



Episode Thirty-Six

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Boxer Falls Episode 36

by Jacob Z. Flores

Grady Boxer sat in the tiny waiting area outside the morgue. He tried his best to occupy his mind, to think about anything other than the fact that Dr. Sherman was at this moment processing his husband's dead body.

If he pondered it for too long, he'd drive himself crazy.

He needed something to occupy his thoughts, and if he hadn't made Connie leave, he would at least have someone here with him now. But Grady couldn't let him stay. It seemed wrong somehow. His husband was. . . .

No, I have to stop thinking about that.

It was just inappropriate for Connie. No, he had to stop that too. Connie was a term of endearment. It expressed lingering sentiment that was *never* right before, and sure as hell was wrong now. He was Conrad. He had to be Conrad and Conrad only. Most likely forever.

He owed Phil that much.

Tears welled in his eyes once again, but he refused to let them fall. Zach was on his way. Vic graciously offered to collect his son and bring Zach to him. He had to be strong for his boy because he was going to need Grady's strength now more than ever.

To stave off the tears, his thoughts shifted to the chair he occupied. Uncomfortable and outdated by at least three decades, the blue, worn fabric clung to undetermined stains about as firmly as he refused to believe that Phil was gone.

Damn it! I can't do this. I can't!

Grady shifted his gaze to the sterile-white walls. They needed a touch-up job. Badly. Yellow water stains decorated the corners, where the walls met the ceiling, and amateur photos snapped of the town hung askew on the wall opposite him. In one of the photos, Lake Fergus sparkled in the early morning sunlight, where the reflecting sun's rays made it appear as if hundreds of fireflies flitted over the water. Another depicted Cotten Square covered in a light dusting of snow, but the image Grady focused on was of Old George. Still standing proudly, Old George's massive arms stretched up and over the town, embracing the residents of Boxer Falls as they had for decades upon decades.

Old George had been an institution, a cornerstone of this town, but, now, thanks to that damn storm, it had fallen. Its body cut into pieces to be hauled away and forgotten as if the mighty tree never even existed.

Just like Phil.

This time, Grady couldn't stop the tears from falling. Just like when Vic told him an hour ago that Phil was dead, the tears poured out of him in a deluge matching the storm that ripped through the town. He crumpled under the stress of his agony, sliding out of his chair and kneeling on the white linoleum floor.

"Oh, God," he pleaded, his eyes gazing up to the ceiling. His need to be strong for Zach had been forgotten, replaced by the tsunami of pain and grief that rose from the fragments of his shattered heart. "Please let this be some bad dream. *Please* don't let this be true. I can't lose my Phil. *Not now!* Not after we *finally* found our way back to each other."

His sobs prevented further words from escaping. Grady could only manage gasping breaths and unintelligible sounds.

He felt hollow and empty. The best part of him had been cruelly extracted, and he doubted he had the strength he needed to carry on.

* * *

"Hurry up, damn it!" Zach Boxer cursed as the sheriff drove him and Adam to the morgue.

When Zach first heard the knock on Adam's door, he wanted to ignore it. He wanted Adam to answer his marriage proposal. It might not have been the best timing, with his father missing and them being naked in the shower instead of on a secluded, romantic beach, but he'd wanted an answer. Adam meant the world to him, and after the hell he saw his dad going through worrying about his dad Phil, he knew he didn't want to waste any more time. He and Adam were meant to be together. Forever.

But Adam hesitated.

No, not hesitated, he stammered. As if Adam were being asked a question he didn't want to answer. Zach understood that response well. When he was constantly fucking stuff up at home on purpose, he sometimes sputtered whenever his dads asked him a question, where the truth would get him in trouble. *That* was how Adam reacted to his marriage proposal, as if the idea of spending forever with Zach was something Adam just couldn't even entertain.

"God damn it!" He repeated to the sheriff. "Drive faster!"

"Sheriff Neale's driving as fast as he can," Adam told him from the seat beside him in the patrol car. He placed a reassuring arm around Zach's shoulder, but Zach shrugged it free.

"Yeah, well, it's not fucking fast enough! Can't you use the sirens or something?"

Sheriff Neale shook his head. "Roads are still bad from the storm. Besides, Grady'll appreciate me bringing you to him in one piece."

"But Phil won't care, will he?" Zach asked, glaring into the sheriff's eyes as he stared somberly at Zach from the rearview mirror. "Because he's dead!"

He knew he was being an ass. While the sheriff might be a fuck up in a lot of ways, he didn't deserve being treated this way. There was nothing he could do to stop his anger though. He was pissed off at the universe for taking his dad away from him and now he had to somehow deal with the fact that Adam had no intention of spending the rest of his life with him.

"Just be useful for once and get me to my dad."

"Zach!" Adam protested as the sheriff returned his eyes to the road.

"What?" He glared at Adam. His lover's brown eyes looked black with grief. He obviously felt awful for Zach, and Zach wanted to curl up in his reassuring embrace, but he couldn't count on that embrace. Based on the way Adam reacted to the proposal, it was just a matter of time until Adam left him too.

Just like his dad Phil.

* * *

Although he didn't want to admit it, Quinn liked the way Oz was taking care of him. Sure, the rich son-of-a-bitch made him a pathetic cheese sandwich for lunch, but he doubted Oz Cotten had ever fetched a meal for anyone in his privileged life.

But Oz had, and it had been for him.

He looked down at where Oz slept peacefully on his chest after giving Quinn one of the best blowjobs of his life. Though Quinn's leg was injured, he'd insisted on some sexual healing, and Oz had delivered in spades. Oz did things with his tongue that drove Quinn crazy. Oz licked and wrapped his tongue around the head and the shaft as his lips pursed tightly around Quinn's hard cock. He worked his hands up and down in twisting motions and suckled so intently that Quinn had to fight to make it last. But it had felt so damn good, that he gave in and let Oz claim the reward he worked so hard to receive.

Now, Oz dozed on top of him, the sheets barely covering naked flesh Quinn wanted to sample again. Even relaxed, Oz's muscles looked taut, and when he followed the curve of Oz's back to where it dipped beneath the sheets, Quinn saw the full mounds of Oz's ass peeking from beneath the fabric.

His mouth watered.

What the fuck have you done to me, Oz Cotten? You've got me slobbering like some lovesick puppy, and I don't do lovesick or puppies.

That didn't stop Quinn from noticing how Oz's short, ash blond hair looked like golden flecks across his pale skin, and before he could stop himself, he ran his left hand across Oz's head, enjoying how Oz's soft hair tickled his palm.

Oz pushed back against his touch like a purring kitten.

This shit's ridiculous! He's going all feline on me, and I'm some dumbass pup. I can't do this again. Can I?

The last time Quinn felt anything close to what he was feeling now, it didn't end well. He promised himself he'd never do a relationship again. He didn't get off on that kind of pain, so he hid his heart behind steel walls of badass bravado.

Those defenses served him well all these years, but somehow, Oz broke through. Now, here Quinn was-on the verge of vulnerability.

He didn't like that feeling. *At all.*

But he couldn't seem to stop it from happening.

"Like what you see?"

Quinn stared into Oz's smiling blue eyes and snuffed playfully. "I've seen better."

"I seriously doubt that," Oz replied as he pulled back the covers, exposing his hard, naked body.

Quinn wanted to run his fingers through Oz's blond chest hair and feast upon the perky nipples that hid underneath the fine covering. Instead, he shook his head. "Yup. Definitely seen better."

"Asshole!" Oz sat up, resting his head on his right palm. "Is this the thanks I get for bringing you a sandwich and sucking you off?"

Quinn thought about his answer for a moment. "For the sandwich, yes. 'cause that was a pitiful attempt at a meal."

"And what about sucking you off?"

A grin stretched across Quinn's face. "*That* was better than the sandwich."

"I would hope so since I suck at cooking."

"I wouldn't necessarily call making a sandwich cooking, but you suck real good where it counts." Quinn grabbed his crotch to emphasize his statement.

Oz chuckled for a few seconds, but the smile in his eyes disappeared as quickly as it arrived. His face turned serious.

"You can get better at the sandwich making. Here's your chance: go put some ham between those dry pieces of bread you brought me for lunch."

Quinn hoped Oz would take his cue and return to the joking and maybe even progress to more fucking. They were at their best when they remained casual. As it was, Quinn felt emotions for Oz he didn't want to feel. Getting serious now would do them no good.

Quinn knew himself too well. He'd fuck everything up just to keep himself safe.

Oz eyed him warily. No doubt, he read Quinn's body language and understood it loud and clear. "I know you and I don't do the serious stuff well, but...."

"No reason to continue," Quinn replied, raising his hand for Oz to stop. "Let's keep it the way it is. No serious stuff. Just fun."

"But when the storm hit, all I could think about was getting to you," Oz blurted. He sounded more like a kid than the tough-as-nails businessman he'd come to know. "I didn't give a damn about Whispering Ridge, about my family. No one. Just *you*."

Quinn had no intention of doing this. They were going to mess up what they had if they continued down this path. Even though he might be feeling whatever the *hell* he might be feeling, he wasn't going to do this again.

"Well?" Oz asked after a few moments of silence. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

He sighed. "Thank you."

Oz's eyes flashed ice blue. "Thank you? That's all I get is '*thank you*'?"

"I asked you not to do this," Quinn reminded him. "I wanted to not be serious."

"Yeah, well, we can't just all skate through life without a care in the world."

"What the hell do you know about living *with* cares? Seems to me you've been skating all throughout your life, *Mister Cotten*."

Oz stood up from the bed and bent down to put on his clothes. Quinn didn't want him to leave, but leaving seemed to be a foregone conclusion now. Just as he thought, he'd fucked things up with Oz, when all Oz wanted was some acknowledgement that Quinn felt the same way about him.

Was admitting he cared that hard for him?

As he watched Oz gather the rest of his belongings, he realized there was only one answer.

Yes. Apparently, it was.

* * *

Adam Parish's heart broke as he watched Zach bawling in his father's arms. He'd never seen Zach express such raw emotions for as long as he'd known him, but then again, Zach had never lost a father before.

It was almost too much for him to watch, and it had been too much for Vic, who quietly stepped out of the room after safely delivering them to Grady.

Adam felt like an intruder, like he should leave Zach and Grady to their pain, but this wasn't about him. This was about what Zach needed, and right now Zach needed him.

He would be there for Zach. Heck, he'd *always* been there for Zach ever since Miss Wilson sat them together in Kindergarten, which was why he didn't understand his hesitation when Zach proposed. Being with Zach had been something he'd wanted since he could remember.

But when Zach asked him to spend the rest of their lives together, he hesitated. He'd always thought he'd rush into Zach's arms, screaming "YES!" at the top of his lungs, but that didn't happen.

And while he wasn't ready to admit it yet, Adam knew why.

Before he could promise Zach forever, he had to come clean about his secrets, and he'd been guarding them for so long, he wasn't sure he could. Once Zach learned the truth, Adam wasn't certain if Zach would still want to marry him.

That, more than anything, scared him the most.

* * *

Although he couldn't explain why he was there, Conrad Cotten parked his car next to the spot where they found Phil Boxer's body. Perhaps it was morbid curiosity or just one final chance to stick it to Phil-to return alive and kicking to the place where Phil breathed his last.

While Conrad often contemplated killing the man to have his chance with Grady, he never imagined the bastard would up and die. He always assumed that Phil's philandering would come between Phil and Grady, not death.

He envisioned comforting Grady, showing him how desirable he was and how much of a fool Phil was for constantly cheating. Death, however, might turn Phil into a saint in Grady's eyes, despite the many problems they had. Conrad worried that Phil's death might also be the end of any chances he had at being with Grady.

The pain he saw in Grady's eyes seemed to verify his fear. He wanted to stay and help, to be the shoulder that Grady needed, but Grady didn't want him there. He practically shoved Conrad out of the waiting room, and the way Grady had looked at him almost broke his heart.

It was like he no longer existed in Grady's world.

For a split second, when he heard that Phil was dead, he secretly hoped that this might mean he still had a chance with Grady. Now, he doubted that would ever happen.

Perhaps it was time to give up on his quest to reunite with Grady.

A white fluttering movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. At first, Conrad thought it was a dove perched in a tree, but he realized it was paper caught in a limb and flapping in the wind.

Although he figured it to be trash, something drew him to it. He crossed the road and slid down the embankment. His expensive shoes, already ruined by the storm, sunk deep into the mud that went past his ankles. In order to free himself, he had to force his feet from the shoes.

Once free, he rather ungracefully climbed up the tree to where the paper flitted on the third branch and yanked it free.

It was a map.

He cursed his curiosity and tossed it into the mud. As the map fell away, he noticed writing scribbled on the opposite side. He bent down to pick it up and gasped when he noticed Phil's frantic handwriting.

* * *

Oz had had enough. He didn't understand why he was wasting his time with Quinn. He'd thought they shared a moment back at the Bear and Bones. He'd thought there had been some unspoken exchange between the two of them when he found Quinn despite the storm that raged outside.

When they saw each other and knew the other was safe, Oz was certain Quinn had been just as worried about him.

When am I going to fucking learn?

Oz zipped up his pants and draped his shirt across his shoulder. In his hands, he held his shoes and his keys. He didn't need to finish getting dressed before he walked out of Quinn's life. It just needed to be done. For good.

"Oz, wait," Quinn called out. Although he didn't know why, he turned around to face the man who infuriated him more than either his father or his brother.

"For what?" He asked as he stared into those damn green eyes that made him stupid.

Quinn got out of bed. Naked, he limped over to where Oz fumed and took Oz's face in his hands. Electric sparks traveled down his body, heading straight for his hardening cock.

Oz hated himself for still wanting to feel Quinn's hands on his body. Right now, he wanted Quinn to take him, to throw him onto the bed and fuck him until they were both sore.

What's wrong with me? Why can't I just leave you here to rot?

Quinn's gaze locked onto his. Oz saw something deep within, something fighting its way to the surface, and he could tell by the pained look in Quinn's expression, that he was fighting the emotion tooth and nail.

"I was worried about you too," Quinn admitted in a barely audible whisper. "When I saw you, I was...well, fuck, I don't know how to say it...but I'd never been happier to see anyone more."

Oz dropped his keys and shoes before brushing his shirt off his shoulder. "That's all I wanted to hear," he told Quinn as he pressed their lips together. "That you care."

Quinn sucked Oz's tongue inside his mouth. While their tongues slipped and slid back and forth, Quinn undid the button on Oz's pants and shoved them along with his underwear to the floor.

Oz wrapped his arms around Quinn's waist, trapping their hard cocks between them, while Quinn ran his hands down Oz's sides before reaching around to squeeze his ass.

They worked their way back to the bed, and Oz gently pushed Quinn onto his back.

"We have to be careful with your leg," he said as he reached into the nightstand to retrieve the condom and lube. "So you lie back and let me ride that hot cock of yours."

Quinn smiled. "More sexual healing, huh?"

"Yes," Oz nodded as he rolled the condom onto Quinn's throbbing cock and lubed himself up. "Unless you'd rather I make you a sandwich instead?"

Quinn pulled Oz on top of him. "Hell, no. I'd rather put my meat between *your* buns."

Oz smiled. "Now *that's* the kind of sandwich I can make."

He then lowered himself onto Oz and rode them both to a creamy finish.

* * *

"A heart attack?" Grady asked, not believing the words that came out of Dr. Sherman's mouth. "You've got to be kidding me?"

"My dad was as strong as a bull," Zach protested. "There's no way in *fucking* hell he had a heart attack."

Dr. Herman Sherman sighed in exasperation. "Regardless," he said, "Phil Boxer died from a heart attack."

Grady collapsed onto one of the awful blue chairs that lined the room. He hated himself for being so weak in front of his son, but he felt so completely defeated.

"It doesn't make any sense," he said to no one in particular. "He can't have survived cancer to die of a heart attack."

Zach walked over to him and held his head to his stomach. "That's because he's made a mistake," Zach accused while glaring at Dr. Sherman. "That fat bastard doesn't know his elbow from his asshole."

Dr. Sherman's pale face turned cherry red. "I understand you're in grief, Zachary, but that's no reason to be rude."

"Don't be telling me...."

Grady stood up and wrapped his arms around his son, effectively silencing his tirade against the medical examiner. It was time for him to be the strong one again. He was the parent after all.

"Dr. Sherman's right, Zach. This isn't his fault."

"Then, whose fault is it? I want to make them pay!"

Grady stroked his son's hair and beckoned Adam over to them. For some reason, Adam had been standing across the room, as if he were afraid to get too close, but Zach didn't need distance. More than anything else, his son needed the man he loved, and that was Adam.

When Adam drew closer, Grady told him, "Please take Zach outside. I want a few moments alone with Dr. Sherman."

Adam nodded, and Zach followed Adam out of the office. When the door shut, Grady turned around to face Dr. Sherman. "Herman, this just doesn't make sense. Is it possible you could have made a mistake?"

"No, it's not," he replied testily.

"It just doesn't add up. How could Phil have had a heart problem? Ever since his cancer, he's seen the doctors more than anyone else I'd ever known. They ran test after test on him, and they all found nothing."

"Well, someone must've missed something," he told Grady rather smugly.

"And what was he doing by the old deer hunter's cabin, wandering around up there by himself?"

"I'm the Medical Examiner, Grady, *not* a detective. I suggest you take that up with Vic Neale."

Grady watched Dr. Sherman exit the waiting room and disappear into the back.

"I intend to," he said to himself. "Because something here is just *not* right."

* * *

Conrad didn't know what to make of what he was reading. Written on the back of the map he found twisting in the tree was a note that appeared to be from Phil.

I'm not dead! 10 mg Narcan!

"What the fuck?" He had no idea what this meant. Why would Phil have written this before his heart attack, and what the hell was Narcan?

"Conrad, might I have a word with you?"

Conrad turned around, surprised to hear a familiar voice behind him.

"Ben?" Conrad asked, staring at the disheveled man, who he hadn't seen in years and who also apparently had just been in a fight. Ben' Vreeland's nose was red and bloody, and his clothes were torn. He'd obviously been run through the wringer. "What are you doing out here?"

"A mixture of business and pleasure," he replied as coolly as ever.

"Well, it doesn't look like it ended well." Conrad couldn't have been more pleased.

Ben smirked. "It did not, but I believe things are definitely looking up for me."

"How's that?" Conrad asked, wondering what the look in Ben Vreeland's eyes meant. He never trusted the man, not for all the years they'd known each other, but Conrad had learned that it was better to have Ben Vreeland as a friend than an enemy.

They'd gone down that road once, with disastrous results. If he could help it, he wouldn't go there again.

"I think you and I are about to go into business together."

"Business? What kind of business?"

Ben smiled. "The kind of business that will win Grady Boxer back in your life. Forever."

Conrad stared into Ben's scheming eyes. He didn't know how Ben knew about his feelings for Grady. That definitely made him uncomfortable, an emotion Conrad was unaccustomed to, and though his gut instinct warned him to tell Ben to fuck off, he owed it to himself and Grady to at least hear the man out.

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** What will Conrad do with Phil's note, and what is Ben's connection to Conrad? What secret past do the two share?*

** What is Adam hiding from Zach? Will it tear the two apart or bring them closer together?*

** Now that Quinn has voiced his feelings for Oz, will their relationship begin moving in a more serious direction or will Quinn's past get in the way?*

** Will Grady learn that Phil isn't really dead?*

** Will Phil ever get the medicine he needs to bring him "back to life" or is he in more danger now than ever?*

TUNE IN NEXT WEEK!

Boxer Falls: The bigger they are...

AUTHOR BIO:

Jacob Z. Flores lives a double life. During the day, he is a respected college English professor and mid-level administrator. At night and during his summer vacation, he loosens the tie and tosses aside the trendy sports coat to write man on man fiction, where the hard ass assessor of freshmen level composition turns his attention to the firm posteriors and other rigid appendages of the characters in his fictional world.

Summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, provide Jacob with inspiration for his fiction. The abundance of barely clothed man flesh and daily debauchery stimulates his personal muse.

When he isn't stroking the keyboard, Jacob spends time with his husband, Bruce, their three children, and two dogs, who represent a bright blue blip in an otherwise predominantly red swath in south Texas.

You can follow Jacob's musings on his [blog](#) at or become a part of his social media network by visiting [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).