



Episode Forty-Three

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Boxer Falls: Episode 43

By Poppy Dennison

So many fools, so little time. The cards laid out their grid on the table before him, teasing in their hidden meanings. Some might not be able to see past the colorful images to find the messages. They spoke to him, their patterns revealing the path he must take next. The answers to all his questions were a shuffle and deal away. With a flip of a card, the first answer would be revealed. He paused, enjoying the moment. One of his favorites, the Star.

The Star

Rider patted the pocket of his jeans for the fifth time, reassuring himself that the test results remained tucked snugly within the tight denim confines. The conclusions he'd reached made no sense to him, but his gut churned with each thought.

He needed help. Not the mental kind, although he began to wonder if another session with his counselor was in order. His thoughts were crazy, but the results didn't make sense. Could he be mistaken?

He watched the crowded lobby of Whispering Ridge. The men and women of Boxer Falls still considered the resort some sort of refuge after the devastation of the storm that had ravaged the town over the summer. Strange to him that they hadn't gone back to their lives as the rebuilding occurred. But no, they hovered here, hoping to catch a brief glance of his father. Their hero. Who had poured money into the town's coffers at a rate that astounded them all.

Doubt ate at Rider's soul. Maybe his father really had turned over a new leaf? It wasn't impossible, but it was unlikely. Conrad's personality had altered so much over the past few months that a stranger stood where his father had once been. And the test results helped reassure Rider that it wasn't just his particular brand of crazy giving him those thoughts.

Finally the broad shoulders he'd been seeking appeared. If anyone could help, Blake would be the most likely option. Conrad's security specialist had distanced himself from his boss over the past few months. Before, there had been secret meanings. Now Blake's duties consisted of "overseeing" the rebuilding efforts Conrad funded.

It didn't escape Rider's notice that the new assignment kept him away from Conrad more than it kept him near the man.

Blake glanced Rider's way. Their eyes met. Could he trust Blake with the letter burning a hole in his pocket or was Blake more Conrad's man than Rider realized?

With a brief nod in Rider's direction, Blake exited the resort. Damn. Rider's self-doubt had struck again. He rose to follow Blake when his phone chirped. He opened it to find a text message from Blake.

"You okay?"

No, he wasn't okay. He keyed a quick response. "No."

"Meet me at Slappy's in 15 minutes."

Rider let out a sigh of relief. Maybe, just maybe, he'd found someone to talk to.

The Star might be a concern. He could feel the doubt racing through Rider, but then Rider hadn't proven himself to be the brightest light in the sky. Perhaps his attentions should shift to another threat. The Tower was a more immediate threat. In all his preparations, having some cheap fling come along and insert himself into the picture

wasn't acceptable. He didn't like unexpected happenings. The cards didn't lie, and they said the Tower needed to go.

The Tower

Quinn lifted a stack of wood from the pile and carried it over to the workers rebuilding the Bear & Bones. He knew nothing about construction, but he was strong and able-bodied. Anything he could do to get Dot and Ira's pub rebuilt and he'd be there doing it.

With a grunt of exertion, he carried the timbers into the shell of the structure. Completely demolished, the rebuilding was moving along at a quicker pace than Quinn thought possible. Each day they moved closer to having a grand reopening. Dot's face glowed with each board that was nailed into place. This building meant more to her than a mere livelihood. It was her legacy, her life. Outside of her son and grandson, this place was her baby.

Quinn grinned and dropped the supplies off to the builders. Just a few more days and the walls would be complete. They already had the electrician in wiring the completed rooms. The drywallers were ready to follow behind him. Plumbers worked in the kitchen and bathrooms. Everything cooked along at a fast pace. They'd be open in no time.

His excitement over the prospect gave Quinn pause. What the fuck? He'd not been this invested in a community...ever. He shivered at the thought. Another season changed, summer officially over with the first frost, and here he was. Still in Boxer Falls. In a...what? Relationship? Were his days of packing up and moving on behind him?

Wanderlust beat at his mind, wondering where the next place to go would be.

"Quinn?"

Dot's voice echoed through the half-built walls.

"Over here!" Quinn stepped out from behind the jumble of building supplies and saw Dot standing near the front entrance.

"Do you have time to hang around today or are you working up at the resort?"

"I'm off today. Thought I'd do what I could here. You need something?"

She looked around at the chaos of construction workers and shook her head. "No. I just feel better when you're here."

The elder Boxers had practically adopted Quinn these last few months. He shrugged off his wanderlust for the moment. No way would he leave the elderly couple until the inn was rebuilt. After that, he'd see where he stood.

Blake hovered outside the empty lot at Slappy's and waited on the youngest Cotten son. He'd sniffed out something strange going on between his boss and Rider, but hadn't figured out what the issue was. Conrad seemed to be avoiding both of his sons more than usual these days, but since Blake had managed to avoid Quinn for a while, he really wasn't in a place to judge.

Rider finally appeared. His eyes looked haunted. The expression had been the same one Blake had seen back at Whispering Ridge. Rider sometimes looked vacant, but Blake hadn't seen that look on the guy's face before.

He nodded a greeting and Rider shuffled his feet nervously.

"You look like you've got something on your mind."

"Yeah." Rider took a breath and reached into his jeans pocket. Blake automatically tensed, but Rider withdrew nothing more sinister than a folded piece of paper. He handed it over to Blake.

The contents confused Blake. He recognized some sort of paternity test, but wasn't sure of the significance. "What's this?"

"Well, I found out that Zach was supposedly a Cotten. Yet another skeleton in the Cotten family closet. I figured he was my dad's." Rider shrugged and ran his fingers through his hair. "He's not."

"That's good news then?"

"Well, I suppose so. But look at this." Rider gestured to the results. "I sent samples from Conrad, myself, Zach, and Oz. Got results back on an extra person. Two sets of brothers? I don't know what to think."

Blake stared at the results. Sure enough, "Unidentified Donor #1" appeared to have a

brother in the mix. A brother who wasn't Zach, Oz, or Rider from the looks of things.
"What the hell?"

"That's what I said."

"What is Werner's Syndrome?"

"Some disease that makes you age faster. It's weird, right?"

"Yeah, it's weird."

"Add to that how different Conrad's been acting lately and...well, I'm concerned."

"Lay it out for me, kid. What are you thinking here?"

Rider took a deep breath and blew it out. "What if it isn't Conrad? What if that guy is the Unidentified Donor? What if Conrad never came home from the kidnapping?"

Blake flinched and carefully folded the results. "Then that means...shit. Who else have you told about this?"

"No one. Who would believe me? Hell, even Oz would think I'd gone the last few steps over the edge with this scheme."

The Cotten family dynamics were so far gone that Blake could easily agree with Rider's conclusion. No way would the eldest Cotten son agree with Rider's thoughts on the DNA results. Not without running his own tests to rule out a screw-up on Rider's part.
"So how is Zach connected to this?"

"He's definitely related to us somehow, but the test didn't really say how. He's not our brother. That's as much as I know."

Blake ran through his options. There weren't many. "I think there's someone we could talk to about this, but you aren't going to like it."

"Oz?"

"No. Phil Boxer."

"Oh no way. He hates Conrad. The last thing I need is to give him more ammunition against my father."

"But Phil is the only one who was there on that ship. He's the one who was with Conrad, who was there for the rescue. That has to be when the switch occurred. Conrad's been off since then, but I just chalked it up to post kidnapping trauma."

Rider clenched his hand into a fist and released it. "Are you sure we can trust him?"

"No," Blake replied. "But I have a feeling there's more to what went on back then than we know. Conrad wouldn't talk about it. He wouldn't even allow more security. I thought it was strange, but couldn't exactly go against his wishes."

"Okay. Let's talk to him then. But Blake, if this comes back to bite my ass..."

"How about this. Got any money on you?"

Rider curled up his nose, but reached for his wallet. He pulled out a twenty. "What do you need this for?"

Blake took the cash and slipped it in his pocket. "Consider me hired."

The final card flipped over and he smiled. It was as it should be. Justice. The reason for all this. Everything had been taken from him, even his son. But the cards continued to speak. His son would have his due.

Justice

Zach's heart pounded. He blinked at Adam, his boyfriend's image blurry through the tears that had formed in Zach's eyes. It couldn't be real. He'd have known. It was a trick, a sick joke. The Adam on the television screen screamed and Zach flinched.

"What is this?" His voice choked on the words, his eyes drifting back to Adam's bloody back as a masked man cracked a whip across his back.

Adam crumbled. He tried to take a step toward Zach but his knees went out from under him. Zach jumped up and caught Adam before he hit the floor.

"I wanted to tell you, but couldn't."

Couldn't? Zach didn't know how Adam hadn't told him, how he wasn't the first one Adam told. His instincts were still to comfort, though, and he ran a hand down Adam's unmarked back. No, not unmarked. He'd felt the raised marks there before, seen the pale remnants of scars.

Adam wrapped his arms around Zach's waist and squeezed tight. "Don't hate me."

"I could never hate you." That much was true. The DVD continued to play on and Zach finally couldn't stand the scene any longer. He released Adam long enough to turn the television off, the sights and sounds of Adam being abused disappearing with the power.

He pulled Adam to his feet. "Can you tell me what happened? Hell, when it happened?"

Adam took a shuddering breath. "When we went to New York."

"Oh fuck." Zach's heart plummeted. He'd gone off to fuck some random guy whose name he didn't remember, assuming his best friend would make his own way. He hadn't seen Adam for days, and figured he'd hooked up with some hot guy from the party. They'd never talked about that weekend, but Adam had been pissed at him for a long time afterward. *No fucking wonder.*

Adam pulled away and took Zach's face in his hands. "It isn't your fault."

"The fuck it isn't. I left you and some sick fuck...God, Adam. I don't even want to know what happened after what I saw. But I need to know."

"No, babe. You don't. I'm okay now. He's...gone."

"Who was it? Who did that to you? I will...Fuck. I will rip him to shreds for doing that to you."

"No need. Old George did it for you."

Zach pulled back. The implication slammed into him, hitting him hard. "Wait. That means the fucker was here. In Boxer Falls?"

Adam leaned in and pressed his forehead to Zach's. "He was. Blake told me...well, he knew what the guy was capable of somehow. He...made sure I knew I didn't have to worry any more."

All this time and Adam had kept this huge secret from him. Zach shuddered and pulled Adam closer. Not that he blamed Adam. God, he'd been so blind. Even hurt beyond anything Zach could imagine, Adam still protected him. Why on earth did Adam even want to be his friend, much less so much more?

Adam leaned back and his eyes filled with the sheen of tears again. "Do you still want to marry me?"

Zach smiled, although he could tell the expression didn't reach his eyes. "More than anything. No more secrets, though. I...want us to talk more about this. I need to know you're okay. It scares me, Adam. The thought of you going through something like that without me even knowing. Damn, why do you even want to know me?"

"Because I love you, you idiot. Always have. Always will."

"I will make sure you never have to keep a secret from me again. I'll be the man you need, I swear it."

"You already are."

The cards never lied. Justice would be theirs. His son would have what he deserved. The Wheel of Fortune spoke. The Star and Tower might be in their way, and would need to be disposed of. Who would be next? He shuffled and dealt, waiting to see where the cards fell. The hanged man turned up and he smiled. Oh yes, the cards knew the path. One of them would be the next to fall.



- *Has Rider discovered a sinister secret, or has dear old Dad turned over a new leaf?*
- *What will Zach do now that he knows about Adam's attack?*
- *Who is the tarot card killer, and who is he after next?*

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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