



Episode Thirty-Five

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Boxer Falls Episode 35

by Geoffrey Knight

Everyone in Boxer Falls remembered the day Phil Boxer died, but none of them could have guessed how it would happen.

It was a warm, cloudless day and the initial clean-up from the storm was almost done. The water had subsided, shattered windows had been boarded up, and the mud and debris had been swept from the houses and businesses that suffered the most.

All except the Bear and Bones, that is.

Standing before the devastated building with his parents, Grady flipped open his phone, his hand visibly trembling. "I'll start proceedings with the insurance company and see how long it's going to take to re-build this place. We'll bring in the best, the fastest, I don't care how much it costs. We need to..."

Dot took the phone gently from him and put her arm around her son. "Sweetheart, you don't need to do a thing except find Phil. Leave this mess with Ira and me. The most

important thing now is that you find your husband.”

She looked at her son, her face filled with concern. His eyes were filled with despair, dark bags circling underneath.

“I was out looking for him all last night,” he said, his voice rattled. “Zach and Adam too. We searched every building hit by the storm. Knocked on doors. Looked under rubble.”

“And the lake?” Ira asked grimly. None of them wanted to say it out loud, but Ira knew they were all thinking it.

Grady took a deep breath for courage, but found little. “Sheriff Neale has had his men searching the banks, as well as a boat out on the water. But they’ve found nothing. He said the next stage is to drag...”

Tears choked him up and Grady couldn’t finish his sentence. His mother hugged him and he accepted her embrace. He couldn’t remember the last time he cried in his mother’s arm. Possibly never. But right now he was a broken man, and Dot’s embrace was exactly what he needed. “I just can’t imagine what’s happened to him. He left his wallet behind. His keys. He’s out there, somewhere, and he needs me. Something terrible’s happened to him. He would never leave without his wallet and keys. That’s not like him. I *know* him, I know him better than anyone in the world.”

*

Sometimes the person we love... is not the person we think we know. Such was the case with Phil Boxer, a man who Grady thought he knew. A man who never truly felt that he deserved his happiness... for very good reason.

These are the secrets that Phil Boxer had been keeping from his lover, his husband, his best friend Grady for over thirty years:

Before Phil began his career as a contractor, he was a medical student, and a brilliant one at that. When he was diagnosed with his brain tumor, Phil knew better than his doctors what was going on, but the life he now led, the secrets he kept, forced him to hide everything he knew. For he had given up medicine to not only save his own life, but the lives of countless others. The men and women that he was forced to operate on, thanks to the merciless black market business of a man named Ben Vreeland. A surgeon who came from a wealthy family of doctors, all of whom supplemented their fortunes through crime.

Why? For the simple reason that they were psychopaths, as young medical student Phil Harrison soon discovered. For the crime the Vreelands practiced was nothing short of monstrous, cruel and cold-blooded –

Organ trafficking.

Phil struggled against the ropes now, desperate to escape Ben and his henchman Seth. He glanced around and recognized his surroundings. They were in the old deer hunter's cabin up in the mountains, a place sometimes used by hunter's who needed some shelter for the night. There was a single window, one door in and out, and a gas lantern on the table.

Phil eyed the door and Ben began laughing.

"You truly think you have a chance to escape, don't you," Ben taunted. "You think you can run home to your happy family and your working class job and let those talents of yours slip away forever? Well it's time for a reality check, Phillip. This life you're living now, that's the lie! It's time to return to your true calling."

"You mean cutting open strangers in third world countries and selling their organs on the black market?"

"I mean using your surgical skills to travel the world, experience other cultures, live the high life with a little champagne once in a while."

"I don't ever recall anything to celebrate. All I remember was the gun you pointed to my head while you made me remove livers and kidneys."

"And the occasional retina," Ben chuckled maliciously. "That surgery was a real eye-opener. Done in a filthy hut in the Philippines with mosquitoes stinging your sweat-drenched forehead and neck. And yet you didn't flinch throughout the entire ordeal. You were too worried about losing the patient. Always so considerate of others, aren't you Phillip? At least I thought you were... until that night in Ecuador when you knocked me unconscious and fled."

"You were a monster!"

"I was your lover!"

"Only until the day you forced me into your insane world. Before that, yes, you were my lover, my idol. I worshipped you and your talent. You broadened my horizons, you honed my skills. But it was all a trick! A trap! You used me. You held a gun to my head and made me destroy people's lives."

"And now it's time to do it again. Otherwise the people's lives I'll destroy will be yours... and your dashing husband Grady... and your beautiful boy Zachary... oh, and let's throw in that hunky handyman Tony for good measure too."

Phil struggled in the chair, the legs bouncing on the floor. "You son of a bitch! If you so much as touch anyone in Boxer Falls I'll..."

"What? Cut out my heart?" Ben laughed again, louder than before.

Desperately Phil threw all his weight to the left, toppling the chair over, hoping the frail old thing might splinter apart. As he hit the floor he heard a leg of the chair crack.

It was followed by the click of a gun.

He looked up to see the henchman Seth standing over him, his gun to Phil's temple.

"See?" Ben smiled. "It's already just like old times."

"Fuck you!"

Ben walked over, took the gun from Seth and fired a bullet into the floorboards two inches from Phil's head. "If you think I'm bluffing, think again. The next time you try to escape, you'll be the first person in Boxer Falls to die. But trust me, you won't be the last."

*

Quinn was under strict orders not to move... and secretly he loved the attention, despite his protesting.

"But I have to go help," he moaned. "Did you see the shape the Bear and Bones was in? It looked like Godzilla came for breakfast and didn't like the way his eggs were done!"

"Don't! Move!" was all Oz said. His voice was stern but his eyes were fixed to the lunch tray in his hands, careful not to drop it as he carried it from the kitchen to Quinn's bed. On it the plate and glass of juice clattered a little.

"You're not exactly used to carrying a tray, are ya Oz Cotton," Quinn observed, more than just mildly amused.

"Shut up, you'll make me lose my focus."

He sighed with relief as he got the tray down in one piece on the side of Quinn's bed.

Quinn couldn't help but smile even more when he saw the meager sandwich on the plate. He lifted the top piece of bread and saw a single slice of cheese inside, no ham or tomato or mayo or even butter.

"Okay, okay," Oz conceded before Quinn could open his smart mouth. "I admit it, I'm not exactly used to cooking either."

"Honey, this ain't cooking. This is what they hand out at an orphanage in a Dickens' novel."

Oz huffed, the humiliation getting the better of him before Quinn grabbed him by the hand and said, "Sweetie, relax. I'm just teasing. I know you're not used to looking after anything else but..."

"But what? Me? Does everyone think Oz Cotton is really that selfish?"

Quinn gave him a suggestive grin. "Actually, what I was going to say was you're not used to looking after the one thing that really matters."

He took Oz's hand in his and guided it over the blankets, settling it directly on top of the stiffening rod beneath the sheets.

Oz's self-pity fled and a smile spread across his face as he gave Quinn's quickly growing erection a hard squeeze.

Quinn lifted the lunch tray onto the bedside table, making room for Oz to climb onto the bed.

"We better take it easy," Oz said. "The doctor said that piece of glass missed the artery in your leg by less than an inch. Any exertion could rupture the stitches."

Quinn grabbed the back of Oz's neck and pulled him in for a long hard kiss before whispering, "The only artery I wanna exert right now is the one in your hand. Now strip, mister. This patient needs a thorough check-up!"

*

The streets of Quito, Ecuador were bustling, even this late at night, as the young Phillip Harrison was shoved through the crowd, a gun discreetly pointed at his back by the man that

Phil had been making love to only a few short weeks ago, promising to live forever be his side. He was impressionable and in love, and now he was paying the price.

As they passed the strip clubs and massage parlors of the dusty, prostitute-filled red light district, Ben pushed Phil into a seedy club packed with scantily clad men. This was Ben's trick, to use Phil as his bait while he squirted ten milligrams of Somnus from a syringe into a stranger's drink. Somnus was a powerful narcotic-based drug that Ben himself had invented, a knock-out drug so potent that it took affect within ten minutes of being ingested, feigning a heart attack and slowing the victims heartbeat down to such a rate that unless a thorough post-mortem was conducted, the victim appeared dead with no hope of resuscitation.

The only way a victim could be "brought back to life" was ten milligrams of Narcan administered through an IV, but such a procedure would only take place if doctors or morticians were aware of the presence of Somnus in the bloodstream in the first place. Otherwise, if undetected, Somnus would eventually prove fatal.

At the club in Quito that night over thirty years ago, the handsome stranger that had picked up Phil finished his drink. Ten minutes later he collapsed on the floor. An ambulance was called, but the victim was already dead. With more and more calls coming in on a busy Saturday night in the chaotic capital, the ambulance drivers took the body straight to the mortician... who, like many morticians in the third world countries where Ben and his family operated, were happy to lose the paperwork and the body to go with it for the sake of a few thousand dollars.

"Work quickly," Ben told Phil pressing the gun to his temple. "The courier's outside waiting for that liver and we don't want to make Signor Esperanza angry with a late delivery, trust me! Some rich bastard paid good money to have a new liver before sunrise."

But on that night, under a ticking ceiling fan and a flicking, insect-filled neon tube, Phil decided he had had enough. Before he knew it, the young man had gripped the scalpel in his hand and stabbed it hard into Ben's arm. Ben screamed and dropped the gun.

Phil grabbed for the gun, and before Ben could let out another cry slammed the butt of the weapon against the back of Ben's skull.

Ben dropped to floor, out cold.

Phil scooped the stranger off the table in front of him and made out with the seemingly lifeless man through the back window of the flea-bitten shack in the backstreets of Quito.

At the entrance to the hospital emergency room, Phil burst through the doors and handed the man to the first doctor who rushed up to him. As more and more nurses and doctors hurried toward them, Phil blurted out, "He's not dead, but he will be if you don't do exactly what I tell you. Ten milligrams of Narcan, administered through intravenous. Now!"

At that moment one of the doctors tried to grab Phil, to question him, to demand what was going on, but before they could hold him, Phil slipped out of their grip and fled the scene.

Never to return.

*

Sheriff Neale was sore. He'd had practically no sleep since the storm, and any chance he did manage to get home for some rest, Blake was there and damn if that man didn't get Vic horny as hell every time he laid eyes on him.

Horny, and after that, hungry!

But with so much time spent pulling the town together and pulling trou down for Blake, Vic hadn't had a chance to buy so much as a loaf of bread. All the leftovers in the house were gone too, and with the drenching boys and their scuba gear due to hit town in a few hours, Vic knew he needed some food if he was going to make it through another night.

Since the Bear and Bones was no longer an option for food, the next best burger in town was up at Emmy-Lou's roadside diner on the outskirts of Boxer Falls, heading up towards the mountains.

As Vic sat at Emmy-Lou's counter hoeing into a burger with the lot, that old-timer Seymour Hicks took the stool next to him and ordered a steak sandwich with extra crunchy curly fries.

"Say Sheriff, how you doin'? Don't see your face up here often these days."

"Guess not," Vic replied. "Guess Boxer Falls is enough to keep me busy, especially with that storm blowin' through. How you fair up there in the woods, Seymour?"

"Few trees down, but nothin' like Old George. I hear he cleared half the town."

"Just about," Vic said, biting into another greasy chunk of burger.

"By the way," Seymour said as his own sandwich arrived fresh of the grill, "Who's that out deer huntin' at the moment?"

"Deer huntin'? Ain't nobody out deer huntin'. At least not without a permit from me. Why?"

"Because there's someone stayin' at the old deer hunter's cabin. I seen a lantern on, late at night. And this afternoon I heard a gunshot, clear as day."

"A gunshot?" Vic asked.

*

Seth had tipped the chair upright again, with Phil still bound to it. But the crack in the leg had loosened not only the structure of the chair, but the ropes binding Phil as well.

"Enough's enough," Ben announced. "It's time to leave this shithole of a town." With the gun still in his possession Ben turned to Seth and ordered, "Get the car ready. I'll take care of this one."

As Seth left the cabin, Ben took two syringes from the inside of his jacket and laid them on the table.

Phil looked at them and gulped anxiously.

"Don't worry, there's nothing to worry about, so long as you don't decide to make things difficult." Ben pointed to the syringe on the left, the one with the blue tip. "This one's a normal sedative. It's to knock you out long enough to get you out of town without you kicking and screaming the entire way."

"And the other? The one with the red tip?"

"Somnus, if you didn't already guess. That's in case you do decide to kick and scream."

Behind his back, Phil quickly worked his wrists, feeling the ropes loosen even more. He felt one knot loosen and a loop of rope slide over his hand.

"Well then," Ben said. "The choice is yours. If I were you I'd take the sedative."

"And if I were you," Phil replied, "I'd go to hell!"

With a sudden burst, Phil launched himself from the chair, ropes falling to the floor and crash-tackled Ben before he had a chance to shoot and aim.

As the two flew toward the floor, Ben fired two shots into the air, pumping bullets into the ceiling.

They hit the floor together.

Phil grabbed Ben's gun hand.

For a moment they fought over control of it before Seth raced through the doorway.

With all his strength Phil pointed Ben's arm and the gun straight at Seth and squeezed Ben's finger against the trigger.

Blam! Blam! Blam!

Seth flew back through the door and hit the porch, dead.

Phil wrestled the gun out of Ben's hand and pointed straight at him.

He pulled the trigger.

Click!

The chamber was empty.

Ben threw a punch at Phil, knocking him backward before scrambling to his feet and making a lunge for the only other weapon in the room – the syringe filled with Somnus.

Before he could reach it, Phil hooked Ben's ankle with his fist, sending him crashing into the table, tipping it over.

The two syringes scattered across the floor.

Ben grabbed desperately for one.

Phil dived for the other.

They both seized the needles then lunged for each other again, each of them plunging the syringe into the other's neck at exactly the same time.

Ben gasped.

So did Phil.

They pulled their syringes free, and suddenly Ben's body went limp and he dropped to the floor.

Phil looked down at the syringe in his own hand. There was a blue tip on the end.
"Oh fuck."

*

Conrad pulled up at the razed ruins of the Bear and Bones just as Grady was climbing into his truck. He instantly saw how exhausted Grady looked, how grim his expression was, how tired his eyes were.

As Grady started his truck, Conrad pulled up in front of him, blocking his path.

"You're not driving anywhere," Conrad ordered, climbing out of his vehicle.

"Connie, I need to find Phil."

"Then let me drive. Look at you. You're exhausted and upset and there's no way in hell you should be behind a wheel. I won't allow it."

"Sorry, Connie. But you don't get to call the shots. Not today. My husband is missing."

Grady started his truck, but before he could put it into gear Conrad reached through the window and pulled the keys out of the ignition. "Now move over. I'm driving. Just tell me where to go."

"You'll help me find Phil?" Grady asked. He was exhausted and his emotions were raw. He needed to know.

Conrad paused a moment. Deep down, in the darkest recesses of his heart, Conrad Cotton hoped that Phil was gone forever. So that maybe, just maybe, he and Grady could start the life they should have been living all along.

Yet seeing the pain in Grady's eyes, all Connie wanted was to make the despair and the hurt go away. All he ever really wanted was Grady's happiness.

"Of course I will," was his simple reply.

Grady leaned out the window and kissed Connie on the lips. "Thank you."

At that moment, Sheriff Neale pulled up in his police 4WD.

"Grady, wait up," he said climbing out of the vehicle and hurrying over to the truck.
"Can I talk to you?"

Grady looked nervously from the Sheriff to Conrad. "Anything you have to tell me you can say in front of Connie. It's okay." He braced himself to ask, "Have you found Phil?"

Vic shook his head. "No, but there's been a report of a gunshot up at the old deer hunter's cabin. I'm about to go look into it. But I thought..."

"I'm coming," Grady said.

"Then so am I," Conrad added.

"Connie, no, it could be dangerous," Grady said.

"All the more reason you need help."

Vic looked from one to the other and said, "Come on then, both of you. No time to argue. We'll take my car."

*

Phil looked down at the syringe in the open palm of Ben's unconscious body.

Red tip.

Its contents empty.

And so Phil's hidden past had finally caught up with him. And if he wanted to survive it, he had ten minutes.

His first instinct was to run and find help. But then he realized he didn't have a hope. He needed to leave a message.

He pulled the cupboards and drawers of the old cabin open and threw their contents across the floor, looking for anything he could write on and write with. He found a map of the mountain. He found a pencil that had been sharpened with a hunting knife. Desperately he scrawled across the map:

I'm not dead! 10 mg Narcan!

He was about to take the map and run for the door when he suddenly he stopped and added:

Grady, I'm so sorry. Forgive me. I have and will always love you! P

With that he scrunched the map in his fist and bolted for the door. He knew how far the highway was.

Maybe he could make it.

Maybe someone would find him in time.

Maybe it wasn't too late.

*

"Maybe we can keep looking," Zach said to Adam, stepping out of the shower he'd only just stepped into.

Adam shook his head sympathetically, lovingly, and gently pushed Zach back under the hot running water. "No, Zach. You're exhausted. Look at you. You're cut and scratched and bruised from searching for your dad. You need to take a break."

"But he'd be the first one out there looking for me if I were missing."

"And he'd be the first one to tell you I'm right when I say, you need rest. Otherwise you're going trip over a piece of debris or fall down an embankment in the dark and you'll be the one we're all looking for."

Zach sighed, and then under the shower of water he started to cry. "You're right," he said, his voice breaking up and the tears streamed down his face with the shower water. "You're always right. That's why I love you." He sniffed under the water and said it again. "I love you, Adam."

Adam almost started crying himself, seeing his lover – the man he had been in love with for so long – standing there in the shower, naked and vulnerable and in tears.

Suddenly he realized how much Zach needed to be held.

He pulled off his own filthy clothes from the day's search and stepped into the shower, not to fuck Zach, not even to kiss him – at least not right now – but to hold him.

Just hold him in his arms.

As tightly as he could, in an embrace that both of them wanted to last a lifetime.

And while Zach rocked in his arms, letting go of his fear and uncertainty and letting it all wash away with the shower water, Adam gently whispered, "It's okay. It'll be okay."

Eventually Zach took a deep breath and said, "What if it's not?"

"It will be. I promise."

"Promise-promise?"

Adam nodded and smiled. "Yeah. I promise-promise. With a cherry on top. I'm a good cook, so you know that's a pretty good promise."

Zach laughed through his tears. "That's something my dads would say to each other. I can't bear the idea of them ever being apart." He sniffed again and said, "Just like I can't bear the thought of ever being apart from you."

Adam nodded. "It'll be okay," he said again.

But Zach wiped away his tears under the shower and added, "Adam I'm serious."

"You're tired."

"Maybe. But I've spent my whole life seeing how happy my dads are, how much they mean to each other, how they make each other's lives so...complete. And I want that too. I want that with you."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you're the one who makes me laugh when I'm crying. You're the one who hugs me when I need to be loved. You're the one right thing in my life when everything else is wrong."

Adam stood speechless under the shower, his heart pounding, his arms still wrapped around his lover as Zach, with another tear streaking down his face said:

"I don't have a ring. In fact, I don't have much of anything at all. But I do have you, and

that's something I want forever. Adam Parish... will you marry me?"

Adam froze. For a moment he stood silent, staring into Zach's beckoning, tear-swollen eyes, before he took a deep breath and nervously said, "I... I..."

*

"I will," Grady said quietly, a tear collecting in his eye.

"What did you say, Grady? You okay?" Conrad reached over from the back seat, putting his hand on Grady's shoulder and giving him a supportive squeeze.

Grady patted Connie's hand. "I'm fine. Just remembering back to the day Phil and I got married."

As Vic's 4WD sped up the mountain, headlights on now as the darkness began to set in, Conrad's hand slowly slid from Grady's shoulder. But Grady's thoughts did not slide from that memory in his head. "It was a commitment ceremony back then, but for me and Phil it was the best day of our lives. We'd written these elaborate vows and speeches, but then when the celebrant asked if he'd take my hand and love me for the rest of my life, all Phil could say was 'I will'. The rest of it just went out the window." Grady's brow creased as he remembered something else from that day. "Actually no, that wasn't the only thing he said. He told me I saved his life. That from then on, I was his only life."

Grady laughed fondly at the memory.

Vic sighed with a smile. "Sounds beautiful enough to me. Hell, you two are the luckiest guys I know."

In the backseat, Conrad stiffened a little.

Grady nodded. "Thanks, Vic."

"We'll find him you know. He'll be okay, I know we'll find —"

Suddenly Vic slammed on the brakes.

The 4WD swirled, its headlights spinning to reveal a lone figure lying in the middle of the road.

As the car lurched to a halt a few feet from the body, Grady, Vic and Conrad snapped off their seatbelts and ran toward the person laying the beams of the headlights.

Grady was the first to recognize him.

"Phil! Phil?" he shouted, running to the slumped body and skidding to his knees beside him.

As Grady trying to scoop Phil's limp body up in his arms, as he tried desperately to wake him, Vic dropped beside Grady and tried to calm him.

"Grady, listen to me, you need to let go! Now! Phil could have been hit by a car. He may have neck injuries. You need to step back now!"

Grady nodded, tears beginning to stream. "He's not moving," he uttered feebly.

At that moment, Conrad wrapped his arms around Grady and helped him eased Phil back down before pulling Grady away to let Vic do his job.

As Conrad held him, Grady wept.

As Vic searched for signs of life, he let out a defeated sigh.

He checked his wrist. He felt the carotid pulse on his neck. He lowered his ear to Phil's chest. And with a terrible sigh he sat back on his haunches.

"He's okay, isn't he?" Grady pleaded. "Vic?"

But all Vic could do was shake his head. "Grady, I'm so sorry... he's dead."

As Grady slipped out of Conrad's grip and landed on his knees on the road, he let out a cry that echoed through the trees before the wind caught it and carried it up the mountains.

The same wind that had snatched the crumpled map out of Phil's hand the moment he had collapsed onto the highway, carrying the piece of paper with Phil's scrawled message on it through the trees and thickets.

Yes, everyone in Boxer Falls remembered the day Phil Boxer died...

... for the first time.

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-Will Phil's note be found or will he become the victim of his own past?

-Will Adam say yes to Zach's proposal, or will he get cold feet in the shower?

-And will Ben awaken and flee town, or exact revenge on those Phil loves the most?

TUNE IN NEXT WEEK!

Boxer Falls: The bigger they are...

AUTHOR BIO:

From palace-hopping across the Rajasthan Desert to sleeping in train stations in Bulgaria, from spinning prayer-wheels in Kathmandu to exploring the skull-gated graveyards of the indigenous Balinese tribes, Geoffrey Knight has been a traveller ever since he could scrape together enough money to buy a plane ticket. Born in Melbourne but raised and educated in countless cities and towns across Australia, Geoffrey was a nomadic boy who grew into a nomadic gay writer. When he's not travelling the world, Geoffrey is travelling the world of his imagination – where the adventures, thrills and romance are limitless.

He currently owns his own advertising and design agency which he runs from his

island home on the Great Barrier Reef, and can't wait to buy his next plane ticket – whether it's real or imaginary.

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