

episode two: *The Priestess*

previously: Milo Hunter's first semester in college is not going well. His violent temper has alienated him from the rest of his fencing team mates, while his social awkwardness has kept him from making new friends. A jaded intellectual, he's bored in all his classes. Further complicating matters is Milo's grandfather. "Grampa" is wealthy, generous and apparently well-intentioned, but thoroughly manipulative, and he has big plans for Milo. These plans somehow involve Milo playing hero. Milo's first mission goes horribly awry, however, when he finds the "damsel in distress" he was supposed to rescue dead from an apparent suicide.

Gasoline again. It drips into my wounds causing searing pain, burning my eyes, flooding my mouth. I gag and cough. I realize something. This guy is an amateur. For all the damage he's done, he has no idea what he is doing. He likes to cause pain. He gets off on making others powerless. He's had a hard-on the whole time he's been torturing me. But he doesn't get it. He's trying to get information from me, but he keeps making me pass out. He doesn't understand the pain threshold, that five broken ribs don't feel significantly different from three. He doesn't understand that while there is a limit to how much pain a body can feel, there are no limits to the torture one can inflict on a mind. A professional would understand that.

For an insane moment I feel indignant. They didn't see me as significant enough to send somebody good.

He's damaged me, but nowhere that matters. He is stupid. He is weak. This is the only time he ever feels powerful. When he's torturing someone.

After today he will never feel powerful again, I promise.

He is lazy. He's splashed gasoline on me twice now, not because he's about to make me burn. He's probably will when he finds out what he wants to know, but not yet. No, he's just splashed gas on me because he's too lazy to fetch water. The gas was right there.

"Oh good, you're awake," he says. He pulls up a chair and sits where I can see him, just outside of spitting range. He's straddling the chair so he can lean forward on its back, his arms crossed on top. "Look," he says. "Me and you, well, I guess we just got off on the wrong foot. I don't hate you. It may seem like it, but I really don't. I don't really know anything about you. It isn't anything personal. I'd just as soon cut you down and call an ambulance to come get you, but I've got a job to do. My interest is strictly professional."

While he's been talking he's pulled a cigarette from a silver case. He has been tapping the end of the cigarette on the case. Finally, he takes out his Zippo. I hold my breath when he lights up, expecting doom for the both of us. No such luck.

"You're protecting somebody," he continues. "That's good. Loyalty is the most important thing a man can have. My boss, he keeps me around. It isn't because I am very bright or anything. He knows I'm loyal. He knows I'd lay down my life for him. The thing of it is, he's worth it. I know he'd do the same for me. I know he'd never ask me to do anything he wouldn't do himself."

He takes a long drag from the cigarette and exhales it slowly.

"Now, you're loyal. I like that. It is something we have in common. If we're ever going to get along we have to focus on our commonalities, not our differences. But, see, I *know* my boss has earned *my* loyalty. Now your guy, gal, whatever, you're ready to die for them. That is good. But I'm just wondering, are they worth it? I mean, I can't help wondering. You're here, but where are they? Why aren't they trying to rescue you or something?"

Oh.

Fuck.

I've underestimated this guy.

He's right. Where the fuck is Grampa? I'm going to die because of him. Alone.

Where the fuck is that fucking old man?

"I'm going to go outside and finish this cigarette," the guy continued. "Maybe I'll have another, before I get back to work. Only a fucking idiot would smoke around all these gas fumes, know what I mean? They're as explosive as the gas itself! You think it over and when I come back you tell me what I want to know and I'll cut you down. If not, well... I'm sorry. It's nothing personal."

Oh.

Fuck.

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Grampa was waiting for me in the dorm room when I got back.

I have no memory of the trip home. I think I ran the whole way, but it was all instinct. A blind run.

The only thing I could see were her open eyes reflecting the night sky, never blinking. The only thing I could feel was her death. The way the cord felt around her neck. The way lungs feel when they can't fill with air.

How could it all have gone so incredibly wrong?

I closed the door behind me and leaned heavily against it.

"I was too late," I whispered. "She was dead when I got there."

"What? No! It can't be!" Grandfather exclaimed. "Are you certain?"

"Certain? Of course I am certain! She was hanging by her neck from a tree! She'd fucking killed herself before I'd even left here!

"No, I meant are you certain that she is the one you were supposed to save? That there was no one else?"

"If there was anyone else there they were as dead as she was!" I was shouting now. Maybe I was overreacting, but I'd never seen anyone dead before. And knowing that somehow this girl was our responsibility and we'd failed her...

Grampa was muttering to himself, "No, it can't be. They couldn't have gotten there before us. We couldn't have been so wrong..." Suddenly his eyes locked on mine. "You've got to go back there! Hurry! She's the wrong one. It is just a coincidence that she chose that time and place to die, and the one you are meant to help is still out there."

I shook my head. It wasn't coincidence. I knew she was the one. I think Grampa did too. "How could I have been so wrong..." he said, shaking his head. Then he took me by the shoulders. "I'm sorry Milo, but we have to be sure. You say she killed herself. Are you sure? Tell me what you saw. Calm down. Breathe deep. Take your time and remember."

I didn't want to. I didn't want to go back there. But I closed my eyes and saw...

"Her feet," I gasped. "They were pointing at the ground. She was stretching, trying to reach the ground, but it was too far away. And her neck. Red gouges with her fingernails. She was trying to get the noose off."

"Murder?" Grampa asked. "Made to look like suicide?"

"Or maybe she just changed her mind at the last minute, but it was too late to do anything about it." I replied.

“What does feel like to you? What does your heart tell you?”

I closed my eyes, trying to separate my own fear and shock, to pay attention. “She was terrified,” I said at last. “And surprised. She didn’t want to die. She never did.”

“Murder then,” Grampa said gravely. “You have to go back. You’ve got to find out all you can before the police get there and destroy the evidence. They are going to believe exactly what you did. They’ll think this is just another teenage suicide. They’ll trample any clues instead of looking for them.”

At that moment I could think of a thousand other things I’d rather have been doing, but I’d signed up for this, and had to see it through. It must have been two, going on three in the morning. I was tired to my very soul. My feet felt frozen to the ground.

I didn’t want to face her again. I didn’t want to see the look of betrayal on her face.

“Here. Wear this.” Grampa said, taking his Stetson and putting it on my head. “It’ll cut down on the chances of leaving stray hairs for the cops to find, in case by some miracle they decide it wasn’t a suicide after all. And put these on.” He handed me a pair of black leather gloves. “No fingerprints. I don’t think they will be looking for any, but you can’t be too careful.” Suddenly I felt a new fear. I felt certain that the cops would be scanning the area for hair and fibers, and would find mine, and trace right back to my dorm room as if I were a shaggy dog with a sudden case of the mange, leaving a trail of hair behind him as easy to follow as the white stones Hansel and Gretel dropped before they got stupid and switched to bread.

“Go back to the woods and find out all you can. You remember what to do. And then, if you are certain that she is the one, find out who she is, and where she lives—lived. You must get to her home before the police do. Tonight. We have to know who did this to her, and why. Now go!”

Had I really wanted this? Begged for it? Swore I was ready? Now I just felt young, foolish. I was no hero, and certainly no detective. I was in so far over my head I couldn’t remember there ever being a surface. I fled the room. I couldn’t stand being in there another instant. I had to do something. I wanted to run away. Instead I ran back to the woods. It was what I needed to do. My job. My responsibility. I wasn’t doing it for Grandfather. It was for her. If I didn’t do something she’d disappear. She’d be written off as just another suicide, and forgotten. My grandfather and I were the only ones who knew any different. I would find out why she died, no matter who she was, no matter who did it. I had to.

Across campus, and back into the woods. The wind was picking up and the rain had stopped. The last of the clouds were clearing away, and the nearly full moon lit the campus as though it were day. Although it had been only a few minutes since I’d been there, it felt like an age and I was now someone older. Before, I’d just rushed in, as if there was going to be a big arrow pointing down from the sky saying DAMSEL IN DISTRESS, and I’d find her there, surrounded by “bad guys” who I’d beat up. Then I’d walk the shaken but grateful girl back home, refusing her invitation to come into her room so she could thank me properly with a “No thanks necessary, ma’am. Knowing you’re safe is all the thanks I need.”

Now I couldn’t believe I ever thought that way. Distress could mean so many things. There wasn’t anything exciting or romantic about it. I’d let my emotions override my brain, and I panicked and ran. It wouldn’t happen again. This time I entered the forest with my every sense awake, suppressing my own emotions until they were a flat line so that they wouldn’t interfere with my perceptions.

Save for the chirping of the crickets and the occasional leftover raindrop falling on a leaf, the woods were silent. The woods held a wonderful smell of good earth and decaying leaves and pine

needles after the rain. Any other night I would have loved that smell, would have closed my eyes and breathed it in deeply. Tonight, though, I knew I'd never be able to enjoy the woods after a rainstorm the same way.

As I walked along the path, I scanned every inch of ground, looking for anything out of the ordinary, any clue. The moonlight was bright enough that I didn't need my flashlight. The college maintained a network of bike paths through the woods for recreation and to provide shortcuts to the neighboring city for commuter students. She could have been leaving campus or returning to it. If she'd been returning, that left miles of path that she might have come down.

She was maybe a hundred paces down the path, just off it. In the dark she was completely hidden by the shadows, but when the sun rose there would be no missing her. With first light the early morning joggers would find her. Was it fair to let them? Should I spare them that trauma and make an anonymous call to the police? No. I had to remain invisible, couldn't let myself get dragged into view.

Did I say I was blocking my feelings? I may have been, but that was in the light of the campus. Standing on the path facing her, I'd never felt so scared. Look for clues, grandfather said. By that I thought he meant to look for smoking guns, bloody knives, footprints from size ten shoes, the wallet that had fallen out of the killer's pocket. But now I knew what I had to do, and it terrified me.

Seeing death for the first time was one thing. That had sent me into a blind panic. What would touching death do to me?

I stepped off the path and walked the short distance to her. In the moonlight I could see her face better than before. My heart stopped for a full minute, and I had to close my eyes and turn away.

I knew who she was.

Her name was Sadie Hawkins, from my Psych 100 class. Even though there had been a hundred other students in the class, I'd noticed her. When the instructor called attendance, I'd looked up to see who she was because she had such a funny name, but when I saw her I couldn't believe she'd ever need to the one to ask somebody to dance. Sadie stood out like a color photo on a wall of black and white pictures. That day she was Bettie Page. Well, Bettie Page as though she were a teenager on her way to a malt shop, not bondage Bettie or jungle Bettie. Her hair was jet black with sharp bangs almost like a bowl cut yet managing to look cool and cute at the same time. Her eyebrows were arched and her lips were painted red, as if she'd sat before a mirror with a picture of Ms. Page and repainted her own face to match exactly. Somehow she managed to pull off Bettie's patented combination of sexiness, playfulness and innocence. Even the size and shape of her breasts matched.

At first glance I tried to dismiss her as a desperate cry for attention. No, that wasn't it. Have you ever seen somebody you really wanted to know but were afraid to talk to so you find something wrong with them to make it okay you didn't talk to them? She carried herself with such ease and had such flawless attention to detail that it seemed like something more than something done just for attention. The subsequent classes I seated myself in the row behind her, and just to the left so that she was in line with my view of the instructor. That way when the instructor got too boring to pay attention to, I could gaze at Sadie. She was only Bettie Page that first day. She always came to class dressed in the most fashionable clothes, but those fashions could be from any period during the last hundred years. Her research was impeccable, right down to the style of makeup, the amount of curl in the hair, and, remarkably, what breast size was considered to be sexy at the time. She was a master forger. Sometimes she was people I recognized. Theda Bara and Mae West, for example. Other times she went for archetypes. 50's housewife. 40's debutante.

The day she walked in as Lillian Gish there was a moment when I realized that of all the

people in the room, only she and I knew who she was supposed to be. I almost spoke to her that day, but I chickened out. I couldn't imagine that such a unique, exciting and beautiful woman could ever want to speak to someone like me. If I hadn't been such a coward, would things have been different? Would she still be alive?

That night she was dressed simply, as if she'd gotten ready in a hurry. Under her raincoat she wore straight 60's mod dress with large squares of primary colors, as if Piet Mondrian had gone into fashion. Flat chest, short cropped hair, just a hint of makeup, Twiggy style. The name "Twiggy" is not one I would have known had it not been for Sadie. I'm embarrassed to admit Sadie actually became a kind of hobby for a while. When I couldn't place who she was meant to be, I'd research until I figured it out. It was more interesting than studying for classes. The Twiggy look was as contemporary as Sadie got and I'd only seen it once before. I wondered if it was her real look, without the wigs and breast padding? I could have reached up, touched her chest, tugged her hair to find out. I didn't. This was the last time I'd ever see her and wonder about her.

I knew what I had to do. I wasn't ready. But I guess there are some things that you're never ready for. Doing it is what makes you ready. Like riding a bike, or learning to swim. Grandfather believed I was ready, even if I didn't.

I pulled the glove off my right hand. I would be doomed if the police dusted for fingerprints. Then I reached out and took her hand.

To somebody watching, it might have looked as though I were asking for her hand in marriage.

Oh God. Her hand was still warm. She'd hadn't been dead long enough for all her body heat to have left her.

Then I know.

She's trying to walk calmly, but she keeps skipping into a scurrying run. Happy. She's happy. She's going to meet someone. Brandon. She loves him so much that sometimes she feels like her body isn't big enough to hold all the love, and she's going to expand and float off like a balloon. It is cold, rainy, but she doesn't notice. She's going to meet the man she loves at their "special spot". It is late, very late, strange for him to want to meet so late, but that must be when he gets out of work. Doesn't matter. He's so worth it. The first man to treat her the way she deserved. The first man to see her out of her costumes and find her even more beautiful. It is dark, but she isn't scared. Brandon's nearby. He'll be there any minute. In fact, here he is!

Hearing footsteps behind her she starts to turn, happily, but the rope is around her neck before she has the chance. Brandon? No, it can't be. Not him. Not him! But she can't see her attacker to know. He (she?) is behind her. In her last breath she smells cigarette smoke, and then she is dragged upwards.

She grasps the rope, trying to pull it away from her neck, trying to get free. Her fingernails rip her flesh. The ground is just below her feet, if she could just reach it she could buy another minute of life. She feels one of her shoes fall off, but the ground is too far away. She manages to slip two fingers under the rope and pulls it away just enough to catch a gasp of air. She's about to scream when arms embrace her from behind and drag her downward. The noose tightens, cutting off breath, and blood flow and life. And then, all she knows is darkness.

I dropped her hand and fell to my knees. But it wasn't over.

There, kneeling on the forest floor I saw her future dying. All the different paths her life might have taken withering and collapsing like vines in autumn as the probabilities readjusted to a future without her in it.

I saw a future where she became a famous fashion designer. I saw her telling stories to her

grandkids. I saw the two of us becoming the best of friends. In the blink of an eye I saw an infinity of possibilities, but through it all, she was happy, she was loving and loved. She did good things in the world, and the world was a better place for having her in it.

I thought I knew what death was, and I wasn't afraid of it. I was wrong. Death itself isn't the tragedy. The tragedy is the end of all the possible futures that had that life in it.

I balled my hand into a fist and I bit down on it. These feelings were too much for me. I couldn't contain them. They were red hot knives ripping through my veins. I wanted to scream but I wasn't sure I would ever stop. Tears coursed down my face, mingled with the blood flowing from my knuckles and splashed on the ground.

I felt her die. I knew her terror, her pain. If I could put these feelings into words you'd rip your own eyes out to keep them from coming into your head. But that wasn't the worst of it. The worst thing was knowing what she'd lost, what the world had lost when she died. All the things she would have done, the lives she would have touched, it all died with her.

The worst thing was knowing there was absolutely nothing I could do for her now. If I could have traded places with her, been hanging from that tree instead of her, I would have done so in a heartbeat.

I vowed revenge, promised to find whoever did this and make them pay. The instant I thought this I realized how stupid it was. How much suffering would I have to inflict on them to bring her back to life?

I stood up. I placed my palm gently against her cheek. "I'm sorry Sadie," I said. "Please, be at peace. I know it is too late, but I promise to do whatever I can." It was the best I could do. It felt stupid, meaningless.

I turned and staggered away, barely able to see through my tears. I couldn't stop now. I knew where I had to go: to the dorm at the edge of the campus at the start of the bike path, where Sadie had lived.

When I pulled the glove back on, I absentmindedly wondered if blood washed out of leather. My torn knuckles were stung under the pressure from the glove, but I didn't want to leave any bloody fingerprints when I picked the locks on the dormitory door. I came in through the side door to avoid the work-study student receptionist sleeping at the front desk.

The locks hadn't been changed since the dorm was built half a century ago. My lock picking tools (another gift from Grampa) had them open as quickly as turning a doorknob, and I was inside and up the back stairs in a moment. I went directly to room 318, Sadie's room. My connection to her had brought me more than just the feeling of how she died, though I didn't know what exactly. I just knew what room she'd lived in, even though I knew I'd never known before.

I paused at her door. Taped just beneath the number on the door was a sign, drawn as if by a child, saying Sadie and Genni's room. Below the words were drawings of two stick-figure girls. One had long hair and bangs. The other had triangles for hair that I took to represent short, spiked hair. The girls were smiling and holding hands.

The lock made no noise as I picked it. I held my breath as I opened the door as slowly as I could, tiptoed inside, and closed it behind me, making not a squeak.

Have you ever seen anything as beautiful in your whole life? Were those my thoughts or Sadie's? She'd looked at her before, the way I was looking at her, and thought the same thing. I'd never seen a woman asleep before. At least, not in real life. At least not one I wasn't related to. Genni. I could see her face clearly in the moonlight. Sadie surprisingly had never dressed as quintessential Flapper, Louise Brooks. It was an obvious choice, and now I knew why she never did. Louise Brooks was

her room mate. The jet black hair cut in a bob, the bow lips that seemed too small, yet sensual all the same. The moon was now low in the sky, and its light played directly on her through her dorm room window, painting her in shades of gray. In sleep she was completely relaxed, all the worries and troubles of the waking world gone. Her face was that of a child who had not yet known stress, never learned that there was such a thing as suffering in the world.

My heart ached when I looked at her and knew that in a few short hours there would be a knock on her door and a uniformed officer would be there to tell her he had some bad news. Would they need her to come identify the body like they always did in the movies? I prayed that she would be spared that. I reached out a hand to shake her awake so that she could hear the news from someone friendly and sympathetic, but then I snapped out of it.

I tore myself away. I had work to do and Genni might wake up at any moment. I had to be gone before she did. I turned to Sadie's side of the room. On the wall above her bed were two posters, one of jungle girl Bettie Page, and the other a reproduction of an Art Deco style movie poster from the '20s for Louise Brooks starring in Pandora. I wasn't surprised to find those. Her desk didn't appear to be ever used for studying or writing papers. It was covered with fashion magazines with publication dates spanning a century. Scattered amongst those were pulp fiction mags and antique soft-core porn magazines, all featuring striking looking women on the covers. Some of them were women she'd come to class as.

Along the back of the desk was a row of Styrofoam heads, each with a different wig on. Blonde, brunette, red head, curly haired, short haired. They were high-quality wigs, made from human hair, not synthetic.

She needed to do this. It was how she coped. I knew this for a fact, but I had no idea why.

There was a picture frame containing a montage of photos of her and Genni. Some were yellowed and showed two little girls in diapers playing together. Oh God, I thought. They've been friends forever. Again I thought of shaking the girl on the bed awake, but I knew there was nothing I could do to spare her the pain she was about to feel.

In the trash can I found the note. Apparently whoever wrote it down didn't have a piece of scrap paper handy, so they used the closest thing they could find, a page from the phone book. Hopefully nobody'd need to call anyone from the Smiths to the Spencers. Just a few quick words scrawled in crayon: Brandon. The usual spot. 11:30. It was a death sentence. I dropped it back in the trash can.

Against the foot of her bed was a large artist's portfolio. Next to this was the paint-spattered tool box she carried her art supplies in. I wanted to see inside the portfolio, but I didn't think that I could open it without making too much noise. I opened her top dresser door and almost jumped in surprise. It was a drawer full of breasts! In the moonlight I'd thought for a moment that they were real. Then I realized that they were all synthetic, just sculpted to look as much like the real thing as possible. I squeezed one. They even felt real. Or at least, as real as what I imagined breasts to feel like. So that's how she did it, I thought, thinking back to her changing breast sizes.

In the second drawer down I found what I was looking for, to the right, in the back beneath lacy silk panties. It was her sketchbook. Not the one she kept for class, but the private one she only showed to two people. I hesitated for a moment. There might have been valuable evidence in there that would help the police crack the case. If I took it they wouldn't find it. *That's why you have to take it*, I thought, not knowing why. I tucked the sketchbook under my arm and closed the drawer.

Suddenly I froze. Genni snorted in her sleep and rolled over. I moved into the darkest shadows of the room and waited, motionless. Her slow, steady breathing resumed. I realized that the light was

no longer coming from the moon, but was the dim twilight of the rising sun. It was time to go.

Walking across campus, I felt so exhausted I wanted to lay down on a bench and sleep. I felt raw, as if emotions too big to fit had been pushed through me, and my, what? Emotional passages? Whatever, had been stretched and torn to accommodate them. Somehow I managed to drag myself home.

Grandfather was gone when I got back. He'd left a note.

My Dear Milo,

I am so sorry I can't be there for you now. I know how hard this is. I know what you are feeling, and I wish there were another way. Know that I am with you in spirit, even if I can't be in person.

This unexpected turn of events forces me to turn my attention elsewhere. While you investigate here, know that I too am working to get to the bottom of this. I am not abandoning you. I am right beside you even though you may not see me.

I will return as soon as possible. This is going to sound like a tall order, but it is imperative that you follow it: act as if nothing has happened to you. Go to your classes as usual. Study, do your homework, go to fencing practice, just as you did before today. Do this as if your life, and the lives of others, depended on it. It does.

Know that I love you. You make me very proud, and I've never doubted for an instant that I made the right decision in choosing you.

Be careful, and never let the shadows know you are watching them.

Love,

Grampa

In spite of the letter, I *did* feel abandoned. I'd never felt so alone in all my life. Alone, angry, confused, exhausted.

What the fuck was he talking about, "never let the shadows know you are watching them"?

I went into the bathroom and vomited, remaining there, soothing my head against the cold porcelain of the toilet. I may have even fallen asleep there for a moment.

I staggered up and pulled my gloves off. My right hand was caked with blood, my knuckles an ugly mess. Should probably get stitches, I thought. I rinsed the blood off and splashed cold water on my face. In the mirror was the reflection of someone I didn't recognize.

Then I noticed the bruises. My neck was ringed with bruises, right where the rope went around Sadie's neck.

I fell into bed too tired to remove my boots or trench coat. I was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

I awoke what seemed to be an instant later to the sound of sirens, and I knew they'd found her body.

Soon, if they were looking for them, they would find my boot prints in the mud around her, my blood on the ground, my fingerprints on her hand and face. Then they would come to my dorm room and find her sketchbook...

Que sera sera, I thought, and fell into a deep, mercifully dreamless, sleep.