



THOMAS

Mabel, episode thirteen: Thomas. In which time loops back on itself.

[INTRO]

MABEL: Hi, you've reached Mabel Martin. I'm not here to take your call right now, so please leave a message after the beep. Thanks!

[BEEP]

ANNA: I've known men who look at their partners as though they're looking at something on a leash. I've seen the way these men watch their loved ones leave a room or serve dinner or speak up in public company, the proprietary tilt of a head, the lingering glance. The measuring of assets. I have spent my whole life with these men, in one form or another. My uncles. My classmates. My friends. Even, sometimes, my dad.

I was there in the dark. When she brought me to you, in the hall warm with firelight, when you had your hands full of angels' trumpets and foxgloves and you turned to me and *knew* me, as though I was a piece of you, something you'd been missing. When you threw your arms around me and the flowers went everywhere, in my hair, in my shoes, in between the buttons on my shirt. And he was there, too, because he always is: beside the fire, shape-changing. His crown, this time, a crown of bone. I saw the way she looked at him, the way she tipped her chin. I know what defiance looks like. And when she turned and walked away, I saw the way he watched her go: not like a

man with a dog on a leash, not like a man with a bird in a cage, but a man whose heart is no longer his own property – a man who has torn a section of himself loose and seen it run out into the world. He's not a child with a shiny toy, he's someone in l–

[BEEP]

[KNOCKING]

Do you hear that, Mabel?

[KNOCKING]

I didn't realise I was still afraid. I thought that the ghost house had killed it. I mean, I'm afraid of him, and I'm afraid of what he'll do to you, and I'm afraid I'll never figure out how to get you home, but – afraid of normal things like being all alone in a big house in the middle of nowhere? I don't have *time* for fears like that, I have riddles to solve and – and sideways-places to sneak into, labyrinths to navigate. Except –

[KNOCKING]

– except there's someone at the door, and the last time I went to answer the doorbell I came back upstairs to find Sally gone, and – fuck, there are other things to be frightened of than splits in the seam of reality and the people or not-people who live there, there are things right here – right here in the world, things like home invasion and murder and all that mundane, everyday violence that happens without the need for ghosts or demons or alternate dimensions or whatever the hell is going on here.

[ELECTRONIC INTERFERENCE]

That's the thing, though. I'm the only one who knows where you are. I'm the only one who's been there, who understands – at least a little bit – what's needed to get you out. If I answer the door and it *is* some opportunistic asshole with a gun? If I die here, shot in Mabel's kitchen and left to turn to meat, then to skeleton? What happens to you?

Maybe that's what it's like being pregnant. Okay, weird thought. I'm sorry. It just made me think about – carrying someone, kind of. Everything I do, I do it holding you, or the idea of you. Does that make sense? No, god, don't answer that, I always pick the stupidest times to say these –

[KNOCKING]

I thought they'd gone, I –

[KNOCKING]

Right. I've got my secateurs on my belt, I'm going to grab a kitchen knife on my way to the door. If someone wants to murder me, I'll at least make it hard for them. And I'll take you with me, too, so you know what happens to me. I'm not going to leave you to wonder.

[WALKING, OPENING DOOR]

Hey, I – what are you –

[BEEP]

SINGING:

*– But he's taken her by her yellow locks
and tied her to a tree
and said, for slighting my command
an ill death shall you die*

*he pulled a tree out of the wood
the biggest that was there
and he dug a cave many fathoms deep
and put May Margeret there*

*No rest, no rest May Margaret took
Sleep she got never none
Her back lay on the cold, cold floor,
Her head –*

[BEEP]

Do you think, if I press my ear to the right wall, I will be able to hear you? If you shout loud enough?

The man's gone again. He said he had to go, there are – systems, like you said to me. There are rules that can't be broken.

I know, I know. Start at the beginning. My phone cut off right when I answered the door. I heard the beep, but I couldn't – I didn't have time to call you back. He was – just the same as the last time, wrapped up in a jacket with a sheepskin collar and holding a phone, waiting in the street as though nothing had changed in the time between then and now. As though the whole world hadn't split open. He looked at me, right from the start. The lines on his face were like scars left by hunting knives. Deep drags in his skin. "I'm sorry," he said. "Damn, I'm sorry. It's happened already, hasn't it?"

I think I just didn't have the energy to be surprised anymore. "Last time you were here," I said to him, "you just kept saying you were lost, and asking me for directions back into town. You got something more to say now?"

He smiled at me. Not like before, when he was trying to make me feel better, but – more like we were equals, now, or people made equal by virtue of having shared something terrible. Survivors meeting eye-to-eye. A smile of recognition and resignation all at once. "I got a lot to say, all right," he said. "You don't happen to have a cigarette, do you?"

I haven't smoked since I was seventeen, and I told him so. He said *figures*, and sighed, and shook his head. "Cup of coffee, then?" he asked. "You could make a pot and bring some cups out here. It's cold but it's bright, and I don't think I want to set foot in that house if I can help it."

I made the coffee, though I sulked while I did it. I put on a coat, and wrapped myself up in a scarf, and carried the cups outside, into the street. The man gulped his like he was dying of thirst, like the heat didn't even scald him. I just stood there, staring. "My name's Thomas," he said when he'd finished, when he'd set his mug down on the curb and fished a broken-stalked cigarette out of his jacket pocket. "I know who you are, you're Anna. You're not a Martin, just someone else who got caught up in their mess."

"Who are you?" I asked him. "Why did you come here over and over? Why wouldn't you say anything other than that you were lost? How come you're talking to me properly now, what's changed?"

"You have," he said. "You've been inside. Once you're inside, it doesn't matter anymore – you leave pieces of yourself in there. That's what this house does, it eats parts of you." He looked up at Sally's house and shivered, a movement like a bird might make, caught out in a rainstorm. "Me," he said,

"I'm all in pieces. Bits of me are echoes. I was lost when I came here first. So some of me will always be lost."

I thought back, back, back to that day full of palindromes, when he came to me three times and I threatened to call the cops on him. When he looked behind me into the house and mouthed something at me, something that might have been *get out*. "You were trying to warn me," I said. "But you were – you were an echo?"

The man shuffled his feet. "That was how I met her. I got lost and knocked on the door and there she was, she said come in, please, and I went in for coffee and most of me never came out. I think if I can just get myself back together I'll be – I don't know what I'll be. If I hadn't kissed her back, none of this would have happened."

"Who," I said, "Sally?"

"Her mother? No, not Sally." He took his phone from his jacket pocket and started to jab at it. Smoke blew out of his mouth but never seemed to dissipate, just hung around him like a net. Greying him, making him more vague. "I wanted to help you, if I could," he said. Not looking at me. Shuffling his feet. "But that house got its claws in you, too."

Something was – you know that feeling when you realise that something's been out of joint, and you just haven't noticed it up until right that moment? I looked at him, at his haircut, at his jacket. I looked, for the first time, at his phone, only it wasn't a phone, not a smartphone, anyway, it was too blocky, too clumsy, made of plastic instead of metal, and it – it triggered a strange memory for me, the nurse I shadowed in nursing school with something similar clipped to her belt-loop. And then I thought: God, it's a *pager*, he's been fiddling with the buttons on his pager all this time, and when did anyone last have one of those, outside a hospital? When did anyone last wear a jacket like that, with its triangular sheepskin lapels? And I thought about you, Mabel, and I thought about Lily, and how there never were any pictures of your father – nothing in the big family albums, nothing about him in the family tree, how your name is Martin, how you stayed with Sally and Esau when your mother died – and I blinked at him, and he was smiling again. Sadder, this time. "I never got to see her," he said. "Not up close. Never got to hold her. I thought when they took her, maybe I could see her then, but there's layers on that place like an onion, and whatever is king down there, it doesn't want me to see her. It doesn't want the Martins all together, it doesn't want them happy. You get me? There's a curse on the

Martins, and when that old lady gets back from the hospital I'd recommend you get as far away from here as you can manage, even if you do leave some of you behind."

"Sally's dead," I told him. "There's no one but me. Me and Mabel."

His face changed, when I said your name. He said, "You've seen her?"

"Yeah, I've seen her. She's alive, she's okay. I'm – I'm going to get her out of there. It's why I'm still in the house. It's why I'm still – "

But he was backing away, shaking his head. "You need to stop," he said, his voice moving up and down like the needle on a seismograph, a machine that predicts tectonic shifts. "You need to stop talking about it. Ever heard the phrase *the walls have ears*? Nowhere in the world is that truer than in this piece of shit house. Don't say those things out loud if you don't want them to screw with your plans. There's – " He squinted up at the sky, his face all wrinkled. "I have to go," he said. "Can't stay in any one place for long. But listen to me, Anna." And he leaned in close to me, and I smelled him, and he smelled like something that's been dead for a long, long time. "*Hay una puerta*," he whispered in my ear. "*Nesecitas descubrirlo*." And then he shivered one last time, and pulled his jacket closer, and walked away.

Mabel, I'm sorry. I know it has to be hard to hear it like this. To hear anything like this. I wish I could make it easier. But he – can you just say something?

Mabel?

Mabel? Mabel, can you hear me? Oh my God, please say something, if you can hear me please – he said there's a *door*, Mabel, he said I had to find it, please, just –

[BEEP]

[OUTRO:]

Mabel is written and produced by Becca De La Rosa. The voice of Mabel Martin is [censored]. The voice of Anna Limon is Becca De La Rosa. The music in this episode was by Ars Sonor, Bluedark, Lloyd Rogers, and (morse), and all of it is available to download from the Free Music Archive at freemusicarchive.org. For more information about Mabel, including a full

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