adam’s. Thinking of moving into town. He’s agreed to put me up.”

*I what?*

Adam shot him a look, but the man's attention was all smiling and open and directed at Dot as she took his hand and shook.

“Well, then,” she smiled warmly as she glanced between them. “This is good. Thank you.”

\* \* \* \*

“Friends?” Adam asked as he hurried through the door to the kitchen? “And I agreed to what now?”

Max just smiled, removed his jacket and his sweater to reveal some very nice, smoothly muscled arms. One arm sported a delicately winding rose vine that began somewhere under his t-shirt, twining downward to end at his wrist. .

Dot seemed to have stuck something gooey and black to the bottom of every single one of Adam's lovely pans. He frowned. The temper would be ruined, and some of them would have to be replaced.

“Just for tonight,” Max said, voice mild as he worked. “It’ll be late when we’re done here, and it’s hard to get the lay of the land in the middle of the night. I can sleep on the couch.”

“Pretty presumptuous of you.”

“You can always say no. I said it to get me into the kitchen. You didn’t seriously think you could feed that mob on your own, with no prep, did you?”

He had a point, and Adam relented. “Fine. But when we’re done, I’ll give you a cab to the hotel.”

“Whatever you want.” Max hummed quietly as he rinsed and loaded the dishwasher.

\* \* \* \*

Quinn hauled an armload of plates, still full of food, into the kitchen as soon as the bar was quiet enough to give him a chance to sneak away. The wait staff had gone into hiding, and he didn't blame them, given the mood of the crowd

“Calling it a wash tonight, boys,” he announced. “Just get them something hot and filling, Adam, and I'll keep 'em watered until it's ready. Won't be making any tips tonight unless you can wow 'em.”

“Long as we don't get lynched, I can live with it.” Adam said. “Hopefully, I've got enough ingredients to throw together something that will make up for the flood of free drinks and fill your tip jar.”

“Sure.” Quinn wouldn't hold his breath on the tips, but if Adam could get even a few of those sods out front to pay for something, it might mean Dot and Ira wouldn't go completely bust on the night. He spared a glance for the stranger at the sink, quietly minding his own dirty dishes. He wasn't bad looking with that mop of dark hair and his lean features. He obviously had a fascination with tats, and Quinn approved of that much at least.

The guy looked up at him and offered a sly smile. Not a flirty one. A competitive one. Quinn bristled and took a step closer to Adam.

“Dude.” He dumped the dishes on the counter next to Max and turned to Adam.  
“What were you thinking? No notice?”

“I wasn’t.”

“Thinking with your dick.” Quinn punched Adam’s arm, a little bit harder than playfully, to get his attention.

He couldn’t help notice the flinch, or the way the kid’s fingers tightened on his knife case. “Don’t,” he managed, though not very loud, and definitely hoarsely.

“You here to stay, or what?”

Adam shrugged.

“Sort it out, kid,” Quinn advised. “You can’t be doin’ this shit to the Boxers. They’ve been nothing but good to you.”

“I know.”

Once more Quinn glanced at Max. “Who’s he?”

Another shrug.

“You don’t have to run off to the big city to find trouble, kid. Be careful, yeah?” he said, more quietly. He couldn’t help feel a little bit protective of the young cook. For whatever reason. He didn’t want him in the way this Max guy seemed to, but recent events had him punchy. Jittery. Anything could happen between one breath and the next, and you wouldn’t notice.

Then cars crashed, and shit hit the fan, and the next thing you knew, you couldn’t breathe or think, and everything could go tits up in a second.

Shaking himself, Quinn moved off a few steps. “I gotta get back out there.”

“Sure,” Adam said, looking up at him and offering a weak smile.

“You do what you do, bartender,” Max said from his position elbows deep in the sudsy water. “Let us worry about the rest.”

Quinn backed out the kitchen door, hands held up in front of him. “Chill, dude.” The door swung back behind him and he made his way back to the bar. He couldn’t decide about the newcomer, and that was weird. Usually, he could tell what a guy wanted. Now, he didn’t even know what he wanted.

*Oz Cotten.*

*Oh hell no. Fuck that shit.*

Standing behind the bar, he felt that narrowing sensation again as he thought about it, about Oz and about That Night with him. Then about car crashes and hospitals

and how he was not ever going to step foot in a hospital room to look at what car crashes left behind. Not ever, ever again. Ever.

Not even for Oz.

Probably.

\* \* \* \*

“What’s that about?” Max asked after a few minutes. He was letting the water out of the sink and slamming the lid of the dish washer down. The noisy rattle and hum of it starting up filled the stretched silence.

“Nothing.” Adam set the knife case down and began unpacking the blades. “I need that counter cleared.” He pointed to the longest expanse of counter where a large chopping block was buried beneath mixing bowls crusted with dried...something. “I’ll get...stuff.”

After that, he and Max fell into an easy pattern. Max did know his way around a kitchen and with a restaurant full of grumbly patrons, Adam was glad of the competent help. I didn't matter that Max was a good ten years older than him, and probably ten years more experienced. He just did as Adam asked quick and efficient, and it was like having a second set of hands.

"I could get used to this," Adam admitted as they worked on trays of apple betty and chocolate mousse for desert.

"What's that?" Max asked, smiling at him, hands covered in the flour he had mixed into the crumble. He'd pulled his hair back into a tail that stuck almost straight out from the back of his head, pulling the otherwise invisible hair net out to encompass it. It left the long lines of his neck, his strong jaw, and the other end of the rose vine peeking from his collar, visible. His tight t-shirt rode up under the ties from his apron and Adam couldn't help glancing repeatedly at the glimpse of skin and more ink not quite revealing itself at the small of the man's back.

"Company," he blurted, when Max had stopped what he was doing to look at him curiously. "I could get used to the company."

“And the extra set of hands?” Max flexed his messy fingers, catching Adam’s attention with the way the tendons moved and the muscles in his forearms rippled ever so slightly.

“Yeah. That.”

Max laughed and went to rinse off. “Just another few hours,” He reminded Adam, “and we can get out of here.”

“Yeah.” Cool pain touched Adam’s finger and he swore. “Shit.” Hurrying to the sink, he stuck the cut under the running water.

“Clumsy.” Max took his hand and examined the damage.

“Distracted,” Adam replied, glancing up at him and smiling through the heat that rose into his cheeks.

That earned a softer smile and a wink, then Max was all business, bandaging the cut and wrapping it in protective gauze and a glove. “Cook now, get distracted later.” Max patted his hand and shooed him back toward the task of slicing apples. “I’m going to go help clear tables. Maybe that way, you can focus on the dangerous bits of your job.”

Adam managed to curb the goofier side to his smile a bit. He was being completely ridiculous. No one had ever got to him like this. No one except Zach.

That shut him down and he dropped his attention back to his work as Max swung out to the dining room. There was that hole again. Still there under the temporary balm of doing what he loved. What he was good at. He’d managed to cover it over for a while, but not fill it up.

Eventually, the last drunks went home. The wait staff left, and Quinn, looking exhausted but satisfied, divvied up the tips.

“Well done, kid,” He handed Adam his share and pushed a pile of bills towards Max. “And thanks. Couldn’t have managed without your help.”

Max shook his head. “No need. I was helping out a friend.”

Quinn eyed him, but shrugged and divided the money, handing another wad to Adam. “Suit yourself.” He pocketed his share and leaned on the counter, fixing the tall stranger with a look. “Need a ride somewhere?”

Max grinned at him, a cool expression that tipped his eyes from chilly to frosty. “Thanks. I’m good.”

Quinn turned his attention to Adam, one brow raised in question.

“It’s fine,” Adam assured him.

Quinn continued to look dubious, but after the afternoon and evening in the kitchen with Max, Adam was feeling much less nervous about the other man. Whatever reason he had for helping, it had meant, for once in a very long time, Adam had been fully immersed in something other than thoughts of Zachary Boxer. That had to be a good thing. Didn’t it?

“If you’re sure.” Quinn reached out a hand, palm up. “Give me your phone.”

Puzzled, Adam held it out.

Quinn tipped his head. “Contact list?”

“Oh.” Adam punched a few buttons before handing it over so Quinn could enter his number.

He kept glancing at Max as he did, something like warning in his eyes. “There.” He handed the phone back. “If you need anything.” One more look at Max. “I’ll see you here at nine sharp, yeah?” he asked Adam.

“Yeah.”

“Don’t be late, or I’ll be at your door with the Sherriff.” He didn’t once take his gaze from Max.

Max just smiled that chilly smile and placed a hand on the small of Adam's back.

It was a touch he could quickly become used to, Adam thought, but he reassured Quinn everything would be fine and the three of them left the bar, locking up behind them.

"He hot for you or something?" Max asked as Adam led him across the street toward his apartment complex.

"No. He's so not my type. He's a slut."

"Doesn't mean he's not hot for you," Max pointed out.

Adam had to laugh at that. "I'm a little young for him. He likes...experience." Adam shivered and quickened his pace a bit. "Not me."

"If you say so."

“Probably afraid he’d break me in half if he tried.”

“I think you’re probably a lot tougher than you look,” Max matched pace with him. “And he’s not half to mean as he wants people to think.”

“Whatever. I barely know the guy. He’s a good bartender. People like him. They tip. All that matters.”

“Hmm.”

“You don’t like him?”

“He thinks I’m going to do something to you.”

Adam stopped dead, turning in the street to look at him. It was too dark to see much but the shadowy outline of handsomeness. Pretty things could be dangerous. He’d already learned that the hard way. “Are you?”

“Depends.” Max moved a little closer. “Do you want me to?”

“Um.” Adam shivered more violently and almost sprinted towards his home.

“Hey!” Max chuckled as he caught up. “Relax. I don’t bite. Promise.”

“Not worried about biting.” Adam shoved his hands into his pocket, fumbling for his keys and sliding them between his fingers. How stupid was he? Hadn’t he already learned this lesson? He gripped his phone in his other fist and wondered how he was going to get out of this one?

“What do I need to do to convince you I have no intention of hurting you? I want to work with you, Adam. I want to help you.”

“Why?” That was the one question this guy seemed most unwilling to answer.

“Do I need a reason?”

Adam snorted. “Nobody does a damn thing for anyone around here without a reason. Usually, it has something to do with getting laid.”

This brought out another of those spontaneous, infectious laughs from Max. “Rest assured, Adam, if either one of us gets laid by the other, it’s because we both want it. That’s one thing I’m very particular about.” He touched his fingers to that spot on Adam’s back. “I already know my limits.”

That stopped Adam cold in his tracks.

“What?”

“Ah.” Max stepped away. “Here’s the B&B. Do you think if I ring, someone will answer?”

“I-I wouldn’t know.” Adam stared at the man, fear coiling in his gut. What the hell did this guy know? What could he possibly know? Why would he say that?

He didn't have a chance to ask because the door to the B&B opened and there was Dot, all smiles and welcome.

"Adam. How was service? Are you headed home?"

Adam stood rooted, staring, mouth too dry to speak.

"Service was just fine, Mrs. Boxer," Max stepped forward. "You are a lucky lady to have Adam here. He pulled a number of miracles tonight. You'd be proud."

Dot smiled. "Oh, I am. He's too good for us."

"Nonsense. He's just spreading his wings. You'll see. He's going to do wonderful things for your little pub." He turned to face Adam. "Do you need me to walk you home?"

"No!" Adam jolted back into the moment. "No. Thanks. I'm fine."

“Good. Than I’ll see you tomorrow.” Moving toward the steps to the front door of the B&B, he addressed Dot. “Think you can spare another room?”

“Certainly, dear. Come on in.” She waved him forward and Max sprinted up the steps. The movement revealed another of his tattoos and Adam could make out a Boston University logo splashed across his lower side, but it was distorted somehow, obscured by more ink, like he’d tried to have someone deface it. Weird, considering the sterling quality of the rest of his ink.

At the top of the stairs, Max turned. “Good night, Adam.”

“Yeah.’ He forced himself to meet the older man’s gaze. There was nothing sinister there. Not that he could see, anyway. “Night.”

“Goodnight, Adam,” Dot called as she ushered her guest inside. “Welcome to Boxer Falls, Max.”

\* \* \* \*

Quinn watched the two walk away before turning toward his own apartment complex. Then turning again and heading somewhere else. He wasn't interested in those four particular walls, the bed where he already knew he wouldn't be able to sleep, or the images of Oz Cotten.

How lame was that?

He craved a smoke. Something that hadn't hounded him in a long time.

“Man up, Asshole,” he told himself. No way was he going to wander aimlessly and let his subconscious lead him where he'd been resisting going ever since news of the crash had spread through town. If he was going to Oz, he was doing it on purpose, of his own free will, to put the whole sentimental crap to bed, once and for all.

He pulled out his phone and dialed.

“What?”

“Hello to you too, handsome.”

“What do you want?”

Quinn almost hung up, but no. He had to get this out of his system now, and move on. “Where are you?”

“Why do you care?”

“You drove off the road. Thought maybe I’d see you were okay.”

“I’m fine.” The line went dead.

Quinn frowned at the phone in his hand, but redialled. No way was this asshole hanging up on him. “Where are you?” he asked as soon as Oz’s voice came on the line.

“With Yoshi. Fuck off.” Again, the line beeped out and Quinn snarled. People did not hang up on him.

It didn't take long to get to the hospital. Getting inside was a whole other matter. He paced the drop-off zone jonesing for a cigarette and wishing he was anywhere but Boxer Falls. What the fuck kind of small town was this screwed up?

This was supposed to be a sleepy tourist trap where he could work and make tips and offer hospitality to vacationers he'd never see again. He was not supposed to give a flying rat's ass about anyone who actually lived here, and who gave a shit if he was mixing his metaphors?

He wanted a cigarette.

“Fuck!”

An ambulance attendant sitting on a bench just outside the bay looked up at him and smirked.

“What the fuck is your problem?”

“Nervous dad?” he asked. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure she’ll be fine.” It took a moment for Quinn to figure out what the hell the man was talking about. “Nervous...? Oh hell no!” he paced away and back again. “Hey,” he stopped in front of the driver. “You know anything about that car accident?”

The guy’s face grew serious. “You know them?”

Quinn shrugged without committing.

“Sorry, dude. No idea. I wasn’t even on duty. Just heard it was one hell of a mess. Duty nurse will know.”

Duty nurse. Quinn knew all about duty nurses and hospital procedures...fuck if he was going to go in there. No way in hell.

He dug out his phone again and rang Oz. It took three call backs before the bastard finally answered.

“What the fuck do you want?” He sounded pissed.

“I’m outside.”

“So?” There was a pause. “Why?”

“Told you,” Quinn muttered, wandering away to a more secluded spot where he might have a bit of privacy. “Came to see you’re okay.”

“Like you care.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” That was about as much concession as anyone was ever going to get out of him.

\* \* \* \*

Oz stared at Yoshi's still form on the bed. He seemed to be asleep, but it was hard to tell. Leaning over, he touched a finger to his friend's lips. "Hey." He said softly, moving the phone away. There was no response.

He pushed back in his chair and leaned his head back, speaking into the phone once more. "Why are you here, Quinn?"

"Come on down and find out."

That stupid, seductive son-of-a-bitch. Just his voice got to Oz, and that pissed him off. "I'm busy."

"Doing what? Keeping an eye on Yoshi? Not like he's going anywhere."

"You're a special one, aren't you?" Oz replied, anger finally getting him out of the chair. There was no way a slut like this bartender was going to get under his skin. "I'll

be right down.” No way was he getting anywhere near Yoshi. He was just a good lay. Gender didn’t figure into that, Oz decided, and he had no right coming around now and acting like he gave a shit.

He left the room as he hung up and almost ran into his father, backpedalling in a hurry. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you, son. Why are you still here?”

“Yoshi—“ He pointed back at the room.

“How is he?” Conrad’s gaze flitted past Oz to the closing door and he fidgeted, hand sliding into his pocket to play with something.

“No change.” Oz narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“Just...checking... on things. Everyone.”

“Checking?” Oz frowned and glanced through the window to Yoshi’s still body.  
“Why?”

Conrad didn’t answer. His gaze was fixed on the window as well, but he didn’t seem to really be seeing anything.

“Dad, I have to go. You should go, too. Home.”

“Right.”

Something was definitely not right with his father. He was distracted, and Oz realized he was still wearing the same clothes he’d had on when he’d come to the hospital right after the crash.

“Dad. Go home. I’m fine. No reason for you to be here anymore.”

“Yeah.” Finally, Conrad looked at him. “Yes, son, of course.” He smiled, but it was strained and preoccupied. “You’re right. Go on. I’ll be heading home.”

“Okay.” Oz walked away, leaving his father standing in the middle of the hallway looking slightly lost and confused. He shook himself. Not his problem. Whatever his father was doing or thinking it was not his problem. The old man had made his own bed, and whatever, or whoever, he’d dragged in there with him, Oz wanted nothing to do with any of it.

\* \* \* \*

Quinn waited at the front entrance, pacing just outside when Oz slammed through the doors to greet him.

He stopped, stared, gaze raking over Oz’s body. He was wearing sweats, ugly, but clinging, and revealing the same tall, straight strong body Quinn remembered. There were a few bruises, some scrapes on his face and the back of one hand, but nothing that was going to leave a permanent mark. Quinn didn’t know why he could suddenly breathe again, or why the craving for a cigarette vanished, just at the sight of a mostly unhurt Oz.

“You’re not hurt,” he blurted.

“What?” Oz frowned. “No. Just...a few bruises.” That had so not been what he was expecting.

“Good.”

“I thought so.”

Oz watched him warily, and he tried to relax. This was crazy. He moved before he really thought about it, and had his mouth over Oz’s, his fingers tangled in blond hair before either of them could stop it.

Oz grunted, stiffened, but the hand that came up to his chest didn’t push for more than a split second. The lips under his didn’t resist when he pushed his tongue in, either. It was only the need to breathe that had either of them pulling away.

“You’re not hurt,” Quinn said again, like an idiot.

“Not yet,” Oz muttered. Then he was pushing Quinn away, less roughly than Quinn might have expected. “Fuck, are you nuts?” He glanced around them but there was no one staring back. Quinn had to grin at the sudden panic on the older man’s face.

“Geez, chill, dude. It’s just a kiss.”

Oz took another step away. “I don’t kiss men,” he snarled.

Ouch. But maybe he deserved that after the way he’d kicked the guy out of his bed.

“Sure you don’t,” he said, smiling and reaching for Oz again.

Oz stumbled out of his reach, head shaking, then turned and scrambled back inside. He almost ran over his own father in the airlock, but didn’t seem to notice.

Conrad Cotten didn't slow one bit as he hurried outside and towards the parking lot like he thought someone was chasing him. If he'd seen the kiss, or Quinn standing in the nearby shadows, he didn't give any indication.

A second later Quinn's phone trilled. He dug it out and glanced at the caller id.  
Oz.

He hit call answer. "Guess you don't call men, either, huh, douche bag?"

Oz's panicked plea had Quinn moving the phone away from his ear and his heart pounding.

"STOP HIM!"

A car squealed out of the lot, and Quinn jumped back, dropping his phone in his haste not to get run over.

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- *What does Max know about limits, exactly, and does it have anything to do with Adam's adventures in Boston?*

- *What's in Quinn's past that makes him refuse to step foot inside a hospital again?*

- *What's up with all the Boston University tattoos springing up all over Boxer Falls?*

- *Will Max's new enterprise put more strain on Grady's already tight financial situation?*

• *Who is Quinn supposed to stop, and why was Conrad rushing away from the hospital?*

**TUNE IN NEXT WEEK!**

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

**AUTHOR BIO :**

Jaime has been writing for various publishers since the fall of 2008, although she's been writing for herself far longer. Often asked why men; what's so fascinating about writing stories about men falling in love, she's never come up with a clear answer. Just that these are the stories that she loves to read, so it seemed to make sense if she was going to write, they should also be the stories she wrote.

These days, you can find plenty of free reading on her website. She also writes for Freya's Bower, Loveyoudivine Alterotica, Pink Petal Books, Dreamspinner Press and Total E-Bound.

Spare time, when it can be found rolled into a ball at the back of the dryer or cavorting with the dust bunnies in the corners, she's probably spending reading, drawing, gardening (weather permitting, of course, since she is Canadian!) or watching movies. Well. She has a day job or two, as well, and two kids, but thankfully, also a wonderful husband who shoulders more than his fair share of household and child care responsibilities.

She graduated some time ago from college with a Fine Arts diploma, with a major in textile arts, which basically qualifies her to draw pictures and create things with string and fabric. One always needs an official slip of paper to fall back on after all....

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