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Episode Thirteen

by Damon Suede

A small town survives like a wary animal.

Tucked in the underbrush, wary of predators, its heart and paws patter towards safety. Gossip and tragedies and windfalls race along its nerves; news pumps hot through a town's veins, and the tiniest nick can do terrible damage: extinguishing hope and smothering sense. Like all small animals, when a town panics it fights or flies...

Dot Boxer had arrived at the Bear & Bones two hours early. It was a Thursday and Ira had given the new bartender the night off. Family business he'd said. But Dot could cover the bar well enough; she'd done it for twenty plus years.

Thursday's were her book club at the library. The ladies finished *Light in August* and admitted, with no great embarrassment, that they'd found it boring and dated. Rather than keeping the ladies trapped indoors on such a lovely March day, Cressida had suggested they break early and all go looking for another title on their shelves at home.

Secretly Dot already knew what she wanted them to read: *Myra Breckenridge*, which was a sorta queer novel, *yes*, but one she'd reread often cause it was so funny. Secretly she believed that the gals had overdosed on Oprah books and she felt bound and determined to move them into the new century and some culture. The other ladies in the group knew Grady and Phil lived together, did "things" together, *y'know*, but Dot figured the town was growing up and they needed to get a grip.

When she got to the pub, she spent almost an hour going over the orders for the next month. They were ahead on everything but beer, which always went fast in the

spring. St. Pat's had wiped them out and Quinn had sold triple the pints they had last year. Nothing like a hot coppertop bartender to make patrons thirsty.

*Tlink!*

A noise in the kitchen got her out of her chair and in to investigate. She closed the little walnut door and headed back down the tavern's narrow hall.

Probably Adam come to set up his ingredients for the dinner rush. *Meezen Ploss*, he called it. Or something. She called it "ingredients," but what the hell did she know? His waffles had tourists driving for an hour and her waffles could drive a nail.

Sure enough, the kitchen fluorescents were on, but Adam stood there wearing a coat with a duffel bag over one shoulder. He was fiddling with something on the counter.

"You're early."

"I'm leaving." Adam's voice was hoarse. "Dot."

She laughed at that. Adam loved to get her goat and teased her about retiring all the damn time. The fact that she was easily 50 years older than him made the joke endlessly funny to him for some reason.

*He looks like he's been diagnosed with cancer.*

"I don't-" Adam wasn't laughing. "I can't take it. I can't take it. He-" He was crying in earnest. His eyes were raw with pain and his hand shook. Then he began crying for real: slow-hot-silent tears that slicked his face. A marble angel in the rain.

"Take what? What happened?" She realized that he had his knife roll open and worry blossomed in her innards. "Hey. Hey there." She went to him and put an arm around his slim torso. "Hon, what's all this then? Shhh."

Adam shook his head and said nothing. He was packing his two-thousand dollar knives, wiping them down and carefully sliding each into the case. As a senior, he'd

saved for six months to buy them and then Zach and his dads had surprised Adam for his graduation. "I took a job. I accepted a position-thing. At a restaurant in Boston. This man Forsyth called-"

"Oh." Dot nodded, stroking his arm to calm herself as much as him.

*That's that.*

She and Ira had always known the boy would move on. Too talented for this little pimple of a town. Big cities, he needed. And no good would come of keeping him trapped here. "But that's marvelous, sweetheart." She pretended to be happy, and hugged him. "Good for you."

*He looks about fifteen.*

"I think I may be making a mistake, but I have to try. I'm 21. I have a future."

"Of course you do." She smiled.

"I haven't given you any notice. I'm doing this all wrong." A sniff. Adam looked wide-eyed over the stainless counter, at the fancy pots he'd asked them to buy, as if he realized that someone else would be using them. "But I have the strangest feeling that if I don't go now I never will."

"Then you go. We'll just close the kitchen for tonight. Somebody in town must be needing a short order job." Dot winked and pursed her lips conspiratorially.

Adam shifted the duffel bag from his right to his left shoulders.

Dot knew that if she softened a moment, he'd stay. And if her grandson didn't have the sense to ditch this tarpit, at least his best friend did. "Hon, we're not going anywhere. You can always come back."

He shook his head. "I don't know."

"Well, I'm an old broad, and I do. You need to leave."

"I do?"

"We'd be wrong to keep you. And you so talented." Dot nodded. "It's a good job, huh? I bet Zach was excited."

"He's still at the hospital with his dad." Adam swallowed and stopped with the knives, wiping his hands on his pants. His wet brown eyes said plenty, and the sigh said more.

"Adam, you should call him. He'll be happy for you."

He nodded like they both knew she was lying to him. Zach would be pissed. "For me to leave."

"To kick some Beantown butt!" Dot smoothed his hair back and opened her arms wide. "Show 'em how it's done.

Adam stepped into her hug and hugged back. Kissing the side of her head. He felt so skinny and tall, like a third son at the beginning of a fairytale.

She pushed him back to his full height and wagged a finger. "Call Zach."

"I will." And his feet were moving. "Soon as I can." Gone.

Only when she heard the front door close did she let herself sink against the stainless counter. What in hell's name were they gonna do for the summer? She needed to call Ira. She needed to check with Quinn.

\* \* \*

A small town learns the places to lick its wounds and scavenge for prey in dark quiet places. Unlike bigger predators, it risks little and worries much, careful to survive on the scraps it finds under rocks and rotting logs.

Zach punched the Coke machine hard enough to rock it on its feet. *Nothing.*

Three fucking dollars and no soda. Whatever.

He wasn't even thirsty. He just had to get out of the room where Phil lay bruised and confused. He still didn't recognize his own family, and seemed a little uncomfortable with the idea that he was married to a man. Watching his fathers pick their way through *that* minefield had gotten too embarrassing to watch so Zach had slipped out to the trauma unit waiting area.

*Woo-hoo: hospital party zone .*

Un-beveraged and restless, Zach stalked back to the vinyl armchairs and flopped down. No way did he want to go back in and introduce himself again to a man who'd

raised him from the time he was a scabby, snotty twelve year-old. Grady had taught him manners, morals, and how to tie a tie, but Phil had taught him to fish, to skim a wall, to shoot tequila, to run a dozer. Seeing a stranger looking out of his eyes, the idea that anyone as strong as Phil could be taken away so quickly...or that his dads could be taken away from him as easily as his biologicals, made Zach want to puke or flee.

Pulling his knees up to his chest, he twisted sideways trying to find a comfortable angle on the molded blue seat. *No chance*. At this time of night, the room was empty of visitors.

"Rider?" Some old dude stood beside one of the columns looking at him. White hair, white beard, well built. Fucking hell. *That's Conrad Cotten*. Waiting for him to answer to a stranger's name.

For a moment, Zach wondered if Phil would recognize him if he went in and gave a different name. Maybe so.

*Maybe I'm crazy.*

Mr. Cotten spoke again; his eyes flashed. "Why haven't you seen your brother? What's wrong with you?" He crossed the room with stern purpose.

"Uhh." As Zach spun in the chair, he tried to figure out how to answer that one. *I don't have a brother and that's not my...*

"I'm so sorry! You're not my son. Good heavens." Mr. Cotten shook his head at himself and the hawkish face relaxed into a white-white-white smile, too perfect to be real. "I beg your pardon. At this distance, I thought you were-"

"Rider. We've met. I mean, I've met him around town." Zach decided not to mention that he'd spent most of February trying to fuck the youngest Cotten. "It's the shaggy hair."

"That's part of it I guess." Mr. Cotten shook his head. He squinted at Zach again, looking him over like a specimen jar. "I'm so sorry to have troubled you. You haven't seen him then. Rider, I mean?"

"Nah. I've been in with my dad. Phil, I mean." Zach jerked his thumb towards the room where the stranger had stolen his father from him. "Tony was running him to the hospital and there was a pileup."

"I know. They called me because..." Cotten stopped himself. "My son was in one of the cars. And two...friends as well."

*Oh.*

Oz Cotten had been in the other car, had almost killed Phil. Conrad Cotten wouldn't leave their fucking family alone.

"You're Grady's boy." Mr. Cotten looked embarrassed. And wiped his face roughly. "I'm sorry. I should've thought-"

*No wonder Grady looked so guilty .*

"Zach. My name is Zach." Zach tried to keep his face calm. He tried to keep his hands relaxed. Phil always said, if they know you're coming, you've already lost the fight. He'd deal with the Cottens later. Fuckers had it coming.

"Is your father alright?"

"Phil's conscious. There were...complications. My other...Grady's with him now."

Mr. Cotten didn't nod or smile at that piece of information. He glanced at the nurse's station.

A thickset woman in blue scrubs and a doctor's coat headed across the waiting area. Mousy hair fell to her shoulders. "Mr. Cotten? I'm Dr. Treadwell." Her eyes flicked to Zach, but he stood his ground. "Mr. Pollack has regained consciousness, but not much else I'm afraid." Treadwell tipped her head as if unsure how much to share. "He sustained significant spinal damage."

"He's paralyzed?" Cotten lowered his voice. "Have you told Oz?"

"We're trying to find a next of kin. Do you know the Pollacks?"

"Quite well. Our boys went to school together. You say he's regained consciousness? Has he been able to make a statement to the police?" For the first time since he'd spoken to Zach, Mr. Cotten looked anxious.

*What is that old bastard worried about?*

Treadwell shook her head. "I'm afraid not. At the moment, we're breathing for him."

"You said he was conscious. How can you be certain?"

Treadwell put her pen back in the breast pocket. "He's responding to questions. His eyes actually."

Mr. Cotton grimaced. "Eyes?!"

Zach could see Cotten's hands fidgeting in his pockets. Even Treadwell glanced down.

The fidgeting stopped. "But he *can* communicate."

"He's able to blink in response to yes or no questions. The police haven't gotten a statement and I imagine it will take some time. At the moment he's resting."

"And Trip?"

Zach squinted at the older man. Again, something skimmed under the surface of his eyes. *Crooked old fucker.*

"Mr. Whitlock is under observation, with that degree of damage to the occipital lobe, he runs the risk of subdural hematoma or worse. We're trying to evaluate his

options. But I'm afraid you'll need to speak with the attending physician; I'll let him know you're here. If you'll excuse me."

Mr. Cotton bobbed his head as if dismissing her. He glanced up at Zach. "Right. I should get back to Oz. If you see his brother-"

"I will." Zach nodded and smiled right at him, a greasy, knowing grin that made Conrad Cotten blanch. But Zach couldn't figure out what the hell he'd just witnessed.

Adam would know. He needed to see Adam pronto. He needed to see Adam and kiss him and love him and thank him for never giving up. Zach knew he didn't deserve that kind of faith, but hell if he was going to squander it. Together they could figure out how to make something useful out of old man Cotten's shame. Maybe they'd find a way out of town after all. He didn't need to sell drugs for Sam. Adam would know what to do.

A pair of unpretty candystripers wandered past pushing carts with paperbacks and towels. They giggled and pretended to flirt with him.

Zach pretended to flirt back.

He leaned against the stubborn Coke machine, not thirsty in the least.

*Best three dollars for no soda I ever spent .*

\* \* \*

Like any feral creature, small towns flinch at strangers and protect their young without pity or patience. Secrets keep a town's teeth sharp and its eyes quick.

Before Adam had been able to board the bus for Boston, he had been arrested.  
Stupid really.

*Possession with intent .*

Adam sat alone in a holding cell. A literal *cell* with bars and a bench. The pale blue walls sported about five or six years of graffiti going by the names that he recognized. It seemed clean enough, smelled like fake lemon, but for all that, it was a cell and chilly as hell. Adam's jacket had been confiscated along with his belt and his sadly un-valuable valuables.

When he'd left his place, he'd wedged Zach's pills and tabs into his waistband. If he couldn't be here to stop Zach's destruction, at least he could slow it down. Before he'd spoken with Dot at the Bear & Bones, he'd written a note explaining the theft and the job offer.

The classy thing would have been to face Zach and tell him the truth. The smart thing would have been to go to the Sheriff straight away and turn his best friend in before things got serious. The kind thing to do was to sacrifice another job offer and sit with Zach in fucking rehab while he screamed at the walls and clawed trenches into his skin while he detoxed from whatever the fuck he'd taken.

*None of the above .*

Adam did the fucked-up thing, stealing his friend's stash of drugs to remove temptation and then getting them out of the house to remove any evidence. He'd toss them somewhere between here and the bus station and be headed for his new life in Boston on the 5:09.

How was he supposed to fucking know that Sheriff Neale hung out at the rest stops waiting to bust folks? How was he supposed to explain ducking into a public toilet with a hundred smiley-faced pills and about fifteen sheets of dodgy acid stamps in his briefs? Who was he supposed to call to bail his ass out and call his new boss for *this* career-ending update?

All he could focus on was what Zach would think after he read that note and saw the stash was gone. Ordinarily, Zach would have been the person he called to come get him out.

*I fucked up .*

"That is fucked up, Parish." Sheriff Neale ambled towards him, a goofy grin on his bearded face. "You-" With a jangle he tugged his keys out of his crowded uniform pants and unlocked the cell. "Are free to go."

Adam goggled at the big man and stayed put. "The hell are you talking about?"

"S'bullshit." Neale waved his hand at the baggie and its miniature mob of smiling pills. "Fucking baby aspirin. Stamped and all. I don't know what you paid for it but you got screwed."

"I didn't pay for them. They're not-"

"Illegal?" A snort. The sheriff picked up the baggie and swung it between them. "These wouldn't help a *headache*, kid."

"Thank you." Adam shook the man's hand firmly. "You don't understand. And it doesn't matter now, but thank you for that."

"I got enough bullshit with that wreck. Cottens making trouble. Townies asking questions. Grady Boxer ready to sue anyone who breathes wrong."

"Okay." Adam waited for the punchline. His hands were squeezed so hard that his nails cut into his palms.

"Parish, I don't need the paperwork. And Dot and Ira don't need the grief. You just head back and hit the waffle iron." Sheriff Neale tore something off a clipboard, balled it up, and made a basket in one throw. "I say we forget you ever had these."

Adam didn't say a word about his travel plans or change of employment.

The Sheriff grunted. "I don't know what that damn Kabir kid has been up to out at the Sherwood estate, but I'm gonna have to bring him in for questioning."

Adam crossed his arms over his chest. So cold. "Who's Kabir?"

"Some bullshit showbiz type slumming it. Father directs movies. Mother's a model. And now, the production company leased the old Sherwood place. Apparently some indie movie shit and no one bothered to notify me that the permits had been filed."

"The drugs were a prop?" Adam finally stepped onto the grey linoleum of the station hallway.

"Let me get your things." He rapped the desk with his brown knuckles.

Adam ran a hand over his face.

Everything they'd shared had been real. Zach had been sober. It wasn't the pills. Did *Zach* know the pills and tabs were fake? At most, they'd been a placebo, unleashing Zach to act on his impulses.

Adam felt like an idiot. Why the hell hadn't he waited to get a straight answer?

Sheriff Neale came back with Adam's duffel, his leather jacket, and two lumpy brown envelopes. "Wallet and valuables in these."

Adam shrugged into his jacket. Since when were the Berkshires so cold at the end of March? Since when did showbiz people turn up in Boxer Falls? Since when did he think running away to Beantown looked better than staying to fight for his man. Everything seemed ridiculous to him. Suddenly his life had turned into a demented clown car: garish, honking problems climbing out, one after another after another.

He laughed without smiling. "This Kabir person has some kinda permit? Like a movie thing."

"Seems so. I dunno...shooting some kind of film school bullshit." Neale rolled his eyes and shook his head. "If this was a prank it was a bad one."

"And you think they were filming me?" *Or Zachary.* "People in town? Is that even legal?"

"Show business has no business inside Boxer Falls. We'll get it sorted out." The sheriff held up the ersatz dope. "I'll need to hold on to this for now, if that's alright by you? Might prove useful in getting the truth out of Kabir and his crew."

Adam nodded, looking at the floor. He felt stupid for seeing danger in a bag full of smiley faces, for agreeing to cook for Forsyth's restaurant, for doubting the only person he cared about.

*When did my life become an afterschool special?*

Adam scooped his wallet out one of the envelopes. He fished around for the key ring, and only when he pulled it free did he realize it only had three keys that fit real doors in the real world: his house, Zach's house, and the Bear & Bones. None of them fit the life he was headed towards. Part of him wanted to simply hand the keys back to the sheriff and go back to the cell so someone else would make the decision for him.

*What do I do?*

"You okay?" The Sheriff spoke gently, and Adam realized that the big man was trying to keep the basket case from flipping out. As the basket case in question, Adam couldn't blame him. Most likely because the last thing the sheriff wanted was more paperwork. And Adam had a bus to catch.

*Right?*

Neale stood at the desk and held the receiver towards Adam, mockery in his eyes. "You wanna call someone to take you home?"

*Dot? Rider? Zach?*

Adam realized that he'd let every one of them down in different ways. What could he do?

The sheriff looked at Adam's bag. "Or I could call a cab for the bus station...if you're still headed that way?"

\* \* \*

A small town knows the places best for hiding, where to drag its kills and bury its lies. In quiet crannies, it hunkers down and bides its time till the long cold fades and takes starvation with it.

About forty yards north of the highway, down a steep incline towards the lake, Brandt's body had landed hard under a dense clutch of black chokeberry. A white-tailed deer grazing on lower branches of nearby chokeberries gave the ripening flesh a wide berth.

Sprung from the trunk of Oz's BMW, battered by branches as it fell past them, the corpse had pulled leaves and branches down on itself as it hit the damp soil. One of Brandt's legs protruded from the pale spring leaves at a bad angle. In the half-light under the canopy, his dark pants looked like a crooked shadow against the dirt.

Almost a half mile away, the Falls' churning could be heard faintly. The roar seemed softened by the distance and the pine needles carpeting the forest floor.

Brandt's dead eyes watched as a breeze stirred the hissing trees overhead. A safe sound, and one the deer probably knew. Then another.

The deer raised its head. Brandt's dead ears could hear clearly.

*Tires on gravel .*

On the highway above, a car passed as the deer held still as stone and Brandt's body did likewise.

The corpse couldn't know that the Sheriff was making his way to the Sherwood Estate on the other side of the water to get some answers out of Sam Kabir.

As it whipped by, a loose oak leaf spiraled down, down, down. It floated in a corkscrew plunge past its old branches and past the speckled alders and past the chokeberries and past the deer's gaze onto Brandt's mottled hand.

Another shadow. Another secret. Another morsel tucked away.

And like a wary animal, weary with escape and watched by dead eyes, the town curled around itself and dreamed.

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■ *Will Adam head for Boston or reconcile with Zach? Can they learn to be honest with each other before one of them gets hurt?*

■ *Will Zach forgive the Cottens? Will Phil remember his family? Can Dot learn to cook a waffle that can't be used as a patio tile?*

■ *What is Sam Kabir up to at the Sherwood Estate? Why does he need film permits? And how much of the truth will he tell Sheriff Neale?*

■ *Is Oz's secret safe? What will Conrad do to prevent Yoshi from spilling the beans by blinks? And what happens when Trip wakes up?*

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**TUNE IN NEXT WEEK!**

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

**AUTHOR BIO :**

Damon Suede grew up out-n-proud deep in the anus of right-wing America, and escaped as soon as it was legal. Though new to M/M, Damon has been writing for print, stage, and screen for two decades. He's won some awards, but counts his blessings more often: his amazing friends, his demented family, his beautiful husband, his loyal fans, and his silly, stern, seductive Muse who keeps whispering in his ear, year after year. You can get in touch with him at:

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