



Episode Thirty

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Boxer Falls: Episode 30

by Poppy Dennison

Old George towered proudly over the landscape of Boxer Falls. The red oak held the titles of both oldest and largest tree in the county, a feat which never went unrecognized on Arbor Day.

In autumn months, travelers could see Old George's brilliant scarlet leaves from miles away. He stood unencumbered, though weathered, through season after season of New England's harshest weather.

With the extreme heat of the past several weeks, even Old George began to wither. His leaves began to dry up nearly as fast as the browned grass surrounding his nearly twenty foot around base.

Old George could survive a drought, had done so many times in his hundreds of years of existence. What he couldn't handle were the hurricane force winds that attacked on a sweltering July day that turned suddenly violent.

At nearly a hundred feet tall, with branches spanning a sweeping distance, when Old George fell, the sound could be heard even over the cracking lightning and booming thunder.

But what everyone heard most were the screams.

* * *

Grady ran his fingers through his shower-damp hair as he headed for the kitchen. He'd left Phil snoring in the bed, still passed out from their wild bout of sex the night before. With a grin, Grady tightened his robe and gave himself a pat on the back for a job well done.

Zach stood in the kitchen, hips swinging to music blaring from the headset of his iPod. A loaf of bread and jars of peanut butter and jelly were spread out on the counter in front of him.

Grady gave his son's back a quick rub as he went by and headed straight for the coffee pot.

Zach jumped a bit and spun around. "Morning," he said as he pulled the ear buds from his ears.

"Hey. What are you up to?"

Zach's cheeks turned a bit pink as he turned back to the sandwich fixings. "Taking Adam on a picnic. We both have the day off."

Young love. Grady remembered those days well. Phil used to do romantic things like that for him, and now that they'd pieced their nearly broken relationship back together, that side of his husband was slowly emerging again.

Grady selected his coffee and popped the choice in the machine. While he waited for it to brew, he went to the pantry and stretched to the highest shelf. He'd stuck the small cooler Phil had used for years as a lunch box up there a while back.

"Will this help?"

Zach grinned at the beat up red and white container. "You kept that old thing?"

Grady shrugged and sat it in the sink. "It wasn't broken or anything."

"Uh huh. Sure. Kind of like how I still have my G.I. Joe one up in the attic, huh?"

Grady bumped his shoulder into Zach's. "Don't pick on me. I'm sentimental."

"Don't I know it. Then again, it's probably a good thing. I learned from a pro." He gestured to the sandwiches. "I'm taking Adam on a trip down memory lane today. Maybe get him to tell me what's bothering him."

Zach didn't open up to him very often about his relationships. Grady took a sip of his coffee and leaned against the counter. "Everything okay with you guys?"

"Yeah, I don't think it's us."

"Good." Grady opened the drawer with the sandwich bags and passed the box to Zach.

Zach bagged up the sticky sandwiches while Grady rinsed out the cooler and dried it off.

The silence stretched uncomfortably between them for a moment. Grady sighed and put the sandwiches in the cooler while Zach washed his hands.

"Are we ever going to talk about it?"

Zach shrugged. "Do we have to?"

Grady crossed the few steps to his son and laid his hand on his shoulder. "Not if you don't want to. But I'm here, if you have questions."

"Only one. Conrad isn't..."

"No, son. Conrad isn't your biological father."

Zach let out a long breath and lowered his head for a moment. "Bad enough to be a Cotten, but I really didn't want to be Conrad's bastard."

Grady turned Zach to him. "I don't care what anyone says, what the definition is, you are no one's bastard. You hear me? You're a Boxer. Period. The end."

Zach grinned. "Yeah. Zach Boxer. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think? Zach Cotten just sounds stupid."

Grady shook his head. "Well, if you want to know more Mr. *Boxer*, you let me know. The secret's out, and I'm sorry I kept it from you for so long."

"You did the right thing."

Grady shook his head and walked over to the freezer. He pulled one of Phil's cool packs out and put it in the cooler. "I'm not sure I did."

"I am. If I'd known, hell, Dad, even a year ago, I'd have gone and done something stupid. You know I would have. This way, at least I know, but I don't have to be dumb about it."

Grady didn't want to admit that Zach was right, but he was. He pulled Zach into a hug, his son now taller than him. His boy had grown up. "I love you."

"Don't get all mushy on me. Now, where should I take Adam? It's so damn busy around here right now with tourists. I'd take him to the falls, but I'm sure it'll be packed."

The extreme heat had people flocking to the hills in hopes of cooler temperatures. No such luck. They'd been in the high nineties just like the rest of the region.

"You know, why don't you rent a boat from Slappy's and head out to the island? If you go to that little cove where we used to fish, you can probably have some quiet."

"That's a great idea!"

Grady opened the junk drawer and slipped a couple twenties from the secret stash he kept there for emergencies. "Here. This will cover the boat rental."

"Aww, Dad. You don't have to..."

"I know. You've been busting ass around here lately, and Phil and I appreciate it. You deserve the break. A day with your guy."

Zach grinned. "Damn, what else should I take? I didn't think further than the PB&J's."

Grady went to the pantry and grabbed a bag of chips. "Here. And I think there are some apples in the fridge. Oh, and what about those Moon Pies that you guys used to devour."

"Perfect! And I can get some grape soda. Adam loves that shit." Zach loaded up the cooler and snapped the lid closed. "This is going to be a great day. Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome. Have fun."

* * *

Vic held the phone to his ear and listened to the mayor ramble on about procedures. "Understood, sir."

"This is serious, Sheriff."

"Understood, sir. I have the manual in hand and will follow the emergency procedures exactly as laid out."

"Good. Damn weather. I guess too many folks have prayed for rain lately."

Right. That's what did it. Vic rolled his eyes. "I'm sure everything will be fine. By the time the storm hits us tonight, it'll probably have died down to just a regular summer storm."

"Let's hope so, Sheriff. But better safe than sorry."

"Agreed."

They hung up and Vic flipped open the huge notebook. Step one: contact emergency personnel.

He lifted the phone again and began making the long list of calls. It was going to be a long day. The weather reporting system churned out another update and Vic's printer began to buzz. He checked the storm's progress and shook his head.

It wasn't close enough to them to generate any warnings for their area, but closer to the coast, emergency warnings were already in place. Storms this size didn't come in from the east often, outside of the rare hurricane that made it this far north.

He pulled up the Weather Channel and watched the storm pattern swirl out over the ocean. It could have been a hurricane for all the red and yellow flashing across the screen. The projected path had it going straight over them.

Vic sent up a vague prayer of his own. Couldn't hurt, at this rate.

* * *

Quinn's alarm clock blared and he raised a bleary head to stare at the time. Oz's arm laid across his chest and he looked over at his...what...lover? Quinn shivered at the word. Better than boyfriend or partner, but still, the idea gave him the willies.

He pushed Oz's arm across and Oz opened his eyes to glare. "Got to go to work. Adam's off today."

Oz groaned and buried his face in the pillow.

Quinn couldn't resist tracing his fingers over Oz's smooth back. When the alarm blared his snooze reminder, Quinn turned it off and climbed out of bed.

Oz grabbed Quinn's pillow and curled up with it.

The man was a snuggler, plain and simple.

After a quick shower, Quinn wiped the steam from the mirror and stared at himself. He'd gone soft. The stress lines around his eyes, the ones that held that *keep away* expression he'd mastered, had all but disappeared.

He padded back into the bedroom and found Oz on the phone.

Quinn listened with half an ear as he pulled his kilt from the back of the closet. He hadn't worn it in a while, and it seemed like as good a day as any to bring it back out.

"Okay, I'll be in soon."

Oz hung up the phone and climbed out of bed. He wrapped his arms around Quinn and nuzzled into his neck. "Morning."

"You working today, too?"

"Yeah. There's a storm coming tonight. I want to make sure everything is in order at the resort." His arms slipped down a bit and he grabbed Quinn's kilt-covered ass. "Haven't seen you wear this in a while. I forgot how fucking sexy it is."

Quinn flexed his ass and nipped Oz's shoulder. "Course it is." He pulled away and searched the dresser for his thick socks. Oz's things had to be moved out of the way to find them.

"I'm going to grab a quick shower. Maybe I'll come by the Bear & Bones for dinner. You're working all day?"

"And all night. I'm closing."

Oz scowled. "Okay."

When the shower started, Quinn put on his beat up black boots and laced them tightly. He pulled on a clean T-shirt and was out the door before the shower cut off.

* * *

Diego's cell buzzed and rattled across the nightstand. He grabbed it and frowned when the caller ID listed the Sheriff's Office main line. "Hello," he grumbled.

"Diego, Vic. Hate to do it, but I need to call you in. Storm's coming in later and we're taking precautionary measures."

He looked to the empty side of his bed and sighed. "Sure, boss. I'll be in as soon as I get dressed."

"Good."

Diego tossed the phone back on the nightstand and headed for the shower. He hadn't been able to talk Tony into coming in the night before. Slowly but surely, he'd get his former lover to admit they were good together.

If only Phil Boxer were out of the picture. Diego wasn't sure of the allure. Maybe Tony only wanted what he couldn't get.

Although tempting to play the hard-to-get game with Tony, Diego didn't believe in playing games. Take him or leave him.

He dried off and put on his deputy uniform. The star on his chest gleamed under the vanity lights of the bathroom. No, he didn't have time for games. He had something bigger in mind.

* * *

The little motorboat from Slappy's pattered its way across the lake towards the island near Whispering Ridge. Adam sat in the front seat, shirt off, and head thrown back in the breeze.

"This is amazing."

Zach grinned. He hadn't seen his boyfriend look so carefree in weeks. He swung the boat around and angled for the little cove. They'd be tucked away, hidden from view of Whispering Ridge and the neighbors on the other side of the lake.

Getting as close to shore as he could with the engine on, Zach turned it off, grabbed the handle of the motor, and lifted it out of the water. When he got the boat situated, he turned back around and found Adam staring.

"What?"

"Just watching. Why haven't we done this in so long?"

"Too busy, I guess."

"Yeah." Adam reached down and dipped his fingers into the lake water. "Feels great."

"I figured. It's been so hot, it warmed the water. Hold on. I'm going to jump in and get us tethered to shore."

Zach stripped off his shirt and hopped over the side. Adam squeaked when the boat rocked. He'd always been nervous of the water since he got tipped over in a canoe when they were at camp one summer.

Only chest high in water, Zach guided the boat up onto the small beach area and tied the mooring line to a tree. "Come on, babe."

He held the side of the boat as Adam cautiously jumped in the water. "Damn, it's colder than I thought." Adam shivered a bit but kept his smile.

Zach grabbed the cooler and beach bag before he pointed to the thick blanket he'd taken from the trunk of his car. "Can you grab that?"

Adam scooped it up and followed Zach onto shore. He spread out the blanket and they settled down on it. The heat of the day dried them quickly and Zach looked around for a shadier spot to eat.

"Let's just stay here for a bit. I'm stuck inside all the time. I'd like to get some sun."

Zach opened the cooler and dug out the sunscreen he'd stashed in it, among other essentials he hoped they'd need. "Roll over."

Adam raised a brow. "Already?"

Zach laughed and scooted closer. "I want to put lotion on you. But yeah, already. Damn, I've missed spending time with you."

Adam laid down on his stomach and Zach straddled his hips. He poured sunscreen in his hand and rubbed it between his fingers so it wouldn't be so cold. Adam's shoulders were already turning pink from the short ride over to the island.

As he massaged the lotion into Adam's back, he felt the ridges that he'd noticed the past several times they'd had sex. He'd asked once what they were, but Adam shrugged him off.

Now that his skin was pinker, the lines stood out. Not lines, but scars. Adam had never had scars before. Not that Zach had ever seen anyway.

Adam must have realized Zach was touching the marks and he stiffened.

"No, babe. Don't do that. If you don't want to tell me, I'm not going to ask. But if you do, I'm here."

He finished smoothing the sunscreen in and stretched out beside Adam. "My turn?"

Adam sat up and pushed Zach onto his back. He sat astride his waist and leaned down for a kiss. "Thank you. I will tell you what happened one day. But not today. Deal?"

"Okay."

"Now flip over and let me get your back."

Sunscreen applied, they dove into the cooler for lunch. Adam laughed at Zach's choices, the happy peal ringing out over the water and returning in an echo. "Moon pies? You're the best!"

He'd worried a bit that Adam's tastes had changed. All the fancy food he cooked at the Bear & Bones couldn't compare to simple sandwiches, but Adam ate his like he hadn't eaten in a week.

After they ate, they cleaned up the trash and stretched out on the blanket. Adam sighed and rolled onto his side. He traced his fingers over Zach's chest.

"What?" Zach hated that haunted look that sometimes came into Adam's eyes.

"Nothing." He pushed to his feet and ran into the water.

Zach watched him dunk under the water and pop back up dripping and sputtering. He raced after Adam, catching him off guard and tackling him. With his arms wrapped around Adam's waist, he pushed them both back up to the surface.

Adam shoved his shoulder. "Asshole."

"What? You looked hot. I just wanted to help you cool off."

"Jerk." Adam hooked his arm over Zach's shoulders and jumped up to wrap his legs around Zach's waist.

Zach walked a bit deeper into the water until it lapped at their chests. He stared into Adam's eyes, then leaned in to kiss Adam again, a slow press of lips to lips.

Adam moaned against him and clung tighter.

Zach teased Adam's lips with his tongue, prompting Adam to open for him.

Adam's hard dick poked into Zach's stomach, as his own tented the front of his swim trunks.

He broke away from the kiss, determined to get his boyfriend back to shore. Adam slid down Zach's body when they reached shallower water. He grabbed Zach's hand and pulled him toward the blanket.

The afternoon sun had shifted enough that the blanket was partially in the shade. Adam laid back in the shade and slipped his swimsuit off. "You brought stuff?"

Zach nodded, his gaze focused on the naked flesh Adam had exposed.

"Then get it, already."

Zach grinned, as he reached for the bag.

* * *

Rider stared across the lake, watching the little motor boat zip over the low waves. He recognized Zach and Adam, and wanted to be out there with them. Fun. Something that didn't involve sex, drugs, or partying. Just friends and a day on the water.

After the middle of the night visit from Sam, Rider hadn't been able to sleep. Restless and agitated, he'd called his therapist for guidance. Her solution was to double his anxiety meds. The mood stabilizers and anti-depressants hadn't had enough time to fully kick in. Six to eight weeks, she reminded him.

When your skin crawled and you wanted nothing more than to feel normal, two months felt like an eternity.

Maybe his solution was right across the lake. Rider watched for the boat to emerge from the other side of the island, but it never did. He waited, minutes turning into an hour. As the sun beat down on him, the heat helped him make up his mind.

No way he'd be allowed to take one of the resort's boats, but he could get one from that little place in town. With a grin, Rider hurried up to his suite and threw his swimsuit and towel in a backpack. He snuck out the side entrance and went to the maintenance shed. The golf cart sat unattended.

Rider laughed and climbed in. They'd taken his car keys, but there were other ways to get to town. He sped off down the drive and headed for Slappy's. Hopefully the tourists hadn't rented all the boats.

His joy faded a bit by the time he putt-putted his way into town. Slappy stood outside the bait shop with a huge can of beer. From the way he stumbled and slurred, Rider figured it was far from his first.

Only one boat remained in the slip, and Slappy happily handed over the keys. "Back before dark."

"Yeah." Rider shook his head when the man locked up the store and climbed into a beat up, old jeep.

"Out of beer," Slappy hollered out the window as he drove away.

Rider got in the boat and sped over to the island. He watched the shoreline carefully for signs of Zach and Adam's boat.

Finally finding it tucked into a small cove, Rider steered that direction and saw Zach and Adam laying on a blanket on shore.

Zach's head popped up when he heard the motor. Rider saw him speak to Adam before Adam sat up and waved in his direction.

Rider turned off the engine and coasted up next to their boat. "Hey guys. You mind some company?"

He half-expected them to say "Yeah, we mind" but Zach shrugged while Adam smiled.

"Come on."

Zach waded into the water and helped Rider tie the boats together. Rider put a little buoy in between them to protect the sides. Rider looked down and realized he should have put his suit on prior to getting in the boat. He'd not thought through that part of his impulsive plan.

"You'll dry out quick enough," Zach said. "It's hot as hell out here."

Rider jumped in with a splash and followed Zach to shore.

It took a minute for his mind to process that he really *was* interrupting. "Damn."

"What?" Adam asked.

"I wasn't thinking. You guys were probably looking for some privacy."

Adam grinned and bumped his shoulder into Zach's. "We've already had our privacy."

Zach wrapped his arm around Adam and smiled. "I'm all privacied out for the moment."

"You sure?" The last thing Rider wanted to do was get on their bad side. Hell, they were the only guys in town around his age, outside of Sam, that he even liked.

Zach gestured to the blanket, then sat back down with Adam. "It's fine. Technically, you own the place, after all. You don't need our permission to be here."

Rider sat down with a sigh.

Adam elbowed Zach in the side. "Don't be an ass."

"What?"

"Rider, we don't care."

"Thanks."

Silence stretched out uncomfortably for several long minutes. Zach reached into the bag beside him, then tossed a bottle to Rider.

He caught it. Sunscreen. Something else he hadn't planned.

"You're getting red."

Rider's skin felt hot and tight, so he poured the cream into his hand and spread it over his face and arms. "Thanks."

They stared at each other again. Rider almost got up to leave, when Adam stood up and stretched. "Let's swim."

Zach scrambled to his feet, pulling Rider up as he went. They chased Adam into the water with a laugh.

Maybe it would work out, after all.

* * *

Phil couldn't resist sneaking up behind Grady and giving him a grope.

Grady jumped in his arms and spun around with a glare. "You scared me."

His smile softened his words. "Your ass looks amazing in those shorts."

"My ass looks amazing all the time."

"True." Phil ran his hands up Grady's sides and pulled him close. "Since we have the place to ourselves for a bit, why don't we sneak upstairs for a quickie?"

Grady leaned in and captured Phil's lips while Phil slid his hands down to grab his husband's ass. Their dicks began to stiffen. Phil pushed his hips into Grady's, the feel of his husband's answering erection sending a surge of arousal through him. He hadn't been this horny in years, and their renewed intimacy continued to set Phil on fire.

Things were just getting good, with Grady's hand down the front of Phil's shorts, when a knock on the back door interrupted them. "Damn it." Phil groaned as he pulled away.

Grady gave Phil Jr. a little squeeze. "We'll get rid of whoever that is and pick up where we left off."

"Deal." Phil wandered over to the back door and opened it. Grady's father, Ira, stood on the other side.

He took one look at Phil's mussed hair and kiss-reddened lips and shook his head.

"You boys sure are randy these days. It's a good look on you."

The older man winked and walked into the kitchen. Grady had returned to washing dishes in the sink.

"Hey, Dad. What's going on?"

"I figured you'd be elbow deep in that list of yours."

Phil glanced at Grady, who appeared as confused as he did.

"What list?" He asked.

"Your "there's a big storm coming and I have to be the most prepared person in the county" list."

"There's a storm coming?" Grady rinsed his hands and dried them quickly on a dishtowel.

Ira shook his head. "You boys been too busy thinking with your little heads to turn the radio on once in a while?"

Grady blushed and shrugged.

Phil crossed the kitchen and turned on the radio they had mounted under the kitchen cabinet. One of Zach's rock stations blared out. They all winced before Phil turned the volume down.

"How bad is it expected to be?" Grady had gone immediately into worry mode. He went into the pantry and pulled out the bin in the bottom with their emergency supplies.

"Pretty bad, I suspect. Already had a plane go down offshore, poor bastards. You have gas and food, yeah?"

"We should be good, Dad. I'll go over the list."

"I'll get the generator started, make sure it's working okay." Phil hadn't checked it since winter, when they'd stored it back in the garage.

"Glad I stopped by then. Is Zach around by chance?"

"No. He's out with Adam."

"Figured as much," Ira said. "I was hoping to get them to help over at the pub."

"I'll give him a call." Grady dialed the phone, but hung up a moment later. "Straight to voicemail. He probably turned it off."

"Well, we'll make do. Quinn is busting his ass over there now, helping out. Of course, the lunch crowd was crazy today with everyone getting out of the heat. I'm going to get back over there. You guys take care of yourselves. Let me know if you need anything."

"We will. Thanks, Dad."

After Ira left, Phil shut the door behind him. "We only have four guests, right?"

"Right. We've got food and water in the basement. I rotated the canned goods out last month."

"I'll go check the generator and make sure we have enough gas."

"Thanks, hon. Shit, Phil."

"What?"

Grady glared down into the supply box. "We used the C batteries last week in the vibrator. I forgot to get more. We need them for the radio."

Phil walked over to Grady and cupped his face in his hands. "Calm down, okay. You always panic over storms. We'll be fine."

"I know. I just hate them. And Zach's out there. What if he doesn't know either?"

"How about this? I'll go over to Slappy's and grab some batteries. He keeps them in stock, and I can make sure Zach and Adam are back. Didn't you say he was getting a boat from there?"

"Yes, I did. That's great. The wind is already starting to pick up. Hurry?"

"I will." Phil pressed a quick kiss to Grady's mouth, then grabbed his keys. "Call me if you think of anything else we need. We have time."

* * *

"What do you mean, the golf cart is gone?" Conrad glared at the groundskeeper who nervously shifted from foot to foot in front of him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cotten. I left the keys in it, but I was only gone for my lunch break."

Shit. Just what he needed. Rider unaccounted for, and now the only means of transportation away from the resort missing? It had Rider's name all over it. Conrad regretted for a moment hiding all the keys from Rider, but until he could trust his youngest son's judgment again, there would be no car in Rider's hot little hands. The risk of an accident was too high in Rider's distracted state.

"Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it. Make sure to get the tools locked up and the outbuildings secure."

"Yes, sir." The man scurried out and Conrad frowned. Where would Rider have taken off to? No doubt to track down Sam again.

He grabbed his keys and phone. Heading for the car, he met Oz coming into the resort. "Your brother has run off, in the golf cart of all things."

Oz rolled his eyes. "You need help finding him?"

"No, I'll take care of it. You make sure everything is under control here."

"Will do."

With a shake of his head, Conrad stormed out of the lobby. "When I get my hands on that boy..."

* * *

Quinn wiped down the bar, then checked to make sure all the customers were happy. Full drinks, empty plates. The sign of a happy diner.

Not everyone at the Bear & Bones was happy, though. His father, for one. Blake sat at the end of the bar, scowling into his plate of potato skins. With Adam off for the day, the food selections were limited to what Quinn and the waitress could throw in the microwave.

Quinn wandered down to where Blake sat and reached to refill his glass. "The skins not working for you?"

Blake looked up at Quinn, then down at his still full plate. "Oh, they're fine. I was lost in thought." He picked up a potato and took a bite.

"Good." Quinn refilled his glass and started to walk away.

"Elliot, wait."

"I prefer Quinn."

"I know..." Blake's gaze turned to the door and he snapped his mouth shut.

Quinn looked over his shoulder. Sam and that asshole, Gino, walked inside and sat down at a table along the far wall.

He turned back to his father, and flinched at the look of hatred in Blake's eyes. "Damn, Pop. Turn it down a notch."

Blake ripped his gaze away and nodded. "I hate that bastard."

Quinn had never heard Blake sound so cold. He didn't know what Gino had done to his father, but Gino had better watch out. He made sure Blake wasn't getting ready to cause trouble, then walked over to Sam and Gino. He remembered the guy who'd plowed the sheriff behind the restaurant a while back, but hadn't seen him around in while.

"Afternoon, guys. We're on a limited menu tonight." Quinn handed over the printed sheet with the evening's offering. "Can I get you something to drink?"

Gino scowled at the menu and glanced up at Quinn. "Gimme a beer. Something good."

Quinn turned to Sam, trying not to grit his teeth. "You have any of Adam's raspberry lemonade?"

"We do. It's leftover from yesterday, but still good."

"I'll have that, then."

Quinn walked away to get their drinks while they scowled over the menu for a few more minutes.

Blake pushed his plate aside and stood. Quinn walked over to him but a loud noise from outside drew his attention. The pair walked over to the windows together.

"Damn," Quinn muttered.

Although the sun shone overhead, black clouds hovered in the sky. The wind picked up until it howled through the trees surrounding the tavern.

Blake whistled. "I heard a storm was coming."

"Yeah, I didn't know it was going to be that bad though. You going to hang out until it passes?"

Blake looked over his shoulder at Sam and Gino, then back to his son. "Yeah. You might need a hand."

* * *

Oz and Tony carried pool furniture into the shed. They hadn't kicked their guests out of the pool until the storm was imminent, but now it looked like they'd waited a bit too long.

Several grounds men hurried over to help. They piled all the chairs and umbrella-covered tables into the shed.

They heard booming thunder in the distance, but the sky above them remained bright and sunny.

"This is weird," Oz said.

"It looks like it's moving fast."

"Let's get inside and make sure the guests are taken care of. We can't do anything more out here."

"Have you, uh, seen your father around?"

Oz stopped and turned to glare at the man. "Let me give you a little advice, Tony. Stay away from my father."

"I..." Tony paused and looked at the ground. "I'm not with him anymore, if that's what you're wondering."

Oz rolled his eyes. Another naïve young man pulled into his father's web. "That's good to hear." And somewhat surprising. Conrad rarely let his lovers stay around after he'd finished with them.

"Yeah. He's in love with Grady." Tony shrugged. "I was lonely, so was he."

Oz thought about Quinn, the man who'd cured his loneliness. "You know, you can do better. Find someone who looks at you the way Grady and Phil look at each other." Or the way he looked at Quinn.

A small smile passed across Tony's face and he nodded. "I'll work on that."

* * *

A rustling in the trees drew Adam's attention upward. The wind picked up and shriveled brown leaves began blowing through the air. "Huh," Adam said.

"What?"

"The leaves. They aren't falling."

Zach and Rider stopped horsing around in the water and looked up as well. The cove offered them some protection, but before long, the wind began whipping around the trees into their little barrier.

"We need to head back." Zach guided him both toward the shore. By the time they'd gathered up the blanket, along with the rest of their belongings, the sun had disappeared, and the sky turned an ominous black.

Adam gripped Zach's hand. "Look at the water."

The harsh wind also created white caps on what was normally a calm stretch of water.

Rider looked at Adam. His gaze drifted back and forth between them. Adam should have explained his fear, but couldn't. Zach understood his hesitancy, knew his

experiences. Rider simply looked confused. Adam was too embarrassed to say how afraid he was of the rough water.

Something in Adam's expression must have clued Rider in because he looked back into the woods. "Let's go to the cabin. We'll have to run for it, but I know where my dad hides the key. It'll have to be safer than being out on the water."

Adam let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"No problem. I'm not good enough with a boat to drive in this kind of weather."

Zach pushed the blanket into Adam's arms, then grabbed the cooler. "Come on."

He took off at a run through the woods just as the first raindrops began to fall.

* * *

Phil parked his truck outside Slappy's. A Whispering Ridge golf cart was the only other vehicle in the small lot. What the hell was one of Conrad's golfcarts doing parked outside Slappy's?

Phil tried the door but found it locked. *Damn it*. He needed to get those batteries for Grady and track down Zach and Adam.

Not a single boat remained tied to the docks. Phil stared out over the water toward the island, but couldn't make anything out. The wind whipped around him, causing him to stumble from the force of it.

"Holy shit." The nastiest looking clouds Phil had ever seen rolled across the dark sky.

Squealing tires caught his attention. He turned to find Conrad Cotten climbing out of his BMW.

"Lose something?" Phil gestured to the golf cart.

"My son. Have you seen him?" Lines of stress covered Conrad's face. The wind howled around them, intensifying his worried frown.

"No."

Lightning cracked and the boom of thunder followed on top of it. "Damn. We need to get out of this storm."

"I need to find Rider." Conrad turned back to his car.

"Conrad, wait. He's probably out on the island with Zach and Adam."

Conrad stopped. He sent a panicked glance out to the choppy water of the lake.

"Zach will know what to do. I'm sure they'll be fine."

Another flash of lightning cracked beside them. Phil grabbed Conrad's arm and pulled him toward the entrance to the bait shop.

With one last glance at the island where he knew Zach and Adam had picnicked, Phil grabbed his keys and opened the door to Slappy's. He kept it on his keychain for the winter months when he used the building to run his snow removal service.

Conrad followed him inside. "What are you doing?"

"Grabbing some batteries for Grady."

"You're stealing?"

Phil picked up a couple of four packs and turned around. "No, asshole. But I'm not taking time at the moment to worry about it. As soon as this storm lightens up, I'm getting back home to my husband."

Conrad flinched at the word, and Phil couldn't help his smug smile of satisfaction.

The wind caught the door to the shop, slapping it open with a bang.

Phil started back outside, but the rain fell so hard, he could barely see two feet in front of him. He opened his cell phone and dialed Grady.

Grady answered with a gasp. "Phil?"

"I'm okay, hon. Guess we didn't have as much time as I thought."

"Did you find Zach?"

"No. There aren't any boats here. I'm thinking they're over on the island. I'm going to have to ride out the storm here, though. It's raining too hard. You get everyone into the basement, okay?"

"Yeah. All the guests came back. I guess it was on the radio to seek shelter."

"It'll be okay. I'll be home as soon as I can. I love you."

"I love you, too."

Phil hung up the phone to find Conrad staring at him.

"Fuck off, Conrad."

Conrad's jaw tightened and his fists clenched. "Are you sure Zach is on the island?"

"Yeah. He and Adam went for a picnic." Phil looked out the window, but couldn't see anything through the downpour.

"Maybe Rider *is* with them."

"Could be. I take it Rider took the golf cart?"

Conrad nodded.

"Then I'd guess he's with the boys. They've probably taken cover in your love shack. There's nothing we can do right now but wait."

Both fathers stared over the water in the direction of the island, even though it was too far away to make out under normal conditions.

* * *

The wind became Old George's worst enemy. With the first burst of ninety mile per hour gusts, his roots strained to hold. The ground, parched and cracked around his base, didn't provide any support.

Branches whipped and jerked, pulling the tree in multiple directions. He rocked in one direction, then the other.

One final gust of wind, and the roots gave up the fight for purchase. Old George began to topple, taking out anything-and anyone-in his path.

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** Will Rider, Zach, and Adam make it to the safety of the cabin?*

** With Conrad and Phil trapped together at Slappy's, will their animosity boil over?*

** Can Blake control his temper, or will Gino face his wrath?*

** Where will Old George land, and who will be caught in the destruction?*

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.

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