



## Episode Thirty-Eight

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### Boxer Falls Episode 38

By: Jeremy Pack

The dream came to Cathy like a dark lover under cover of deepest night. It began as a gentle caress—a tender finger stroking a lazy line upward along her spine to the base of her hairline, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. The tracery aroused warmth deep in her core. The drawing, tingling sensation promised wonders yet to behold.

There was a nibble at the nape of her neck, tentative at first, teasing. Anticipation flared like breath given to fire. The blaze brought with it comfort and the soothing weight of a lover's body pressing her deeper into the mattress. It wasn't unpleasant—hell, it felt damn good to be under a man again—and she felt safe sheltered in that embrace.

And then, too late, she was the fox in a snare. The tender teeth started chewing through her defenses right into her carefully guarded center. Passion became fear. The gentle weight that had felt safe was suddenly dense and oppressive. She couldn't move!

*No! Damn it! No!*

Too late. Cathy's secret lover, so long denied, had finally returned to claim her in her

moment of carelessness. He would not be denied this time. Caught up in his cruel embrace, she could do nothing but wait for the visions to come. Gods, this was going to suck.

*She was bound tightly at the wrists. There was a sense of movement and speed, carrying her away from all that she loved.*

*South. She was southward bound. Mexico? Brazil? No. Boston. Boston and then the port and then further still. Montserrat, Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Lucia. The Caribbean! That's where he was taking her. Who? Who was taking her?*

*Every nerve in her body was screaming. Get to Grady! Get to Zach!*

*And then she was in paradise, but a stone's throw from hell. She sweltered in a wet tropical heat. Blood soaked her hands. She glimpsed a dirty scalpel. A claustrophobic surgical suite. A cooler packed with ice. Organs. Death. Dreams lost. Terrible, terrible stains on her soul.*

*Ben.... No, not Ben!*

*But she would be forced to do terrible things, just the same. Evil things she had done in the Philippines and later in Ecuador.*

*This time there would be no dark hotel rooms and back-alley deals. This time there would be a Quonset hut on a small island with no escape save the speedboats guarded by well-armed thugs. The victims would be the same, though. She would do unspeakable things to unwitting tourists, the castoffs who inhabited gutters and forgotten byways, and Cuban refugees whose ill-fated voyages carried them to unfriendly shores.*

*She could hear endless, relentless screams from the next hut over. The most evil, terrible hut of all. The one where soldiers and puppets were made.*

*La casa de los monstrous. The house of the monsters.*

Cathy screamed and sat bolt upright in her bed. She clawed at the multitude of spiders and insects scabbling out of her sweat-soaked hair and running down her neck.

Sweat. It was just trickles of sweat.

She flew out of the bed and huddled in a corner, mewling softly as her hammering heart tried to beat its way out of her ribcage.

She bit down on a trembling knuckle and tasted the tang of copper. She'd bitten hard enough to draw blood. Why the hell did it always have to be *bad*? Why couldn't she

see *good* things? Why couldn't rock hard abs and sweaty sex be broadcast over the psychic airwaves? Hell, she'd even settle for Aunt Eunice's visions of piping hot Ovaltine and fuzzy kittens. Why was it always death and destruction?

She wormed her way up the wall, keeping her back squarely braced in the corner. Images from the horrific dream plucked at her raw nerves, threatening to undo her all over again. She took several deep breaths in an effort to center herself. The vision was important.

Phil. She had been in Phil's head. He was alive but in terrible danger. Why did it have to be Phil? She frowned, realizing that she was suddenly faced with an impossible choice. She couldn't tell anyone. She couldn't!

But she had to. If she *didn't*, Phil would be in the equatorial Atlantic hacking livers and kidneys out of hapless tourists inside a week. And wouldn't that be a shitty end to someone's dream vacation? To say nothing of what it would do to Phil and Grady and *Zach's* postcard-perfect life. Well, mostly postcard-perfect. This was Boxer Falls, after all.

The Beltane Occult Shoppe – The Beltane in common parlance – was a carefully cultivated front. She had worked very hard to capitalize on the crackpot image it had bestowed upon her. It kept her safe and close to – *Not right now, Cathy! Focus!* The Beltane was a house of cards. If she acted – as she knew she must – it could all come crashing down.

In Cathy's experience, phony psychics and hucksters didn't arouse fear the way real ones did. As long as people thought she was a harmless eccentric – as long as they didn't know she could strike up how-do-you-dos with the skeletons lurking in their musty closets – everything was fine and dandy. The second someone found out the truth though, she'd be yanking pitchforks out of her ass and dodging stake burnings all the way the hell out of Dodge. Could she really put all that at risk?

Who could she tell, anyway? She immediately dismissed Sheriff Vic. After that night she'd spent in lockdown because of a misunderstanding involving a chicken and a craving for coq a vin – and honestly, could she really be blamed for holistic living? – she'd been reluctant to report *anything* to him again. Besides, that nasty business with the dagger and the dead reporter were still very fresh in the town's memory. She'd been trying to keep a low profile after that, even if she'd dodged the bullet that time.

Grady?

Meek, pragmatic, milquetoast Grady? Who the hell was she kidding? Grady was a

mommy-daddy, a nurturer. The guy polished the shining armor. He didn't *wear* it. And anyway, that was like shitting where you slept. Much too close to home.

"Hey, Grady. Strangest thing. I had this vision that your husband is alive. Yeah, and in terrible danger. You see, I only *pretend* to be pretending to be a psychic so I can keep an eye on our family — *your* family. Why don't you go ahead and rescue him. K-thanks."

*Smooth, Cathy.*

Still.... What else could she do?

She turned wary eyes toward the nightstand in response to a sudden compulsion. Lying face up on top of a stack of tarot cards, she beheld a chilling sight. Bathed in the glow of the silver moon, a card bearing the image of the very celestial orb seemed to mock her.

*Illusion, deception, obscured vision....*

There was a puppet afoot in Boxer Falls. A puppet who had been handpicked and imbued with a monster even he didn't know about. A face arose in her mind, wavering and shadowed. She huddled deeper in the corner, bracing herself against the walls upon legs that were suddenly too weak to keep her upright.

The monster was lurking, sure as death and taxes, lying in wait for the words that would bring it to life.

Cathy rubbed at gooseflesh on her arms. What if those words had already been spoken?

Well now, wouldn't that just be the buttercream to top off this fuckadoody cake?

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Conrad chased the pain into consciousness. There was a deep, insistent burning in his abdomen where he assumed the bullet had penetrated. He remembered everything that had happened after he'd discovered the map and the message from Phil. Weren't bad memories supposed to be hazy in moments like this? Wasn't that the cliché?

Unfortunately for him, these memories were particularly lucid. Why the hell did he have to go out looking for trouble? If he hadn't been so intent on visiting the scene of Phil's demise, if he'd just kept his nose out of it, he would be holding Grady Boxer in his arms right now, Phil Boxer would be a fast-fading memory, and he would have everything he'd ever wanted.

Instead, he'd run into Ben Vreeland and his conscience had made a surprise appearance – unfortunately, at a most inconvenient time. Wasn't that always the way of it?

There had been a brief instant when he'd considered going along with Vreeland's twisted plot. That idea had been just as quickly aborted as conceived. Conrad Cotton was many things, but he was not evil. Not really.

Conrad also had a shitty poker face, apparently, because the moment he decided to walk away, a dark figure had emerged from the trees at Vreeland's back with a weapon trained on him. A shot had been fired.

Had he seen confusion and fear in Ben Vreeland's eyes? No, surely not. But it didn't really bear contemplating because here he was – gutshot and stuffed in a...? Where the hell was he? It was so dark. It smelled like rotting fish and shit. The floor seemed to roll and he could hear the unmistakable sounds of moving water transmitted through the metal beneath his body. If he had to guess, he'd say he was in the hold of a boat of some kind. A big boat.

Conrad heard a grunt and became aware that he was not alone. The darkness felt dense and threatening all of the sudden. He couldn't see an inch in front of his face, but the sounds of the other had been close – too close. "Who's there?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

There was a long, strained silence.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," was the response. The voice coming back at him echoed of the metal walls.

If the unmistakable growl of Phil Boxer's voice hadn't been so appropriate in this ridiculous situation, Conrad might have been undone. As it was, the only word that came to mind was *apropos*.

"Cotten." It wasn't a question. He exhaled. "I knew I was going to end up in hell," he grumbled.

Phil snorted in response. "I'm not dead."

"I know. I got the memo." Conrad tried to roll over to face Phil, but the pain in his side flared to life and he grimaced instead. "Between you and me, I liked you better that way."

"Stuff it, Cotten," Phil whispered harshly. "They hear us talking and things are going to get dicey."

"Dicey? As opposed to being shot, trussed, and locked up with a talking corpse?" Conrad groaned. This situation was getting more bizarre with every passing second. "Where are we anyway?"

"Shipping container," Phil offered. "We're on a cargo frigate. We set sail from Boston a day ago. And what do you mean 'you got the memo?'"

"I found your note," Conrad said in reference to the map and the hastily scrawled message. It might have been their only chance of alerting someone in Boxer Falls they were still alive.

"Fuck," was Phil's reply. "Reason seven hundred and fifty-six why I hate your guts."

Conrad tried to turn over once more, and this time he wasn't able to keep the grunt of pain at bay. "Add it to my tab," he said through pain-clenched teeth. The feeble attempt at humor betrayed his agony.

"You okay?" Phil asked. Was that *concern* in Phil Boxer's voice?

"Not really," Conrad admitted as the pain subsided. He breathed out slowly, trying to minimize the flex and stretch of the open wound. "I seem to have been shot." He gritted his teeth and rolled onto his back, pinning his arms painfully beneath him.

"Jesus. How bad is it?" Unmistakably concern this time.

"Bad enough."

Although it was difficult to make anything out through the thick blackness, Conrad could see a shifting of shadow moving in a strange rhythmic fashion off to the right. *What the hell was Phil up to?*

Conrad almost quipped that now wasn't the time for diddling, but Phil's gasp of triumph beat him to the punch. Now somewhat light adjusted, Conrad could see Phil's silhouette flexing free hands in the air in front of his face. "Dumb bastards should have checked the crossbeams before tossing me in here." In the next instant, Phil was kneeling at his side. "Try to hold still, this might hurt."

Conrad tried very hard to ignore the undercurrent of glee in Phil's voice as sure fingers began probing at his wound with a gentle, practiced touch.

*Practiced?* How did Phil know anything about gunshot wounds? After a moment, Phil said, "Surface wound. Feels like it grazed you. You'll live." An exhalation of breath. "Lucky me."

"How...?"

"Later," Phil said. He quickly worked to free Conrad from his bindings. "I hate you, Cotten, but not enough to leave you to the fate these bastards have in store for you."

Conrad couldn't think of anything to say to that. He was well aware of some of the more illicit trades in which Ben Vreeland had a stake.

Once Conrad was free, Phil said, "We're going to have to work together to get out of this. You up to a fight?" Conrad could only nod in acknowledgement. "Good. Let's get the hell out of here." Phil gestured toward the rear door with his chin. "This doesn't change anything, you know."

"For either of us," Conrad agreed.

And then, much to Conrad's surprise all hell broke loose as Phil started hollering and pounding on the walls of the container. What the hell happened to keeping quiet? What about *dicey*?

Retribution came swift and sure in response to Phil's bellows. There were sounds of keys jangling, of chains rattling, and an immense groan as the door of the cargo container swung open.

The surprises, it seemed, were only getting started, because the next instant Phil Boxer jumped on top of him. Phil grinned and said, "I think I'm going to enjoy this. Does that make me a bad person?"

And then he plowed his fist into Conrad's face. Goddamn it. Not this again.

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Zach lifted his head from Adam's shoulder and pushed away, looking toward the floor in shame. He shouldn't have lost it like that. Here he was manning up and asking for a lifetime commitment with one breath and sobbing like a baby with the next. No wonder Adam needed six months to think about it. Seemed like Zach still had some growing up to do.

When he finally dared to look up into Adam's eyes, he didn't see recrimination, though. Weird. Adam looked ashamed. What did Adam have to be embarrassed about?

And then it hit him.

*Six months.* Adam didn't need time, *Zach* did. In light of recent events – what with Zach's dad being dead and all – well, now just wasn't the best time for dumping, was it?

The realization sucker punched Zach in the nuts. Adam was going to dump him. There was no indecision. That six-month horseshit had just been an excuse to give Zach time to grieve. How considerate.

How could he have been such a fucking idiot?

And all those platitudes and sweet sentiments and promises of *enthusiastic* yesses. He'd nearly bought that line of shit. Adam was just like all the rest. Get off and get out. This was just a more painful version of the same dog and pony show he'd already seen a hundred times.

What had he been thinking?

He hadn't, obviously. He was done. He was so done with this shit.

Zach's shoulders tensed in response to the dawning awareness of what was really going on.

"I think I should leave," he said coldly.

The shame on Adam's face melted away and was replaced by sudden confusion.

"What? But – "

He stomped away and threw open the door.

"Hey, where – ?" he heard Adam call after him.

He kept marching. Out the door, toward the stairs.

A strong hand clamped down on his shoulder and spun him around. Adam's face was bright red and his breathing was quick and shallow. "Zach, what the fuck?"

Zach spat in Adam's face.

*Huh?* Where had that come from? Even Zach was surprised by the contempt in that act. Adam seemed paralyzed with shock as wet spittle ran down his cheek. There were tears brimming in his eyes. Tears? Now he was going to turn on the waterworks?

Rage boiled over again and Zach jerked roughly away. "You can take your six months and shove them up your ass," he said in a low, husky voice. "I've got better things to do than to be strung along by a two-bit short order cook."

Before Adam had a chance to recover, Zach turned and ran.

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Midway through Dr. Sherman's blubbering account of being restrained at knifepoint by a pair of Spanish speaking thugs in ski masks, Vic's cell phone rang.

Grady was still reeling from this new set of horrors. Someone had murdered his husband and then they had *stolen* his corpse? Was Candid Camera being revived from syndication purgatory? Was this someone's idea of a sick joke?

As Vic stepped away to take the call, his mind wandered to the discarded muddy shoes. Connie couldn't have had anything to do with all this, could he? The Cottens and the Boxers were famous rivals, and Connie had made his intentions clear often enough. But would he really kill Phil to clear a path to Grady's heart? As inappropriate as it seemed, Grady didn't know whether to be flattered or absolutely mortified by this horrific turn of events.

And underneath all this unreality was the sharp, intense pain left behind by the saw that had hacked out half of his heart. In fact, if he turned his thoughts inward and focused on it, he wasn't sure he'd be able to hold it together in the face of the empty life that lay ahead. The one without Phil.

Grady's eyes stung. His body actually ached to feel Phil's arms wrapped around him. He noticed the cold steel beneath his hand just then. He had been leaning against the autopsy slab for support as Dr. Sherman babbled on about the theft of Phil's body. *Phil's body. My husband's corpse was laying on this table.*

Grady snatched his hand away and rubbed it vigorously against his jeans.

God, he just wanted to cry. No. He didn't want to cry. He wanted to punch that fat prick Herman Sherman in the face so hard his fist disappeared. He wanted to smash that ferociously ugly pasty white face. Why hadn't the coward tried to stop them?

Why was his husband dead, goddamn it? *Why!*

He jumped at the heavy weight of Vic's beefy hand on his shoulder.

"Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse," Vic said. "Looks like we've got bigger problems."

Grady's mouth went slack. He knew if he could see himself in the mirror, he'd look like some kind of caricature from a B-grade cop drama. "Bigger?"

Vic frowned. "Why the fuck they always got to pick on the hippies?"

"Hippies?" Grady was still too shocked to follow logic – particularly when the threads of said logic were flapping wildly in the wind.

"The Beltane," Vic explained as if stating the obvious. "I had the boys at the station do another sweep near where we found Phil's –" Vic looked away and cleared his throat. "Where we found Phil. They found Ben Vreeland. Sorry bastard was shot right through the forehead."

Dr. Sherman's blubbering came to an abrupt halt. "Another homicide? Really?" His beady little weasel eyes were practically alight with sudden enthusiasm.

Vic nodded, ignoring Dr. Sherman's remarkable recovery from his ordeal. "They found a Tarot card pinned to his chest. The Moon. There was another one – The Lovers – near the spot we found Conrad's shoes."

"A serial," Dr. Sherman breathed almost reverently. "I never thought I'd see the day," he said.

Grady swallowed hard. "A serial... *killer*? In Boxer Falls?"

Vic nodded. "If the press calls this guy the Tarot Killer, I think I'm gonna puke."

Grady beat him to it.

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Zach stood alone staring out over the ruins of his past. Wasn't it just yesterday he'd been bitching about hauling shit for his dads and dreaming of finally getting out on his own? How had everything changed so suddenly, so completely?

Ruins. That's all that was left of his life now. Smashed china on a dirty floor. In this moment, he wished like hell that whatever Cotten had made him had just kept his dick in his pants.

He didn't hear the woman sidle up behind him so much as feel her. He was so miserable, so damn tired, he couldn't even summon the strength to turn around. He

didn't need to. He knew who she was.

"Don't give me some hokey line about forks in the road or rising from the ashes, okay? Because I really don't want to listen to that shit right now."

"Okay, smartass, I won't."

"You got a spell for this? Some words of wisdom from your spirit guides or some kooky crap like that? You want to read my cards?"

Instead of speaking, Cathy just stood there. For some weird reason, Zach felt comforted by her presence.

A memory of his mom's face surfaced and wavered like ripples on the surface of a pond. She was beautiful, his mom, but sad too. In the memory, she was holding him as the Greyhound bus carried them south to New York City, and she was singing soft and low. "If you fall I will catch you, I'll be waiting."

"Time after time," Cathy sang in a high, sweet voice in perfect time to the tune playing in his mind.

*Jesus Christ. How did she do that?*

A chill danced over his body, and Zach spun and looked into her eyes. They were brilliant blue and sparkling with tears. Just like...

That was impossible.

"Phil's alive," she said. "And we're the only ones who can save him."

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- *Who is the evil puppet lurking in Boxer Falls?*
- *Will Phil and Conrad escape or will they kill each other in the attempt?*
- *Who is the Tarot Killer and who will be the next to die?*
- *Will Zach's outburst destroy his relationship with Adam?*
- *Who is Cathy? Will she and Zach be able to save Phil in time?*

**TUNE IN NEXT WEEK!**

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

**AUTHOR BIO:**

Jeremy Pack is a writer of fiction about men who happen to be gay. You're as likely to find him thrilling to a midnight release of the latest popcorn actioner as weeping in the greeting card aisle to a particularly touching Hallmark card. It is these tastes that inform his storytelling. A fan of car chases, heart melting sentiment, and head scratching puzzles, he strives to pepper his stories with all three. Jeremy resides in the Pacific Northwest with his partner and their six-year-old daughter, Elise.

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