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Boxer Falls: Episode Sixteen

By: Xara X. Xanakas

Conrad stoked the fire and wondered just when his life turned into the clusterfuck it had become. Sitting in the boathouse with the curtains drawn, hiding away from the world, he knew Grady was going to be a no-show. Seeing him broken and sobbing in that boy's arms, it became crystal-clear to him. Grady would never mourn him like that, no matter how much he hoped.

He stabbed at the fire until the log broke apart in a spray of sparks. One of the cinders popped as it split, landing on the rug. It smoldered there for a moment before he smothered it. Wispy streams of smoke spiraled up from it, an apt metaphor for his life.

"Up in smoke," he muttered, reaching for the bottle again.

"Thirty-year-old scotch deserved better than that," a voice said behind him. "At least pour it in a glass." Grady stamped his feet on the rug by the door and slipped out of his parka. Conrad couldn't do anything but watch as he hung it on the coat rack and went to the counter to get a couple of mugs.

"I thought you were...." Conrad started as Grady sat on the floor next to him.

"I am," Grady said quietly. He took the bottle and poured them both a shot. He stared down into the cup. "I loved you, you know."

"Grady, I-"

"Don't." Grady put his hand up to stop him. "If I don't get this out now, it'll never get said."

Conrad wasn't sure he wanted to hear what Grady was about to say. Especially if it was that they were through. "We had such good times here," he said looking around. "Remember our first time?"

"Connie, please." The pain in Grady's voice sliced Conrad's heart.

"Sorry. I just don't think I can hear you say it."

"I know," Grady said with a sigh. "But it has to be. I'm sorry."

"Please," Conrad said, wincing at the pleading tone of his voice. He covered it by gulping the rest of his drink.

"Damn it, don't you get it?" Grady slammed his cup down on the mantel in front of them and turned toward Conrad. The handle broke off, and rather than look at Grady, Conrad watched it spin across the tile and come to a stop in front of the fire. Grady stood and started pacing. "Do you know where I was when my husband started having seizures? What we were doing when your son was hurt in that accident?"

"Oz is fine. A few bumps and bruises. He's more pissed about having his precious routine interrupted than about this minor accident."

"Minor?" Grady shouted. "My world was in that truck."

"Part of your world is right here, with you."

Grady's shoulders slumped, and he looked around the room. The desk and chair were covered with boxes and papers Conrad had been looking through all morning, so Grady turned and sat on the end of the bed. "That's why this is all my fault."

"Don't be stupid," Conrad said, pushing up from the floor. He crawled onto the bed to scoot behind Grady and hold him.

"Don't. Just let me go," Grady said, trying to free himself from Conrad's arms.

"None of this is your fault," he said, holding tight as Grady resisted. "You didn't wish for any of this to happen."

"But what if I did?" Grady asked as he stopped fighting. He turned to the side and sank against Conrad's chest.

"So you wished for your husband," Conrad still couldn't say Phil's name, "to have a seizure so he would have to go to the hospital at the exact time my too-high-strung son would be barreling down the mountain?"

"Don't be a jackass," Grady said.

"Okay," Conrad chuckled. He ran a hand along Grady's spine. He didn't know if it was for Grady's comfort or his own.

"I started up with you again because I thought Phil was going to die. I couldn't handle it."

"And now?"

Grady snorted. "He's going to live, but I've lost him anyway. He doesn't have a clue who I am, who Zach is."

"Can the doctors give you any idea how long it's going to be?" Grady shook his head and took a shuddering breath in. "Okay. We'll figure this out, all right? We'll figure it out."

Grady lifted his head, and Conrad could see the strain it had been taking on him.

"Don't worry, okay?" Conrad said, trying to be reassuring. He pulled Grady closer and kissed his forehead. Grady tucked an arm around Conrad's waist and looked up at him.

Conrad knew he shouldn't. It was wrong. He should quit while he was ahead. But the feel of Grady in his arms, accepting his strength, was so right, he couldn't stop himself. Conrad put one hand on the side of Grady's face and held him still as he leaned in for a kiss. *A small one. A good-bye kiss.* But when their lips touched, that old magic ignited. Grady wrapped both arms around Conrad's neck and pulled him along as he laid back on the bed. Conrad's hands trembled as they started unbuttoning Grady's shirt with little guidance from his brain. It was a good thing, because his brain had shut down, and his body was in control.

Grady had his hands were all over Conrad, ripping his shirt open and combing through his chest hair. Conrad groaned as Grady buried his face against his neck and wrapped his legs around his waist to grind into him.

"Please," Grady whispered, as he continued to pump his hips against Conrad's.  
"Don't."

Conrad settled his weight onto Grady and grabbed a handful of hair to pull Grady's head up. "Don't what?" He searched Grady's eyes as he waited for an answer.

*Please be 'don't stop'. Please be 'don't stop.'*

"Stop," Grady said before surging forward to take Conrad's mouth in a hard, sloppy kiss. He clutched Conrad's shirt in both fists and broke the kiss with a growl. "Don't. You. Dare. Stop. Now."

Conrad smiled, and all his blood surged into his dick. "Not planning to." He took Grady's hands and pinned them to the bed. "Stay," he said.

Grady licked his lips and nodded.

Conrad sat back up on his heels and looked down at the man that had his heart. Slowly, he peeled Grady's shirt open, working it over first one shoulder, then the other, and slipping it out from under his body to drop it on the floor. Then he worked on his undershirt. Inching it up, kissing the skin he exposed as he went.

Grady's belly was still flat after all this time. Softer than it used to be, the ropes of muscle not visible under the weight of the years. But still just as perfect to Conrad as he'd been over thirty years ago when they first met.

"Please, Connie," Grady whispered, pushing his hips up.

Conrad chuckled against Grady's skin, but he didn't move any faster. If this was to be his last ride, he was damn well going to enjoy every second of it, and make the journey worth remembering. For as long as he had to. Forever if it came down to it.

Conrad remembered Grady's nipples being particularly sensitive, hardwired directly to his cock. When Conrad rolled the T-shirt up to expose them, Grady rolled onto his good shoulder and grabbed Conrad's head. Conrad took his wrists and pinned them back to the bed.

"I said stay," he said. He pulled the shirt over Grady's head and wrapped it around his wrists.

"Oh God, Connie." Grady moaned and undulated his hips. "Will you just take me already?"

Conrad shook his head and went back to work on Grady's chest, nibbling along Grady's collar bone to his shoulder. The little grunts and groans Grady made threatened to take Conrad over the edge. He'd have to quit the teasing and move on, or he'd be done before they ever got started. He worked his hands down to Grady's crotch and felt a wet spot on the front of Grady's slacks.

"A little anxious, are you?" he teased.

"Fuck, yesss." Grady's answer turned into a hiss as Conrad licked a nipple.  
"Enough playing. Start fucking."

Conrad pulled back to look down at Grady's face. Flushed with passion, his pupils blown wide open with lust, he was the most incredible thing Conrad had ever seen.

Grady must have seen something in his expression, because he stopped writhing under him and smiled up at him.

"I'm here now," he said. "Make love to me. One last time."

Conrad smiled, even as his heart broke apart. He knew why Grady had to end things. That didn't mean he had to like it. But that was a battle for another day. Right now, Grady was his. His alone, and no one else was between them. Thoughts of spouses and sons, businesses and betrayals, past and future heartbreaks were gone. It was just him and Grady.

And far too many clothes. He undid Grady's belt and opened his pants. Then he eased them down his legs and off. Standing at the end of the bed, he pulled both socks off until Grady was naked and waiting for him.

"Now you," Grady said, his eyes hooded. "Let me see you."

Conrad took his time undressing. "I can't believe you ripped my shirt," he said shaking his head.

"I'll rip those pants off you if you don't hurry."

"Pushy bottom, aren't you?"

Grady laughed. "No one's called me that in years."

Conrad kicked out of his pants and toed his socks off. He lost his balance when his toe stuck in one of the elastic bands. He reached out to catch himself before he crashed into the footboard. Grady chuckled.

"That move is for the young, old man."

"Oh, now you've done it," Conrad said. He rummaged through the drawer in the nightstand until he came up with the lube. He struck out looking for condoms, though.

"Well, fuck."

"What?" Grady said.

"No gloves. Fuck!" Conrad shouted.

"It's okay," Grady said.

"No, it's not. I really need to fuck you right now." Conrad was desperate to be inside Grady. If he wasn't going to get the chance again, he *needed* to fuck Grady long and hard. *Now*.

"Connie, it's okay."

Conrad looked over at Grady. His hands were still wrapped up in his T-shirt.

Grady lifted his knees and placed both feet flat on the bed, exposing his hole to him. "It's okay," he said again with a nod.

Conrad's dick throbbed at the thought of fucking Grady bare. "But what about . . .?"

"I trust you. And if. . ." he shrugged and he clenched the shirt. "We'll deal with that, too."

Conrad crawled on top of Grady and unwrapped his hands. "You don't have to do this, Boxer."

"I want to, Connie." Grady grabbed Conrad by the wrists and kissed one of his palms. "I want this with you."

He surged forward to kiss Grady-hard and deep- with as much love as he could. The words wouldn't make it past his lips, so he showed Grady with his actions.

"You're sure?" he asked one more time as he squeezed some lube onto his fingers.

Grady nodded and spread his legs wider. His cock was rock hard and leaking precum against his abdomen.

Conrad tried to be gentle, to go easy on Grady, but excitement got the better of him. He pushed three fingers right in, and Grady hissed and arched his back.

"Sorry."

Grady moaned and pushed back against Conrad's hand. He fucked himself on Conrad's fingers, until Conrad curled them and found his spot. "Connie!" Grady shouted and pulled away from Conrad's hand. "Now," he moaned.

Conrad slicked his cock with his lube-covered fingers. His hand sliding hot against his own skin nearly had him coming, so he dribbled some more along his length

and lifted one of Grady's legs over his arm before he pressed his cock against Grady's hole.

"Boxer," he whispered, staring into Grady's eyes.

Grady smiled at him, and he thrust his cock in to the hilt. Grady threw his head back and groaned, low and deep, and long. The veins on Grady's neck stood out as Conrad pulled back out and pounded home again. The velvety slickness of Grady's ass, the heat searing his cock as he fucked Grady hard and fast, just as he always liked it, bore down on him, and he didn't know if he could hold his orgasm off for much longer. He shifted his hips and Grady arched his back off the bed and slammed his ass down onto Conrad's cock. His hips bucked against Conrad's as he came, his dick, completely untouched, shot load after load onto his chest.

"Jesus," Conrad said, as Grady's body convulsed beneath him. The heat closed in around him, and he came too, amid short, frenzied jabs. His whole body shuddered. If they were thirty years younger, the tight slickness would have had him coming again.

He collapsed on top of Grady, sure he was going to expire right then and there, and that was all right. He shifted to Grady's side and held him close as his breathing went back to normal. He'd just dozed off when Grady leaned in to kiss him softly, then the bed shifted. Grady dressed quietly while he pretended to sleep.

"I love you," Grady whispered, just before the door closed.

\* \* \*

Phil sat in a rental car across the street from the address on the driver's license in the wallet Grady had left with him. No matter how many times he looked at the photos in it, he just couldn't remember any of them. He had been scheduled to leave the hospital later with the men that shared his name. But he'd checked himself out early. He couldn't stand to see their faces anymore. The sadness and disappointment in their eyes as he explained that they had to be mistaken, that he didn't know who they were. Luckily everyone else in town seemed to know who he was, and the girl at the rental company didn't ask any questions.

He watched a couple he'd never seen before leave. What a joke-he hadn't seen any of these people before he woke up in the hospital. The couple passed his car and went

into the diner. A few minutes later, the man he was waiting for came out. Yes, Grady was a handsome man, but Phil couldn't imagine being married to him. And being with him for nearly thirty years, as Grady claimed? It just wasn't possible.

Grady looked up the street, and Phil shrunk down in his seat, but Grady's gaze swept back to the other end of the street before he pulled his hood up and quickly went to the car in the driveway next to the bed and breakfast. Phil suspected the truck parked next to it was his, but he didn't recognize it any more than he recognized the sign over the door.

Grady carefully backed out and gave one more glance around, looking very much like a man who didn't want to be seen, before he drove away. Phil was about to get out and cross the street when the boy showed up, his face red and his jacket open. An image of that boy, running around with bright green mittens hanging out of the ends of his sleeves, his jacket open to the cold, flashed through his mind. He almost called out to Zach to zip up-before he caught himself.

He leaned back against the car seat and stared at the kid.

Zach ran up the steps to the apartment building next to the B&B and hammered on the door. Zach shouted, but the only word Phil could make out was 'Adam'. Zach continued to pound for a few minutes with no answer before he turned around and glared at the diner. He stood on the top step and looked up the street, just as Grady had done, before he zipped up his jacket, started across, and disappeared into the diner.

Phil waited in the car for a couple of minutes, in case Zach stormed back out, then he got out. He jogged across the street and up to the house. Nothing looked familiar, but he easily found the kitchen. He made a cup of coffee-his favorite Dark Magic K-Cup. As the machine hummed, he wondered how he knew that flavor was his favorite. It finished brewing, and he took his cup with him as he studied the pictures along the wall going to what looked like the private residence. The photos showed a lifetime of memories he no longer had. One was of a younger version of him smiling back at the camera, posing with Grady, his arm around a teenaged Zach. He smiled at the sentiment, but that was all he felt while looking at it.

The master bedroom was big, but not huge. The space was dominated by a king-size bed. The white comforter reflected the sunlight back into the room. *If* Grady was his husband, as he claimed, then he imagined that bed had seen plenty of passion. Phil's dick responded at the thought. He looked down at his crotch, thinking that getting hard over the thought of fucking Grady stupid in this room was significant, but he couldn't

remember why. A shadow of a memory, flickering around the edges of his mind. He put his coffee cup down on the dresser. Another flash of recognition hit him, and he knew Grady would be pissed if he left a ring on his parents' antique furniture, so he picked it back up and set it on the coaster on the nightstand.

Shaking it off, he looked in the closet. The clothes on the left side looked to be his size, and he found three pairs of work boots and a pair of running shoes that would fit, but he didn't remember buying any of them. They'd technically fit him-his body at least. They didn't quite fit with who he thought he was now. He pulled one of the duffel bags from the shelf and went back into the bedroom. He set the bag on the bed and started searching the drawers for anything that looked like it would be his. The first one he opened held tidy rows of white boxer briefs and neatly rolled dress socks. The next held jock straps in a variety of colors, some silky boxers, and even some thongs with wild patterns on them. A pile of solid white sweat socks was on the other side of the drawer.

"Jackpot," he said shaking his head. He didn't think he was the wild type, but the rest of his clothes didn't match the buttoned up style of the other drawer. He emptied the whole thing into the bag and stuffed some of the clothes from the closet in with them, leaving the hangers piled on the bed. He jammed the boots and shoes in another bag with some more clothes and slung one bag over his shoulder. He took one last look at the room, picked up the other bag, and then he left, going back out to the rental car.

\* \* \*

"Adam!" Zach shouted as he pushed open the door to the Bear and Bones. "Where are you?" He'd heard that Adam hadn't really left town, that he was manning the kitchen at the Bones, where he belonged. Not hundreds of miles, and a whole other life away from him. The crumpled note in his pocket had to have been a joke. Adam wouldn't have left him.

"Adam?" he called as he approached the kitchen. Adam's laughter floated through the window at the end of the bar. Relieved, Zach took a second to calm his heart before he put his hand out to push the swinging door partway open. He froze when he heard a voice, lower and deeper than Adam's, say something. Adam mumbled something back, and Zach stepped into the doorway.

He found Adam standing next to the sink, staring at a stranger. A stranger who was holding Adam's hand, gently blowing on the palm. He couldn't miss the bulge in Adam's pants, or the bobbing of his Adam's apple when the stranger looked back up at his face and smiled.

"I told you to be careful," the stranger said.

"I know. I just didn't think when I grabbed that pan," Adam said. He blushed, actually fucking *blushed*, at the stranger's teasing.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Zach demanded and Adam jumped. Zach slammed the door against the wall and took a step forward. Adam jumped and tried to pull his hand back, but Zach noticed the man held tight. A rose vine tattoo circled the arm attached to the hand he held out for Zach to shake.

"Well, you must be Zach. I'm Max."

"What the fuck, Adam?" Zach asked, ignoring Max.

"Zach, this is my friend, Max." Adam stared at him, but Zach wouldn't budge. Not without some fucking answers.

"Well, I think you two have things to talk about. Adam, I'll see you later?"

"Yeah," he said, giving Max a small smile.

"You be careful now, okay? I want you in one piece when I finally have you all to myself," he said.

Zach noticed goose-bumps break out along Adam's arm as he nodded.

"Zach, it was nice to meet you," he said, without breaking eye contact with Adam. He winked, then turned to leave, brushing Zach's shoulder on his way out.

"Who the fuck was that?" Zach asked as soon as the door swung shut.

"Max," Adam said as he turned back to the stove and stirred some onions around in a pan.

"Who the hell is Max? And what the fuck did he mean by all that 'get you all to myself' bullshit?"

"He's a friend." Adam didn't offer anything more. Zach stepped up behind him and hugged him tight.

"I was so afraid you had left me," he said. He buried his face in Adam's neck, but Adam pushed him away.

"I'm cooking here."

"Let me help." He reached around Adam for the spatula, but Adam slapped his hand.

"No thanks."

"Oh, but you'll let Max help?"

"At least he knows his way around a kitchen, and I don't have to do everything myself-as usual."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zach pulled Adam around to face him and was shocked at the anger he saw in Adam's face. It passed into resignation, and that hit Zach like a gut punch.

"What do you want me to do Zach? I just can't do this anymore."

"Can't do what?" Somewhere between his father breaking down in front of him and finding Adam's note, Zach's world had careened off its axis.

"This, Zach. This!" he yelled, flicking the spatula back and forth between them.  
"It's too much, and I can't carry it by myself anymore."

"Sorry to be such a burden," Zach shouted. "If you'll give me back what you took, I'll get out of your hair."

"Of course, *that's* the only reason you'd want me. Your drugs," Adam yelled.

"Keep your voice down." Zach looked around to see make sure no one was watching through the window. Quinn was out working his charm at one of the tables on the opposite side of the room, and the afternoon waitress was taking an order at the far booth. "Just give me the stuff," he whispered.

"I don't have it."

"What do you mean you don't have it? I need it."

"Well, too fucking bad."

Zach grabbed Adam's arms and spun him around. "You don't understand. If I don't come up with the cash, they're going to-"

"They're going to what? Send you back to Patty's Pharmacy to buy more?"

"You can't just buy that shit over the counter." Zach spiraled into a panic. If the entire stash was gone, Sam was going to... he didn't know what, but it wouldn't be pleasant for him. Suppliers don't like it when their dealers come up short. He knew that much from the movies.

"Yes, you can. You think you were actually on drugs when you fucked me? No, it was baby aspirin."

"Technically, we didn't fuck," Zach said. His dick throbbed at the memory of that night. Their cocks, slick with their precum, sliding together in his hand. Adam panting and clawing at his clothes. God, how he had wanted to be inside Adam, but it was so frantic, so fucking hot, he'd blown his load before he even finished getting undressed.

"Well, at least I avoided *that* mistake," Adam said, turning back to his stove.

"Adam, I-"

"You didn't even ask how I know it was baby aspirin and not ecstasy. Do you even care?"

"You didn't take it yourself, did you?" Zach's stomach dropped through his balls at the terrifying thought. "With that Max guy?"

"Why? What do you care?"

"Goddamn it, Adam," Zach growled. He combed his fingers through his hair, pulling hard, hoping the pain would somehow make this conversation make sense. Images of Adam, gloriously naked and writhing on a bed of roses washed away his thoughts of thugs with guns and concrete shoes. He squeezed his eyes shut and the picture changed. Max, his arms around Adam, the tattooed vines coming to life and

engulfing Adam until there was nothing left of him. Zach shook his head hard and popped himself on his forehead.

"What?" Adam asked. He leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms in front of himself.

"It's not supposed to be like this," he said, shaking his head.

"Really? How is it supposed to be? Me, being around to pick you up from one of your messes? Wiping some other guy's cum off your chin? It's all right for you, but the thought of me getting any action is repulsive to you? So bad, you would only touch me when you thought you were hopped up enough on drugs to get over it?"

"It's not like that at all," Zach said, reaching out for Adam, who jerked away from him.

"Yeah, well, tell that to your supplier. Is it Bayer or Johnson & Johnson?" Zach stared at Adam in shock. "Yeah. Sheriff Neale told me what it was. After he arrested me for possession-with intent."

"Arrested? What?" *Every. Fucking. Thing. I. Touch.* Zach's knees gave out, and he crumpled to the floor.

"Yeah. Arrested. As in handcuffed and thrown into a cell, for hours."

"I'm so sorry." Zach's eyes burned as his vision blurred. A band tightened around his chest, and he couldn't take a deep breath. Adam, sitting in jail. His fault.

"Well that and five bucks will get you a cup of coffee at Starbucks. But not here."

"You weren't supposed to find out."

Adam huffed and threw the spatula into the sink. The clanging bounced off the hanging pots, and Zach winced at the sound. "Oh, that makes it all right then! You were going to do drugs behind my back in order to keep fucking me? Is that it?"

"No, I-" Zach stood and reached for Adam, but Adam slapped his hand away. He turned around and braced his hands against the edge of the sink. His shoulders slumped, and Zach could barely hear his voice.

"Please, Zach. Just go. Let me go."

He reached out again, but the door banged open, startling him.

"We're getting a little backed up out here. Wanna get these orders up?" Quinn asked, glaring at Zach.

"Yeah, I'm on it," Adam said as he shuffled around Zach to the prep area. His movements were slow at first, but soon he was hustling around the kitchen, busting the orders out with his usual efficiency.

Dejected, Zach left, noticing that Adam never turned around.

Quinn patted Zach on the shoulder and put an arm around him to lead him away from the kitchen.

"I think you should just give him a little space right now. Besides, you have your own problems, yeah?"

"What do you know about it?" Zach shook Quinn's arm off and perched on a stool at the end of the bar, where he could watch Adam through the window. Quinn stepped in front of him and blocked his view.

The bell over the door rang, and Zach looked over to see Max walking through the door. The rose vine tattoo twisting up his arm brought the image of Adam, naked in Max's arms, back to his thoughts. A growl rose in his chest, and Max smiled at him, the kind of smile that set his teeth on edge.

Quinn answered it with a nod and a smile of his own. The temperature dropped fifteen degrees by the time Quinn looked back at him.

"I know what happens when you lay down with dogs. And you, my friend, are a couple bucks shy of a flea collar."

\* \* \*

Trip pulled off the road at the bottom of the hill. There wasn't any rubber on the asphalt to mark the spot of the accident and they'd already replaced the guardrail. The new aluminum gleamed brightly in the sun, a shining beacon next to the old weathered railing. He parked under a copse of trees, where he could hide the car anyone driving by. He got out and looked up the pines that lined the road. Judging by the way the branches were broken, he was able to follow the path Oz's car had taken as it rolled over the edge and down the creek side.

He checked for oncoming cars, but the road was deserted. Crossing to the accident site, he canvassed the area. He rubbed the sore spot on his neck and kicked at the weeds along the gravel shoulder. His gun had to be out there somewhere. The police hadn't questioned him about it, so that meant two things. First, they hadn't found it in the

wreckage. That was a relief. Trip's hospital source slipped him a copy of the EMT reports. The injuries to the Pollack man's neck were attributed to the broken tree poking through the windshield. Profuse bleeding from a neck laceration, it had read. The cut had jagged edges, consistent with a tree branch ripping through his skin. He'd flatlined twice on the way to the hospital, and they even reported him as a DOA before they revived him in the emergency room.

Everything had happened so fast. Pollack had turned around to grab Trip's gun, and it went off a couple of times in the struggle. Trip wasn't even sure if anyone had been hurt. He thought he saw some blood hit the windshield, but if there was any evidence of a gunshot wound, none of the emergency workers or doctors made a note of it. He sure as hell wasn't hit, and he damn well would have known if Oz had been shot.

It also meant that Oz hadn't told them about the gun either. That wasn't any kind of relief. What was Oz up to now? If he had the gun, why hadn't he turned Trip in? The waiting was killing him. He hoped the gun had been thrown clear of the car, and it was out there, just waiting to be found. Along with his camera.

*Stupid, Trip.* He really needed to get that camera back. He'd thought that following Oz would lead to something huge. So focused on that task, he hadn't taken the

time to download the pictures of Conrad plowing Grady's ass at the boat house.

Whenever the BMW took off, he'd followed, like he was some kind of super sleuth.

*Some pro.* When the bug he'd planted under the bed started broadcasting, he began planning his big payday. Amid dreams of fancy cars and checking his mental rolodex of contacts, he'd forgotten to set the receiver to record. He's the only one who would hear Grady's confession and Conrad's coercion. The pictures were the cornerstone of his plans.

*Fucking amateur move .* And now the photographic evidence he needed to bury, not just Conrad, but Oz Cotten as well, was lost.

"And what the *fuck* happened to that body?" he shouted at the sky. His voice echoed back to him, rooting a flock of birds from their nests, bringing him back to the task at hand. Find the gun. Get the camera. Locate the body, then bury the Cottens, once and for all. How could such a simple to-do list get so fucking complicated?

If he didn't find the camera, he'd be back to square one. Or worse, what if Oz decided to hang him out to dry? No, he'd comb through every blade of grass and every dropped pine needle if he had to, but he was determined to find what he was looking for.

A car slowed as it approached him, coming to a stop next to where he was squatting, digging through some debris from the accident. The driver rolled the window down, and Phil Boxer leaned out.

"Need a hand, buddy?" he called.

Trip looked at him warily. His sources told him Phil suffered from amnesia as a result of the accident, but he was skeptical about how much had been erased. "Do I know you?" Trip answered, deciding to play dumb.

"I don't think so. Then again, I apparently don't even know myself," Phil said with a smile. "Just thought you may need a lift back into town or something."

"Nah, I'm good. Just taking a walk," Trip lied. "But thanks." He waved and turned back to the edge of the road. *Keep driving, buddy. You can do it.*

"Have a nice day then," Phil called. He rolled up the window and drove off. Trip sighed with relief. Phil either didn't remember what happened there or he was one hell of an actor. Either way, Trip was in the clear. At least for now.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out. He looked back to make sure Phil's car was gone before he checked the screen. A habit he'd developed from watching his back around the Cottens. The last thing he was expecting was a message from Oz, but there it was, screaming at him.

*We need to talk. NOW!*

"Fuck."

\* \* \*

Grady got back to the house and trudged into the kitchen. He flicked on the coffee maker and took down a mug, completely on autopilot. He winced at the pain in his shoulder as he reached up, and the motion set off sparks further south. He could still feel Conrad slipping into him, no barriers between them at all. He never even let Phil fuck him bare. Given Phil's philandering, that had turned out to be a good thing. With Conrad everything was raw and real, and just so right at last. Conrad owning him, completely, just as the tattoo on his ass indicated.

He'd gone to the boathouse to break things off with Conrad, once and for all. He hadn't planned on one last roll in the hay, but maybe it was better this way. The sex had been-well, spectacular *might* begin to sum it up. One hell of a swan song. If he was destined for a life of no sex with the man who couldn't remember the last thirty years with him, at least he had this to carry him through.

He selected a Passion Fruit tea K-Cup from the carousel on the counter. He checked the clock as he opened the top to put the pod in place. Four-fifteen. He and Zach were supposed to pick up Phil at five. The pod wouldn't slip into place, so he figured Zach left one in the maker that morning. But the label staring back at him said *Dark Magic*, Phil's favorite. He'd had his regular Donut Shop, and Zach only drank hot chocolate. The guests had a machine out front they used. Grady's heart pounded in his ears, and he dropped the pod on the counter.

"Phil?" he called out, rushing back to the living room. He checked all the common areas, and even the open guest rooms, calling Phil's name as he went. When he made it back to their bedroom, he stood outside the closed door for a second. Something kept him from opening the door. Fear of what he may find in there? Guilt, by the truckload, that Phil was once again alone in their home while Grady was getting pounded by Conrad Fucking Cotten.

He put one hand flat on the door and leaned his forehead against it, praying for something-he didn't know what to ask for, but he tried, before he reached out and twisted the knob. He took his time opening the door, afraid of what he'd see inside the room. He kept his eyes closed until the hinges stopped squeaking, as images played in his mind. Phil lying naked on the bed, waiting for him. Or Phil unconscious on the floor next to the bed, a trickle of blood running down his chin. Maybe Phil was in there, standing with arms crossed over his chest, ready for a confrontation

Grady took a deep breath, then exhaled. He opened his eyes to find a pile of hangers on the bed, empty drawers half closed, and a coffee cup on the nightstand next to the bed.

"No, no, no, no," he said, sinking to his knees. "No, Phil. Not now." Pain radiated through his chest, and his breath caught in his throat. Breathing was impossible as his gaze kept going between the hangers and the coffee cup. Finally, everything he'd tried to hold in, broke free, and he collapsed to the floor covered his face, and sobbed into his hands. He considered staying there forever, but at some point guests would come calling, and Zach would come home. He didn't want his son to find a crumpled pile of what used to be his father, on the floor.

The phone rang in the study, but Grady let it roll to voice mail. Going into the room he and Phil had shared was an impossibility. He couldn't force his feet to carry him over the threshold. He pulled himself up off the floor and made his way back downstairs, to lock himself in his office. He sat down behind his desk, opened bottom drawer, and took out the bottle of scotch Conrad had sent him.

He poured three fingers into a tumbler and downed half of that with one swallow. The burn running down his throat made him feel alive, but his eyes still couldn't focus on anything except the pictures of Phil throughout the room. He finished the whiskey and sat back as the warmth started in his belly and radiated outward. His fingers tingled as he poured another drink. Halfway through the second glass, he dug his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the file cabinet behind him. He hadn't wanted to think about it, but with Phil in his current state, he really needed to assign someone else the power of

attorney in case something happened to him. He dug through the cabinet and pulled out a file, spilling the contents onto the floor.

"Crap," he said as he clumsily sat on the floor to pick up the documents. Each one held special memories, and Grady took his time going through them. The civil union certificate, with both their signatures on it. That had been one of the best days of their lives. Giddy with nerves and happiness, Phil had even dotted the 'I' with a heart. Their wills, leaving everything to one another, and later amended to make provisions for Zach. And Zach's adoption papers. The original ones. From the first adoption. The one Grady had arranged less than a year after the last huge Cotten Family Reunion, back when they would all return to Boxer Falls every other year and try to convince the townsfolk they all gave a shit about one another. Six months after the adoption, Old Man Cotten died, leaving everything to his direct heirs. Conrad had taken control of the estate and used it for vacations until the beginning of the year.

Grady took the last swallow of scotch and stared at the form. With blurry vision, he pulled his phone out and dialed the number he'd memorized. It went to voicemail. Just as well.

"I'm sorry. I was wrong. He's gone. He left me. I was so wrong. And he's gone. And so are you. And I was wrong. So wrong to keep it secret for so long. Just so wrong,

and I'm sorry." The phone beeped, signaling the end of the recording time. He hit the disconnect button and leaned back against the cabinet. His eyelids heavy, as sleep pulled him down.

"Just so wrong," he mumbled as he fell asleep.

\* \* \*

Phil pulled up in front of the address that was on the card in his wallet. A small, non-descript house on the edge of town. No one would give two thoughts to who lived there as they drove by, unless they recognized the cars. He grabbed his bags from the back seat and walked in through the front door, like he owned the place. He dropped the bags in the entryway and went into the living room.

Tony got up from the couch and walked up to him, wearing nothing but a hard-on and a smile.

"It's about time you got here."

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■ *Will Adam ever be able to forgive Zach?*

■ *Will Zach borrow enough to invest in a flea collar?*

■ *Has Trip tripped up his chance at revenge?*

■ *Does Phil remember more than he's letting on?*

■ *What secret is Grady keeping, and for whom?*

**TUNE IN NEXT WEEK!**

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

**AUTHOR BIO :**

Xara X. Xanakas decided years ago to embrace her weirdness. A friend first described her that way to the man who's been her husband for over twenty years. That formula fits her, and she figures if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Being Texan, her crush on cowboys comes natural, but the techie in her loves to show nerds a good time. She relishes all things different, and brings saucy style to her writing. Whether wrangling a wayward ranch hand or adding another critter to her were-menagerie, Xara strives to make the outlandish appealing. She'll make you quirk a brow and snort with laughter, and that's all right by her. Xara believes that unique is best and happily ever after is the icing on the cookies.

Give her a shout out at her [website](#), or ~~stalk~~ follow her on [twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).