



## Episode Three

by Poppy Dennison

A beam of sunlight broke through the curtains covering Grady's bedroom window and landed across his face. He winced, tempted to throw the covers over his head and pretend his life wasn't spiraling out of control. The gulf between him and Phil grew wider with each passing day. Grady reached over and ran his hand over the pillow indention where Phil slept.

No surprise that Phil had left already. Grady didn't even remember him getting home last night after he'd gone out to salt the roads. Money was so tight for them right now that Phil took any and every side job he found. His absence caused Grady's

insecurities to rear their ugly head.

Add to that the stress of Zach's drifting existence, and Grady knew something needed to give, and soon. Their son lacked any drive or ambition. The harder they pushed, the further he aimlessly floated from one job or relationship to the next. Zach's case worker had warned them about issues like these when they'd adopted him. Grady had hoped that the example he and Phil set would be enough to overcome Zach's tumultuous childhood.

A quiet snick and slap sounded from the foyer: if it was late enough for the mail to come, Grady really needed to get himself moving. He tossed back the white down comforter and climbed wearily out of bed. His back ached. Grady reached for the prescription pain killers before pausing. Maybe he could tough it out. The orange bottle of pills called to him for a long moment. Grady turned away from it, and the fog it would bring.

No guests at the B&B meant that he could stumble into the main house in his flannel pants and robe. A Christmas gift from Zach, the set reinforced his notion that the once far away thought of being old had finally caught up with him. A few years ago, he wouldn't have been caught dead in navy and green plaid pajamas.

He stooped to gather the mail and the pull from his strained back had him throwing out an arm to help himself stand up again. "Oh, my sciatica," he mumbled to himself. With a quiet chuckle, Grady carried the mail into the kitchen and dropped it on the counter. First coffee, and then he'd deal with the bills.

The almost empty K-cup carousel mocked him. Grady spun it and stared at the last two offerings: Dark Magic or Hazelnut Decaf. Dark Magic it was. He popped the cup into the brewer and added coffee to the grocery list stuck on the fridge. Phil would be irritated if he came home to find his coffee gone.

When the Keurig finished its sputtering brew, Grady snagged his cup and took a long drink. Damn, this was strong. It would wake him up though, and maybe help get the rest of the painkillers he'd taken last night for his back out of his system.

He gave the mail a quick sort. Bill, bill, bill...hmm. Gorgeous white envelope with embossed lettering. *Whispering Ridge* Grady eyed the return address for a long moment before opening the envelope. Conrad had sent him an invitation to the grand opening of his new resort. Grady checked the front of the invitation again. Mr. Grady Boxer. Not Grady Boxer and guest. Just him. Phil would be livid.

A sharp knock came from the front door. Grady hurried as fast as his aching back would let him to get it open. He locked eyes with the man standing on his front porch. Speak of the devil.

"I got your message," Conrad said.

"My mess..." Oh hell. Grady vaguely remembered calling after Phil left for work last night. What he couldn't remember was exactly what he'd said when Conrad's voicemail had picked up.

"Must we do this on the porch?" Conrad's voice sent a dark thrill down Grady's spine. Deep, smooth, and cultured. Grady remembered the sound of that husky voice

whispering in his ear. That was before his flannel days.

He fought his embarrassment and pulled the door open. He quickly adjusted his robe, wishing he'd taken the time to get dressed. He felt vulnerable enough around Conrad without standing there in his old man pajamas.

Grady shuffled into the sitting room with Conrad following. Conrad looked around, his cool blue stare not giving away a hint of his thoughts. Grady tried to see the décor from Conrad's viewpoint. Exposed beams in polished dark wood lined the ceiling. A newly refurbished fireplace flanked by bookcases covered the far wall. Comfortable furniture, patterned rug. Everything in its place.

With a pleased sigh that at least his home was up to snuff, he scooped up Tock, one of their huge Maine Coons, from his curled up position in a club chair. His back twinged at the weight. Dammit. He couldn't even lift their cat now?

Conrad settled in the chair opposite. Grady admired his perfectly put together clothes. Light khaki pants, crisp white button down, and a sinfully dark leather jacket. Grady knew that jacket probably cost more than his monthly mortgage and tried to hold back the bite of resentment.

*If only.* But no, he'd made his bed and now he had to lie in it. He couldn't help but sometimes wish he could be lying in it with Conrad.

Conrad smirked, seeming to read Grady's thoughts as well as he always had. "So, you miss me." He crossed his legs, propping his left ankle on his right knee.

Grady's gaze zeroed in on the peak of the triangle the position formed, caught on

the forbidden bulge at the apex of his thighs.

He forced his eyes up, over the stomach and chest he'd once worshipped. Was Conrad still as muscular as he'd been back then? Had his chest hair lightened to the salt and pepper of his full beard? God, Grady wanted to know. He shivered. Everything laid bare in front of this man he'd once loved to distraction. "I do."

\* \* \*

Dice. Chop. Mince. Repeat.

Disaster. That's the only word Adam could play over and over in his mind. Zach had blown his new Mr. Wrong the night before at the club, while Adam had gone home alone. Again.

The night had faded fast after some twink let out a bloodcurdling scream when he found his big bear of a man flirting with some other guy. Must be nice to have options.

Of course, the evening's drama didn't stop his best friend from calling him at one in the morning to extol the virtues of the newest man of his dreams. *Jesus H.*

He gave the sizzling sausage a vicious stab and flipped it over in the skillet. Now he had to deal with Mr. I-Think-My-Shit-Don't-Stink new bartender. Dot Boxer would never have allowed him to get away with showing up late to work. And on his first day? His ass would have been canned so fast his head would still be spinning. But this joker just sidled right in and charmed everyone within spitting distance.

The low rumble of masculine laughter drifted in from the dining room. Adam

scowled and stabbed the meat again, imagining a certain red-head under the tines of his fork. His phone trilled out the latest annoying ringtone Zach insisted he have, and Adam prepared to answer with some scathing retort. Until he saw who was calling. "Hello." He hoped his voice didn't give away his frantic emotions.

"You sound surprised to hear from me."

Surprised? No, not really. Terrified? Yeah, closer.

"No, sir."

"Now, Adam. I thought we'd gotten past this 'sir' business."

Shit. He was bungling this all over the place. "Sorry."

"No need to apologize. But you can make it up to me by being available tomorrow."

"To-tomorrow?"

"Yes. Make what arrangements you need to. I'll be in town early afternoon."

Shit. He was supposed to work tomorrow. "I'll do my best."

"I knew I could count on you. And Adam?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not prepared to take no for an answer this time."

\* \* \*

Oz rushed back into the office and plunked down behind his desk. Stacks of files and papers greeted him, giving him a moment of regret for taking his unscheduled

morning outing. As he fired up his laptop, he gave them a quick flip through to see what needed to be handled first. The whirring of the hard drive as it spun seemed loud in the quiet of the office. He sat back in his chair while he waited for it to finish booting up. The text just seemed to blur into long black lines, and he didn't even notice the login window had popped up on the computer screen.

His thoughts strayed back to his earlier visit to the sheriff's home. He decided dropping by Vic's house would suit this informal request better than visiting him at the station, where he could be observed by anyone in Boxer Falls. He'd learned within his first few weeks in town that gossip spread through the little hamlet like wildfire through a tinderbox. Last thing he needed was for the entire town to know he was asking for help with a private, family matter.

He needed someone to keep an eye on Trip. Oz knew his old college rival was up to no good. He hated owing anyone. Especially elected officials. He'd played that game too often for it to sit well with him, but he'd decided to suck it up and ask for help for the sake of his future. Instead, he'd found the sheriff, trussed up and obviously balls-deep in his own embarrassing predicament. It made it easier for him to stomach needing a favor. And given the sheriff's proclivities, well, that may just give Oz the ace he needed up his sleeve.

He hadn't meant to break in; he just wanted to take a look around, maybe find something that he could use to ease into conversation with the man. Some common ground. When his knocking went unanswered, he made his way to the back of the

house. The shades were drawn, so he couldn't see in, but the glass door slid open when he tried it. He took a tentative step inside, and that's when he was given the leverage he needed. He was too savvy a business man to not slip this bargaining chip into his pocket for later.

A sheriff with secrets could easily be bought off. Oz knew Trip would pull out all the stops to recruit anyone he needed to gain the upper hand, using whatever means he had at his disposal. He realized he had to beat Trip to the punch, even up the ante a little to keep the advantage in whatever game his rival was playing here. He added a note to his mental to-do list to check out Victor's past, just in case he needed a little extra encouragement for the sheriff to do his dirty work.

Oz closed his eyes, and a picture of Vic floated across the insides of his eyelids.

Naked, with polished steel cuffs contrasting against his dark skin, while his cock played peekaboo with the mouth of the cup it was stuffed into. He shuddered and locked those errant thoughts away. He should be horrified, wanted to be disgusted, but something in him couldn't fight the burst of arousal he'd gotten from the sight. He gave himself a whole body shakedown then leaned over his desk to focus on the tasks ahead of him.

He signed the most important of the papers in the stack and shoved them into his outbox for his assistant to deal with. His father had hightailed it out of here earlier like his ass was on fire. For all Oz knew, it was. Ever since Conrad had "come out", his commitment to the family and their business had been superficial, at best. Oz huffed

out a bitter laugh. At least Rider got it honest: both his father and his brother thought with the brain in their pants.

Conrad certainly seemed to be making up for lost time. Oz knew he was up to something, could see it in his father's face, but he hadn't been able to figure it out. Yet. His earlier misadventure with the sheriff hadn't given Oz the reassurance he was hoping for. He needed someone to keep an eye out for whatever plan was incubating in Trip's one-track mind, and to help minimize the damage Conrad's raging libido could do to the family. The sheriff was a logical means to that end, given his job was to keep the peace in their town.

With the grand opening of Whispering Ridge only weeks away, Oz needed to focus his attention on making the resort a success. Someone had to pick up the slack from Conrad's distraction. That meant Oz was putting in extra hours to keep everything running and didn't have time to clean up after his trouble-prone family.

He shifted his attention back to the work on his desk. Conrad left the interviewing of the new masseuse for the spa in his hands when he'd run out for his mysterious meeting earlier. He probably had an appointment to get his dick serviced. Must be nice to have your needs met by something other than your own fist.

He moved the folder with the application and resume to the top of the pile and set the rest of the files aside. Yoshi Pollack. Interesting name. It sounded somehow familiar. His phone rang before he could read any further to find out if he knew the applicant. He answered it absentmindedly. "Yes?"

"Mr. Conrad, your appointment is here."

"Send him up."

Oz quickly scanned the resume. His eyebrow quirked in confusion. This guy was completely overqualified for a massage therapist position in their spa. He wondered what they could possibly offer someone who obviously had better options available to him. Why would someone want to take this much of a step down? He was so lost in thought, he jumped when he heard someone clear their throat.

"Mr. Cotten?"

Oz did a double-take at the man standing at the door. Black hair, deep brown eyes, and almond colored skin revealed his Asian descent. Oz met the man's eyes with a slight smile. "Please, come in."

"I'm sorry to startle you. I knocked, but I guess you didn't hear. Yoshi Pollack." Yoshi said as he crossed the room in long, confident strides. He stuck out his hand in greeting and returned Oz's smile. That's when it hit him.

"Yo-yo?" he asked, not able to keep the surprise from his voice. No wonder the name was familiar.

Yoshi chuckled. "No one's called me that since Exeter."

Oz laughed and circled the desk. He gave Yoshi a quick hug, one of those chest bump pat on the back kind that he'd always found annoying, before pulling back and eyeing his brother's high school friend again. "What are you doing here? I thought you were off to med school."

"I am. Well, I was. I'm taking the semester off. Heard you guys were up here, and thought I'd hang out for a while. Saw the job opening and thought 'what the hell'."

Something in Yoshi's words didn't ring true. With Conrad and Rider as practice, Oz had a nose for picking up on subtle lies and half truths. Maybe he'd found the help he needed after all. With the right motivation, Oz could get Yoshi to feed him information on the rest of the Cotten men. Yoshi used to blush and stammer whenever Oz made an appearance. Oz pulled his lip between his teeth and eyed Yoshi up and down, hoping that unspoken attraction was still there. He'd use all the cards in his hand to keep Trip from winning this game.

Oz turned on his charm, and there it was. A subtle change washed over Yoshi under Oz's assessing stare. Yoshi's cheeks flushed as heat began to spread its way up from the open collar at his neck and over his face. Oz smiled, knowing his little gamble had just paid off. "No shame in taking a break. In fact, why don't we take one now? I haven't eaten. Would you like to head up to my suite for a bite of lunch? We can...catch up."

\* \* \*

Phil pulled up to the curb in front of his house and grabbed a couple of the bags sitting on the front seat of his truck. A silver Mercedes sat in his usual spot, hopefully an unexpected guest for the B&B. Money was always tight for them this time of year. Grady hadn't had any big cases in a while and the construction business fizzled to small time repairs this time of year.

Glad he'd stopped to pick up some coffee and pastries as a surprise, Phil carried his purchases around to the back door. He let himself into the kitchen and piled the bags onto the counter.

The stack of bills caught his eye, as did the fancy invitation laying there. Someone must be getting married or something. Phil scooped up the card and scowled. Picking up the accompanying envelope, he stared in frustration. Of course. Only Grady had been invited to the party. Fuck that. Where Grady went, so did Phil. He'd won that fight years before and would be damned before he let that asshole Conrad take away the life he'd built.

He heard the rumble of voices from the front of the house and pasted on a fake smile. No need to have this out with Grady in front of a paying customer. Phil recognized Conrad's voice and stopped.

"So you miss me."

And then Grady's damning reply. "I do."

---

Copyright 2012. Poppy Dennison. All Rights Reserved.



- *Will Conrad's visit to Grady lead to something more?*
  - *Who called Adam, and what do they want with him?*
  - *What skeletons will Oz find in Vic's closet, and what charms does he plan to use on Yoshi?*
  - *How will Phil react to the conversation he overheard between Grady and Conrad?*
- 

**TUNE IN NEXT WEEK!**

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

**AUTHOR BIO:**

A sassy southern lady, Poppy Dennison developed an obsession with things that go bump in the night in her early years after a barn door flew off its hinges and nearly squashed her. Convinced it was a ghost trying to get her attention, she started looking for other strange and mysterious happenings around her. Not satisfied with what she found, Poppy has traveled to Greece, Malaysia and England to find inspiration for the burly bears and silver foxes that melt her butter. Her love of paranormal continues to flourish nearly thirty years later, and she writes steamy love stories about the very things that used to keep her up all night. If her childhood ghost is lucky, maybe one day she'll give him his own happily ever after.

- [Email](#)
- [poppydennison.com](#)
- [Goodreads](#)
- [Facebook](#)