

episode four:

THE FOOL

The story so far: Milo Hunter has issues. It isn't bad enough that his father abandoned him when he was too young to remember. Milo was left alone with his vindictive mother who took out all the resentment she feels toward her absent husband on him! To make matters worse, the one person who Milo truly loved and could always count on, his grandfather, died when he was in fourth grade. *But wait just a minute!* If Milo's grandfather is dead, just who is it who visits Milo in his dorm room at the start of his freshman year in college? Who sent him on a botched mission to rescue a "damsel in distress" who was dead before Milo even arrived on the scene? Whoever it is, he's disappeared again, leaving Milo on his own to find the truth. Milo is far more than a geeky, introverted outsider, however. He has been trained in stealth, combat, lock picking, and other skills that every college freshman should know. In addition to all this, he has the uncanny ability (occasionally) to pick up the thoughts, feelings, and memories of the living and the dead. However, right now he can't help feeling like he's just a kid who is in way over his head.

It is the sound of loneliness. The whistle on the AM radio as he slowly turns the dial left to right to left again, trying to find a human voice. At night the sky pulls in closer and the signals from the radio stations travel farther. Sometimes Boston. Sometimes New York. But now we've traveled too far away, and it is just that whistle.

"See that flashing red light out there?" Dad asks. I looked out the car window across the snow covered fields, and I saw the little light, slowly lighting and going dark, far away in the night sky. "I bet that's a radio tower. If I can just figure out what number it's at, I bet we'll get a good, strong signal."

I pull the blanket tighter around me. I am still cold, even though Dad's got the heater cranked all the way. My breath hardens on the window and becomes frost crystals. They look like the fronds of prehistoric plants. I imagine crystal dinosaurs stalking through them. I have to go to the bathroom, but I don't want to speak. If he stops the car, I'll have to get out right there, in the night, in the cold. I take my finger and press it against the frost. The frost melts. I make another spot next to it. Then I work the frost off in a curved line beneath the two dots. A smiley face. It is funny, but that's not how I feel, so I add another line. Now the face is shouting. I rub it with my fist until it is just a wet spot on the window.

How much farther is it? I know better than to ask. Last time I did, dad shouted at me to stop asking. We've been going for two days now, stopping only to get food and gas and go to the bathroom. Two days of sleeping in the back seat. My neck hurts. I've read and re-read my comic books until I've memorized every line. I've colored every picture in my one coloring book. Dad hasn't slept at all. Not for two days. Some camping trip this has turned out to be. "It'll be worth it. Just you wait and see. It's the best place in the whole world. You'll love it!" That's what he said. I don't care anymore. I just want to get out of the car.

But he keeps driving. Sometimes he's hunched over the steering wheel, and his whole body shakes. Is he crying?

He catches a station for an instant, and Elvis' voice fills the car. "We're caught in a trap. I can't walk out. Because I love you too much, baby..." Then the distance takes him, and all we hear is that

cold, empty whistling.

The frost has erased any trace of a mark I made on the window. I try to pull the blanket tighter. It doesn't help. I am still cold. I close my eyes.

I open them again and I'm not a little boy in the back seat of a car anymore. I taste gasoline. I can't move. The cigarette butt floats in slow motion toward the ceiling. The ceiling is wet with gasoline. It explodes into flame as soon as the cigarette hits it. The flames fall toward me. I twist away, but it is useless. The fire rides the short distance down to me along the gas fumes, and I am engulfed in flame. I scream.

I was standing in Psych 100. I'd shouted myself awake. The whole class was in commotion. At first I thought it was because of me. Then I realized I wasn't the only one standing up. A guy in the back of the room was shouting and walking down the stairs. Staggering was more like it. He seemed so drunk he could hardly walk.

"It's all your fault!" the guy shouted, pointing at the professor.

"If there is a problem, sir, I'll be happy to discuss it with you after class," the professor replied.

"I know what you two did!" the young man shouted back at him, his voice louder. He was three quarters of the way across the room now. "I'm not gonna let you get away with it!"

"Please, sir, we can discuss this like two civilized adults," the professor pleaded, his hands open.

"This is for Bobbie!" the man screamed, pulling a knife from his jacket and driving it into the professor's belly. The professor sank to his knees, clutching his abdomen. There was a collective gasp from the class. The professor fell. The young man bolted for a door in the back of the room. The students in the front of the room struggled awkwardly, knowing they should rush to the professor's aid but hoping that someone else would take the initiative.

I sat down and yawned. Just when I thought the class was going to get interesting... I was going to tackle the guy with the knife, but there was no anger coming from him, no fear or pain from the professor. Then I'd remembered the readings from the book, about the tests conducted on crime witnesses. God, was I the only person in the room who'd actually read it?

Sure enough, the professor stood up. "It is all right, everyone!" He held the knife above his head and shook it. The blade was floppy rubber. There were nervous laughs around the room, many relieved faces, and some genuinely indignant expressions. "Now, I'd like you to answer in your notebooks the following questions." He turned and wrote on the board. "Please describe the assailant. What color hair did he have? Was it straight or curly? What was he wearing? How tall was he? What other things did you notice about him that might help the police find my killer? Secondly, what was he upset about? Describe the whole scene as best as you can remember it. I'll give you five minutes, and then I'd like you to turn to the person sitting beside you and share your observations."

I sighed. I was really hoping that I could get away with dozing through all my classes that day. I was exhausted from the previous night's activities to the point where I felt stupid, and worried that when I opened my mouth to speak out would come nothing but slurred babble.

I jotted down a few lines, and hoped that it was enough to cover myself. Then I turned to the young woman sitting a seat away from me to my left. She smiled and moved into the empty seat beside me.

I felt embarrassed for a moment. She'd been sitting right near me all semester and I'd never really noticed her. She was beautiful, in a quiet way. Her face was very round, like pictures I'd seen of Inuits, only her hair was dirty blonde, hanging like a waterfall down to the center of her back. Her face was furry, covered in that blonde fuzz that babies have that is invisible unless you are up close. She

was tan, but the laugh lines around her mouth were pale. Wow, I thought. She smiles so much her face doesn't tan there.

"Hi," I said. "You're Golda, right?"

"Wow, good memory!" she laughed. "I'm terrible with names. What was yours again?"

"Milo," I replied. "Milo Hunter."

"Milo Hunter. Milo Hunter..." she repeated my name a few times, as if she were rolling it around in her mouth, trying to see how it tasted. "OK, I'll try to remember, but I'll probably forget, but then I'll pretend that I haven't because that is SO embarrassing, so if I don't call you by your name for a while, maybe you could just remind me. Don't take it personally. I never forget a face. I'm terrible with names." She laughed again. Usually I couldn't stand people who laughed all the time, but for some reason I liked her laugh. I laughed along with her, not knowing why.

"Boy, Milo, that guy really startled you! You were out of your seat!"

"What? No, not really." I leaned close to whisper to her, "Actually, I'd fallen asleep and was having a bad dream."

She giggled. "Wow, you must have been really out if you made it past stage 4 non-REM into REM sleep, sitting up!" I laughed. At least one person paid attention in class. She took my notebook and handed me hers. I was glad she remembered what we were supposed to do.

I glanced at her description. It was all wrong. She had the guy at 6 feet, with straight brown hair, when he was 5 foot 4. She had details that were assumed, such as that he was upset about a girl, when "Bobbie" could have been male or female.

"Uh, how did you know he had a cold?" Golda asked. "He didn't sound to me like he had a cold."

"Well, the skin around his nostrils was red." I replied, surprised she hadn't noticed. "Plus there was a soft bulge in his pocket. He would have blown his nose really hard before he came into the room and stuck the tissue in his pocket, because it is really hard to sound threatening wed your dose is all stubbed up,"

"Okay," Golda laughed. "Now you had down that he had curly hair, and I put down straight hair. Which one of us is right?"

"Well, I can see why you'd make that mistake. He had curly hair, but he wears a hat so much that it gives him permanent hat-head. He tried to fluff it up today, but it still came out pretty straight."

"So that is why you wrote 'probably wearing a baseball cap. I don't remember if he had glasses or not. Did he?"

"Well, he wasn't wearing them but he usually does. You could tell by the dents on the sides of his nose."

"Brand new jeans, not yet washed. Imitation leather jacket. Slight limp on the left. Left handed... you noticed all of this when you were just waking up from REM sleep?" Golda was shaking her head.

I felt a pit open up in my stomach. I wasn't supposed to do anything to call attention to myself, for one thing. For another, here I was talking to this really cute girl and I'd just convinced her I was a total freak. And I hadn't even realized I was doing it. I shrugged my shoulders and nodded.

She grabbed me by the shoulder and exclaimed, "That is so COOL! I can't believe you can do that!" She laughed and I laughed too. She thought I was cool! In high school whenever I forgot and did something like that, I was always met with, "Oh, that Milo, he's so weird."

"Now I'd like you all to meet Rob," the professor announced. "" The guy who'd recently murdered the professor came out and stood beside him, "Let's all give Rob a round of applause for his fine

performance!” Most of the class clapped. “Rob is a grad assistant in the Psychology department. He’s one of the people who helps correct your exams, so be nice to him. I assure you Rob and I are on good terms, and he’d never kill me. Would you, Rob?”

Rob shrugged his shoulders. I could tell he really wanted to get out from in front of all these people.

“Now those of you who haven’t read the homework assignment are probably wondering what that was about. One hundred and twenty-eight people, give or take, just witnessed Rob commit a crime. The police rely on eye witness reports to catch and convict criminals. Now, looking at Rob, is he anything like what you described him to be?” There were a few laughs, and much shaking of heads. “Were your descriptions anything like what your neighbor described? No? I didn’t think so. In fact, I’d be willing to bet that no two of the 128 descriptions we have match each other, and none of them are completely accurate. What does this all mean? I can see by the closing of notebooks and zipping of backpacks that we don’t have time to discuss it today. We’ll pick it back up first thing on Monday. Please put your names on your descriptions and pass them forward before you leave. Have a great weekend everybody!” The professor’s voice had risen to a shout by the time he finished talking over the students rushing to leave. I looked sadly at the professor. It just struck me as so rude that everyone got up and left while he was still speaking, even if it was time to go. I stayed there, and I didn’t even like the class. I had another class on the other side of campus I needed to get to, and I stayed.

Golda handed me a stack of descriptions, and I shuffled my papers around to make it look like I’d added mine, but I left my description safe in my notebook. I passed the papers onwards, slung my backpack over my shoulder and walked out.

I got into the hall to discover, to my happy surprise, Golda walking right beside me.

“I think it means we are all neurotic,” she said. “Or psychotic. Which do you think?”

“Huh?” was the most intelligent response I could make.

“Well, neurotics build castles in the clouds, right? Which is to say, they’ve constructed a reality for themselves that is different from the consensus reality the majority believes in. So something happens, and we all see it, so we know it is real. But then everybody describes something different. Wouldn’t that mean all of us are neurotic then, because we are all perceiving a different reality? Or would that mean that we are psychotic, because we all live in the different realities that we perceive?”

I’m pretty smart. I know that. Normally I’d be able to think up a dozen responses and say something equally intelligent back to her. Maybe it was because I was so tired. All I could think at the moment was that not only was she cute and didn’t think I was a total freak, but she was really smart too. Wow. “Um...” was the best I could manage.

“Or does it mean that reality is something that gets created on the fly, when we interact with each other? If we’d talked to each other first before writing the description, would the descriptions have converged on one standard?”

“No, I think we’re probably all psychotic. The world makes a lot more sense that way, if you think about it.”

We both laughed. We stood together outside the building for an awkward moment. I felt like I was supposed to say something to her, but nothing was coming to mind. The sunlight seemed to catch in her hair and play there.

Within two seconds after walking away from her I thought of at least 27 things I should have said instead. I looked my watch and said, “Oh crap, I’ve got three minutes to get to Brit Lit on the other side of campus!”

“Oh, well, Okay, I’ll see you Monday, I guess.”

“Okay. Monday. See you then!” I gave her a big smile, hoping it would convey all the things I couldn’t make my mouth say, like “You’re really cool and you are a beautiful person. I’m really glad I got the chance to talk to you today.” I doubt it did, though.

On the way to class, I felt a chill run across the back of my neck, and I knew someone was watching me. Someone or something, dark and cold and hostile. I almost turned to look, but then I remembered Grampa’s warning. Don’t let the shadows know you are watching them.

One rookie mistake is to hide your thoughts by cloaking them. This only serves to make yourself conspicuous by your absence of thoughts. At best, you read like a walking corpse. I didn’t make this mistake. I put a song in my head, Gonna dress you up in Mylar/All over your body. Madonna’s inane lyrics stick like molasses and are almost impossible to get rid of. Then I let myself think the things I hadn’t let myself before. Golda’s big, beautiful breasts were so magnificent. How I wanted to bury my face between them! How wonderful they would feel naked under my hands. I wanted to lie beneath her in a secluded field and let her hair surround me, so that I could see nothing but her face and the sun through her hair. I imagined the way her mouth would taste, the way her tongue would feel touching mine. I imagined her leading me back to her dorm room, pushing me down on her bed, ripping each other’s clothes off and...

It was gone. Whatever it was had lost interest and moved on. I felt shaken.

I fared better in Brit Lit and Astronomy. I didn’t hear a word the instructor’s said, but fortunately I wasn’t called upon to interact with anyone. I also managed to stay awake. No more embarrassing nightmares. I’d gotten lucky before, but I doubted that anyone would conveniently show up to murder the Brit Lit or Astronomy teachers if I woke up screaming in class again.

Even though I called them nightmares, that didn’t really seem accurate. It just seemed like too much of a coincidence. Were they memories then? Something that happened to Sadie? A child shivering in the back seat of a car while their father drives and drives. Someone older, burning alive. Had Sadie seen these things? How were they important? I wanted to believe they were things that happened to Sadie, but that felt wrong. I got the distinct impression that these were things that had happened, or were going to happen, to me. Was it the future I was seeing? Was Grampa sending me some sort of warning?

I felt angry at being in class. Grampa had insisted on the importance of continuing with my usual routine as if nothing had happened, but I felt like I should be doing something to find Sadie’s killer.

I took the time to review the facts, frustrated at how little I actually knew. Sadie was murdered. Her murderer smoked cigarettes, or spent a lot of time around people who did. She’d left a sketchbook that for some reason was important enough to steal, although I hadn’t had the chance to look in it yet. Were there clues there, or just a goose chase? Sadie was planning on meeting her boyfriend Brandon. Was Brandon the killer then? Or did the killer know that she was supposed to meet Brandon at that particular place and time. Had the killer pretended to be Brandon to lure her out there? Or was it just a sudden act of violence, and she was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. If that were the case then wouldn’t Brandon have been out looking for her?

I needed to find Brandon, that much was certain.

Another thing that was certain was that Grampa knew a whole lot more than he was telling me. Sadie had been important somehow, but why? What wasn’t he telling me? Goddamn that old man! Why couldn’t he just give me answers? Why did he always just give me a little bit of the picture and make me figure out the rest on my own?

I should have gotten used to it. He'd been that way for years. Ever since...
Ever since he came back from the dead...

"GRAMPA! Is that really you?" I cried. The other patrons at the café looked up, unsure whether to be alarmed or amused.

"In the flesh! Or what is left of it anyway." He held his arms open and I came around the table and hugged him. If I had any doubts about who it was before, now they were gone. I could smell that same antique spicy Grampa scent that was his and his alone. He wasn't joking about having less flesh. He seemed to have lost about a third of his weight, and now he walked with a cane.

"But, but, but, how?" I sputtered.

"I think you better sit down before you fall down," Grampa said, lowering himself into a chair with difficulty. "The things you take for granted. You stand up, you sit down, for a century or so, and you never realize how much you use both legs to do it." He leaned his cane against the table, and rearranged his leg with his hands.

I picked up my chair and sat down. If I seemed calm at the time it was only because this had happened many times before. I'd be sitting somewhere, sometimes in this very same café, and Grampa would show up, and we'd talk and it would be like old times. Then I'd wake up and feel disappointed because the reality I woke up to was so inferior compared to the one I'd left.

This was all just a dream. I knew it, but as in a dream I had to play along. It was a nice dream and I didn't want it to end.

"We have so much to catch up on!" Grampa exclaimed. "Five years, such a long time. Is this the same Milo? It looks like there is twice as much of you as when I last saw you. And you've got glasses now."

"It is the same me, Grampa," I replied. It was as if he'd just gotten back from a long trip. It would have been easy just to let myself fall into that pleasant illusion. I had to shake myself away. If I asked the question, would I wake up? "Grampa, I went to your funeral. I threw the first shovel full of dirt into your grave."

"Well, I can't resist quoting Sam Clemens: reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated," Grampa laughed, but I couldn't laugh with him. Didn't he know how much his death hurt me?

"But you've been gone five years. Couldn't you have called or something?" Grampa's smile faded, and his face softened.

"You are right, Milo. I am sorry. It's been...a hard five years. You have no idea how much I wanted to send you some sign, some message telling you that I'd be back as soon as I could. But there were lives at stake, and more. I needed the world to believe I was dead. To my sorrow, that included you, too. I hope that you will give me the chance to make it up to you."

I didn't reply.

I'd read that in a dream, it was possible to recognize it was a dream. When you did, it was called "lucid dreaming" and you could make the dream go the way you wanted it to. The girl behind the counter was very cute and only a few years older than me. I willed her to come plant a big wet one on my lips. She left the counter and walked over to our table. She stopped and bent toward me, smiling.

"Here's your double cap grandé, sir," she said to my grandfather, placing a large mug of steaming coffee in front of him.

"Ah, lovely," he replied. "How very Georgia O'Keeffe!" he said to the girl, stroking the surface

of the cappuccino with his spoon. The frothed milk had been folded into the espresso to make an elegant flower-like pattern. "I am almost embarrassed to be drinking this in public." The girl giggled and walked back to the counter.

I scowled, annoyed, at their inside joke and at the fact Grampa had gotten a cappuccino instead of me getting kissed. Perhaps this was Grampa's dream, not mine.

"I owe you an explanation, at the very least," Grampa said, taking a sip of his drink. "I guess you've figured out I've been doing more than taking pictures, all these years."

"Yeah," I replied. "The Friedlanders told me some things about you. Things I didn't understand then, and still don't."

"You will understand it all, in time. If it is what you want. Do you remember the story of Sherlock Holmes at Reichenbach falls?"

"Of course. When Holmes killed Professor Moriarity, and he supposedly fell to his death. But he had really just faked his death so that he could go after Moriarity's henchmen without them realizing it. Do you mean you're Sherlock Holmes?"

"Well, I am an investigator, or a sort. The photojournalist bit was a good cover. It let me be in a lot of places asking questions without raising suspicions. And yes, I died fighting evil, and stayed dead to let the evil think I was no longer a threat."

"You know, Grampa? When Holmes came back, I didn't really buy it. I really wanted to, but I knew that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was tired of writing about him and tried to stop, but then he caved in to the demands of the fans. But the stories after he came back, they never felt real to me... and I just couldn't believe he wouldn't have let Watson in on the plan. I mean, he was his most trusted friend for years. I just couldn't believe that Holmes would do that to Watson."

"It was precisely because Watson was his friend that he couldn't let him know. Watson was willing to die for Holmes. If he'd thought for an instant that Holmes was still alive, he would have done everything in his power to help him. Then they both would have wound up dead for real. All Holmes' plans would have been undone, and evil would have triumphed."

"But I was in fourth grade! What could I have done?"

"You would have done all you could. Even back then."

We were both silent. My mind was reeling. The world felt slippery. I couldn't get a grasp on it.

"I'm sorry that my actions caused you pain. Please believe me when I tell you there was no other way. But now you are older, and it is time for you to learn the truth. You don't have to forgive me right now, but maybe once you've learned the facts you'll understand. But you have to promise me something. There is only one person in the world who knows I am alive besides you, and it must stay that way. You must promise me that you will keep it a secret that you've seen me. You must tell no one, not even the people you trust most. Do you promise?"

Since promises made in dreams only have to be kept in dreams, it was an easy one to make. If I'd known then what I know now, would things have been different?

"Finish up your coffee. It is time to go for a ride. Nobody has been listening to us, but we shouldn't take chances. Do you need to call your mother? Is she going to be worried that you are out late?"

I took a sip of coffee. It seemed cold and bitter to spite of all the sugar I put in it. "No, I doubt she even noticed I'm not there."

Grampa stood up, with effort. I put my book into my backpack, grabbed my jacket and followed him out the door. We walked out into the freezing rain. The moment he stepped to the curb, the largest car I'd ever seen pulled up. Under the streetlights it shimmered silver, its elegant curves

making it look like the God of All Cars, and all other vehicles were just imitations of its grandness. So *that is a '38 Mercedes Benz Grosser*, I thought.

Roy Friedlander stepped out of the car to open the door for us. He was dapperly dressed, like a chauffeur from an old movie. He smiled and nodded at me as I got in the car. I could imagine how the Friedlanders had felt all those years ago, getting into this same car. Inside it was warm and comfortable and felt very safe, like being inside a fortress. Well, a warm, leather upholstered, cushy fortress anyway. Outside the rain pounded the rooftop and the wind howled, but we might as well have been underground.

Roy drove us. I watched the lights of the city pass by. After a moment, Grampa started speaking. "What do you know about the history of the world?" He held up his hand when I started to answer. "That was a rhetorical question, Milo. You don't have to answer. I know the answer already. You know, well, I wouldn't say a whole bunch of lies, because that implies both inaccuracy and conspiracy when this isn't necessarily *always* the case. But the history you know is an abstraction. It takes the vast epic of humanity and condenses it down into big names and big numbers. It is as if all history was caused by a few hundred kings and generals and presidents, and the occasional scientist of two. They all conveniently happened to do whatever they did that was so important in places where there were people to photograph it or write about it. And everyone else in the world has just been along for the ride these "great men" take us on.

"There are other histories though. The one commonly taught just happens to be one of the most convenient. Little of importance has ever happened where everyone could see it. Even when it has, it has always been the result of other influences."

"You mean like the Freemasons?" I interrupted. "I know that the majority of presidents have been Freemasons."

"Ah yes, the Freemasons. And the Illuminati who control them, right? The poster children of conspiracy theorists! The majority of American presidents have also been Protestants, but how often do you hear about the Protestant conspiracy controlling the world? They've also been white males. But, is there a secret cadre of white males setting up fiendish plots to keep other white males in positions of power? Well, maybe that isn't a good example. My point is that most people believe in conspiracy theories because the alternatives are so much worse. They like to think that there is someone behind it all. That there is someone who is responsible for all the pain and suffering they see in the world, someone who is responsible for their own feelings of powerlessness. If their isn't, then they are left with two alternatives. That it is all meaningless, and there is no point to any of it. Or that God is a real Bastard who delights in tormenting His creation, or at best is an absentee Father who stopped caring about His children long ago. Or worse, that ultimately they are responsible for their own lives

"I am not saying that there aren't conspiracies, or that there is or isn't a God. What I am saying is that when people start questioning their beliefs, they usually replace those beliefs with things that are more comfortable for them, and things that absolve them of any personal responsibility. Very few people actually quest for the truth.

"In the end, people are coming up with elaborate answers to the same question: why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? This is the wrong question. The real question is, why isn't there more?"

"We live in a house of cards. A gust of wind is all it would take to bring it crashing down. A man walks into MacDonald's and starts gunning down customers, killing a dozen people before he turns the gun on himself. It is a terrible tragedy, certainly. But think about it. Just outside of the man's town the river is dammed. This has lowered the floodline, and thousands of people are now living in

places that used to be underwater. Explosives can be made easily, with off-the-shelf products that can be found at hardware and grocery stores. The man wants to die, and he wants to take as many people with him as he can. Why doesn't he fill his truck with explosives and take a trip to the dam? The dam is unguarded. Security amounts to a fence put there to keep kids from swimming and getting caught in the undertow. Or if he didn't feel like driving that far, he could drive his truck-bomb to a nearby office building and explode it at 10 am when it is the most crowded. That's just one example. This country's water supplies are all unprotected. In times past warring countries would toss the weighted bodies of plague victims into their enemy's water supply. Are you surprised that germ warfare is centuries old? We wouldn't need corpses today. How much death would there be if someone tossed a Petri dish of a deadly virus, or a few grains of plutonium, into the a city's water supply? Think about the laughable security measures at airports coupled with the fact that pilots are trained to follow demands of hijackers. So far this is the safest way to deal with a hijacker, because hijackings have always been politically motivated. Either people seeking exile in Cuba and other countries, or trying to get their comrades out of prison. If a man who is willing to kill a dozen people and himself in a MacDonalds, why doesn't he hijack a plane? It wouldn't be much more difficult than walking into a MacDonald's with a gun. He wouldn't be flying to Cuba, though. He'd be crashing the plane into a major metropolitan area.

"The biggest flaw I see with conspiracy theories is that the conspirators are always up to something really bad. You live in a country whose "founding fathers" wiped out 97 percent of the land's native inhabitants and owned slaves, and yet are held up as heroes to schoolchildren. There's just no need for evil to be hidden!"

I thought of Reagan, and Donald Trump and Jerry Falwell and the others. Horrible people who so many people thought of as heroes. I tried to think of a single person was hailed as a hero for doing something for the benefit of others in my lifetime, not just for playing sports, acting, or being rich. I couldn't.

"It isn't evil that needs to hide. But try to do something good, and you'll wind up crucified.

"There are conspiracies, just not the way most people think of them."

Grampa pulled something from his pocket and handed it to me. It was a ring. On it was an emblem I'd never seen before. It had a circle at the center, and from it radiated eight arrows, almost like a compass rose.

"This is our sigil. The sign of the 27th letter, and the invisible helping hand. We do what we can to keep this house of cards from falling. We keep the planes from crashing into buildings and the dams from blowing up. We seek out the secret histories. Sometimes, we get to make a difference.

"I asked you a question earlier. Do you want to do more than just read about the adventures and start living them? You are at a fork in the road. Hand back the ring and follow the path of safety, security and comfort. I've left you well provided for in your trust fund, which is yours no matter what you choose to do. You can go to college, have the career of your choice, get married, settle down, raise a family and live happily ever after, or do whatever else that makes you happy. Or you can put on the ring and join me. You will see wonders and mysteries that few people ever experience, but you will also find pain and loss and heartbreak down that path. And in the end, you just might get to make the world a better place."

"You knew what my answer would be, before you even started talking." I said, putting the ring on my finger.

"Excellent!" Grampa exclaimed, shaking my hand. "Welcome to the club. Tomorrow you'll begin training." He reached into his pocket again, this time to get me a business card. "After school go to this address and ask for Max Schroeder. He'll be expecting you. Dine with him, if invited. Max doesn't

get many visitors these days and he'll love the company. Meet me back at the café afterwards. I'm glad to have you with us."

The car pulled to a stop and Roy opened the door. "I hope you don't mind walking the rest of the way home. It wouldn't do to have your mom see you getting out of this car."

We got out of the car and I realized we were just a block away from my house. I turned and hugged my grandfather. "Thank you Grampa," I said. "I'm glad you came back. But promise me one thing. Promise me if you leave again, you'll say goodbye this time."

"Oh Milo, I promise," Grampa replied tenderly, and then pushed me away, very gently. "Now go. You don't want to be in any more hot water by being any later than you already are. I will see you tomorrow. Goodnight."

I ran all the way home, but even in that short distance my clothes had soaked through and I was freezing cold. Mother was passed out when I got home. Sprawled out on the couch, but whether it was from drugs or alcohol or both I didn't know. She didn't wake up as I pulled her into a more comfortable sleeping position, on her side so that she wouldn't drown in case she vomited in her sleep. I got the down comforter and tucked it around her before I went upstairs to my bedroom.

I was so disappointed when I woke up the next morning. I'd been having that wonderful dream again, the one where Grampa was still alive, his death just a made up story. He wants me to join his secret society to save the world. I hung on to sleep for as long as I could, but I had to get up and go to school.

As I struggled out of bed, I felt an unfamiliar pressure around my finger. I looked, and on my hand was a ring. A circle, with eight arrows radiating from it.

* * * * *

I closed the sketchbook wiped the tears from my face, and leaned back on my bed. I'd spent two hours reading through it and now my heart was breaking. I knew I had to find Brandon. I had to talk to Genni, and soon.

The day had passed pretty much like any other, with one exception. I listened to the rumor spread like a virus. That morning most of the campus had no idea that one of their fellow students was dead. By lunch time I started hearing hushed whispers that a body had been found. By afternoon, people were openly asking each other if they'd heard about the girl who'd committed suicide last night because of a fight she'd had with her boyfriend.

I wanted to shout at them. They had no idea. Why would they say those things? I wanted to go to the police and scream at them for being stupid, lazy assholes. They'd taken a look at the girl hanging there and immediately decided it was suicide and weren't going to look any further. Too busy eating their fucking donuts! Even though I had a guilty sense of relief that they weren't going to be looking for me, I still felt furious.

I was glad when I was finally able to make it back to my room, and shut them all out. I'd been hoping to find Grampa there, or at least a note. But there was nothing. Nothing save for Sadie's sketchbook, which I went through cover to cover.

A violent knock pounded on my door. My heart jumped. Maybe the police were just calling it a suicide as a cover story while they looked for the killer! "Just a minute!" I shouted, stuffing the journal under that mattress. I wiped my face and blew my nose, and opened the door.

"The assholes downstairs have politely asked me to invite you to their fucking lame-assed ice cream social tonight at seven. I guess they are too fucking cheap to hang up flyers," a very striking young man announced. He was, skinny as a scarecrow, and tall about a head taller than me. He was wearing black parachute pants, well polished combat boots, at least a dozen earrings in piercings that circled the edges of his ears, rings on most of his fingers, a black T-shirt with the white outline of a hand saying "I love you" in sign language. His head was completely shaved, except for a long lock of hair dangling from his forehead, hanging in the shape of a comma over his right eye. It was died fuchsia.

"Uh, are you sure they didn't ask you to *politely* invite me?"

"Oh, fucking fuck, whatever!" His eyes lit up as he noticed something in my room. He pushed past me. "Hey, *A Clockwork Orange!*" he exclaimed.

"What?" I had no idea what he was talking about. I was certain I didn't have any oranges in my room, clockwork or otherwise.

He walked over to my turntable, kneeling before it reverently. "It's a Transcriptors Hydraulic Reference, the same turntable Young Alex has in the movie *A Clockwork Orange*. Don't tell me you've never seen it?"

I shook my head.

"OH MY GOD!" he exclaimed. "It is one of the most important movies ever made! You HAVE to see it! A tube preamp...dual mono tube amp, and are these...holy fuck, yes! Martin Logan Quads!"

I was starting to worry that a madman had come into my room. I had no idea what he was babbling about. Then I realized he was talking about my stereo. "Yeah, it is kind of lame. All those pieces, and it doesn't even have a radio or tape deck built in. I was thinking about selling it and getting something all-in-one."

He looked at me as if I'd just announced that I was going to rape his mother. He stared at me, mouth gaping open. "You really have no idea what you've got here, do you? You've got some of the best stereo components ever made, and you think they are LAME?!?" He turned back to the stereo. "I have to hear it!" He turned and started rifling through my albums. "The Cure... Depeche Mode... Hüsker Dü... have you heard their latest album? It fucking rocks! I'll bring it over. At least you've got good taste in music! Alright, here we go." He pulled an album off the shelf. It wasn't one I'd expect. Judy Garland Live at Carnegie Hall.

He gently pulled the album from its sleeve, cleaned it, zapped it with the antistatic gun, and lowered it onto the turntable. He lowered the needle down into the track for *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

"This was my grandfather's album," I said apologetically. "I never really liked it much. It is just a little too..."

"Gay?" he asked, his raised eyebrow conspicuous on his bald head.

"No, I was going to say, too nice, too fluffy."

"Oh but it isn't though. Just listen." He closed his eyes and listened, a smile on his face. "Do you hear that? Judy was a child star, and as she got older, they tried to keep her that way. They bound her breasts so people wouldn't see that she was getting older. It broke down all the tissues in them, so when she got older, she just had these sacks. She hated her body and her life. And that was the least of her problems. So when she's singing this song, she's really singing it. She really wants to be somewhere over the rainbow, where she can be happy, but she knows she can never go there."

Then I heard it. That profound sadness underlying the melody, that pain and that longing. I sat

there with this stranger, eyes closed, hearing that song for the first time.

When the song ended, he pulled the needle from the record. He suddenly noticed the Go table. His eyes widened. "Is that...no it can't be... it is! Is it really?" He pulled the Plexiglas from it and stared in awe. He ran his fingers across the surface. He bent close and sniffed the wood. Then he rubbed his cheek against it. "Oh wow, oh wow," he said, over and over again. "You play go? We have to play sometime. I'll bring Zhang Yongwei over. He's been teaching me. He's like 2 dan which is really high for someone his age. Don't call it Go though. Call it Wei Qi. He's very touchy about the Japanese and says they stole everything good about their culture from the Chinese. Wow, I never thought I'd see one of these."

"A Go board?"

"A real kaya wood board! Do you know how rare these are? One like this would cost tens of thousands of dollars if you could find one. And one this old... you can tell it is really old because the wood is slightly indented from where the pieces have been slapped down on it for all those years. Are you totally clueless? How could you have all this stuff and not know anything about it?"

"I inherited it from my grandfather. Give me a break!"

"Oh, okay, so you're a druggie then."

"What?" I exclaimed, having no idea how he could have reached such a conclusion.

"Well, obviously. Look, you don't have to be ashamed of it. It's okay. There are two kinds of students who come to a school like this. Kids who can't afford to go anywhere else, and kids who get sent here by their parents because they think it will get them away from the drugs, or whatever else they think they need to get their kids away from. You obviously come from money, so you must be a druggie."

"No, it isn't like that," I pleaded, trying to think up a good cover story. "It is my grandfather's alma mater. He left me money to go to college, but it had to be this one."

"Oh man, that is LAME!" he exclaimed. "Stick to the drug story. It is *way* more respectable. You'd go here instead of going to a good school just because of money? What about paying your own way? I can see I've got a lot to teach you. Let's go."

"What? Go where?" I was completely bewildered, unsure whether to laugh or feel insulted.

"Ice cream social!"

"But you said it was 'fucking lameass.'"

He rolled his eyes, "Well, yeah! But FREE ICE CREAM!" He grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the door.

"Wait a minute! Just let me put some shoes on. Jeez. Who are you anyway?"

"Oh yeah, we haven't met yet, have we? I'm Sidney." He held out his hand. As I reached out to shake it I noticed something I hadn't seen before amongst all his other adornments. It was a ring, but not just any ring. It bore a circle with eight arrows radiating from it.

Be sure to be here for **Episode 5: The Lovers!** Ah, the sweet terror of romance! Milo, Golda and Sid eat ice cream. Milo plays chess and gets a history lesson. Meanwhile, has Milo unwittingly been a servant of Chaos? Don't miss it!