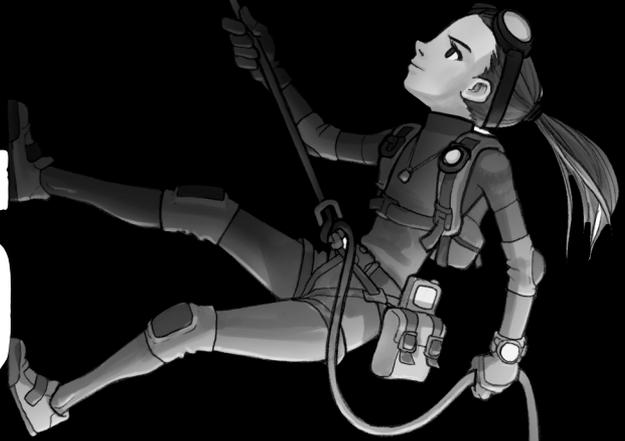


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**To my den of thieves — let's steal
more time together**

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CHAPTER 1

AN INTERESTING INTERVIEW



I always knew I had a purpose.

Seven simple words were written in straight, clean lines on the top of M's stack of note cards. They were her introduction, an introduction to a speech that M had slaved over because it needed to be perfect. One by one, she riffled through the cards in her deck, reading and whispering the speech aloud. This was going to be, perhaps, the most important hour of M Freeman's life.

She had agonized over her speech during the entire ride to New York City. It was rare for M to travel to the city, even though she lived only a few hours away. In truth, she never really traveled anywhere. So when the limo had arrived to pick her up, in order to not freak out, M had thrown herself into her preparations, as the empty countryside slowly grew into bridges, traffic, buildings, and crowded sidewalks.

And now, sitting in a waiting room, M repeated those seven simple words to herself and she knew that she was in full interview mode.

The room looked like a blank canvas. The waiting area was a long hallway with chairs lined against the wall, mostly empty.

But M wasn't completely alone. Sitting several chairs down from her was another girl, one who looked slightly older than M. A teenager. M had smiled and said hello when she'd come in, but this girl had her game face on. M didn't take it personally. This was a competition.

Across from M there was the door that led to the interview room. She glanced at her reflection in the door's glass window, a slight girl dressed in her brand-new black interview suit. Even though it was an expensive suit, M knew it didn't fit her as well as she wanted. With her brown hair worn up, her elfish nose looked even smaller and more compact than usual. M never trusted reflections, but seeing herself always got under her skin. Maybe she didn't belong here?

It's weird, she thought, how a door that, once you walk through it, could change your life looks just like any old door. Or maybe every door that you walk through carries the same potential to change your life? But still, she had hoped for something more special, more memorable. This was the Lawless School, after all.

When the door opened, though, M felt something otherworldly. It was as if a passageway to her future had opened and someone was inviting her in.

"Ms. Freeman?" a well-dressed woman called from the doorway. "Please come in."

As M stood, the other girl rose from her chair, too.

"Ah yes, Ms. Smith, I'm glad you could join us as well. Please, both of you, this way."

The interview room looked out over a park. M could see

trees, penned in by buildings on every side. The park was buzzing with activity, children and parents and pets all playing in the lush green fields. August had been so hot, but the first chill of September was finally drifting through the air and everyone was celebrating.

M sat down at a long table and the other girl, Ms. Smith, sat down two chairs away from her. She was wearing a white cardigan with a gray pencil skirt, which would make most people look like a librarian, but on Ms. Smith, it looked smarter, keener, sharper. M could imagine her cutting through a crowd like a hot knife through butter. She could also imagine Ms. Smith disappearing into the same crowd if she needed to, and no one would ever remember that she was there.

“Ms. Freeman, I am Ms. Watts,” the interviewer announced. “We will start your interview now, so please make yourself comfortable.”

Ms. Watts sat on the other side of the long table, directly across from M. M started to wish she had worn something other than a blazer. Next to Ms. Smith, she felt like a child in a school uniform.

Still, M composed herself and began her speech. “I always knew I had a purpose, Ms. Watts.”

“I’m sure you do, Ms. Freeman, but allow me to ask you a few questions first,” Ms. Watts interrupted. “Can you tell me which direction is southwest?”

This was weird, thought M, but of course she knew the answer. M pointed behind herself and to the left. “That way.”

“And how can you be certain?” asked Ms. Watts.

“The sun,” said M, motioning outside the window.

“And if there was no sun?” she asked.

“You mean, if it were nighttime?” asked M.

“If that’s what ‘no sun’ means to you, then yes,” said Ms. Watts.

“Then the stars.”

“And if there were no stars?”

“Like, if it were cloudy?” asked M.

Ms. Watts wrote something down quickly in her notebook then smiled. “Ms. Freeman, perhaps we are getting ahead of ourselves. Can you tell me how many stories are in this building?”

“Thirteen stories, but the elevator says fourteen because it’s supposed to be bad luck to have a thirteenth floor,” M answered.

“And the buildings around us, how many stories do they have?”

“The building to the left has seven stories. The building to the right looked to be fifteen stories. There is a parking lot behind us, which is probably four stories plus a roof deck. And there’s no building in front of us. Just a park.” M smiled.

“Do you always notice how many stories are in a building?” asked Ms. Watts.

“Yes, ma’am,” said M. “I’m afraid of heights. My mother always told me that whatever you are most afraid of, then that’s usually the first thing you notice wherever you go.”

“Your mother, how is your mother?” asked Ms. Watts.

“She’s well, thank you,” said M. “Do you know her?”

“No, I’m sorry, I meant, please tell me about your mother. What does she do?”

Ms. Watts leaned forward in her seat, scratching even more notes into her book. M took a minute to consider this last question. She looked over at the other girl. When was Ms. Smith going to get her interview? And would M have to sit through that?

M studied Ms. Watts’s face carefully. Why did the woman look so familiar to M one minute and like a total stranger the next? And the way she’d asked about M’s mother was so casual, not at all like an interviewer and certainly not like someone who had never met her mother before.

“My mother is an art historian,” M finally answered. “Excuse me, Ms. Watts, I’m sorry, but have we met before?”

“An art historian can be a demanding job,” interjected Ms. Smith, from her side of the room. “Is your mother around much?”

It was true — M’s mother was a total workaholic. She constantly flew from museum to college to private art collection all around the world. M wished she could tag along sometimes, but her mother was very strict about her sticking to her home-school studies.

“My mother is very good at her job and sometimes her job keeps her from the house, but that’s true of a lot of single parents,” M said, though instantly she wished she hadn’t.

“Oh yes, I should say that I am sorry to hear about your father. I see that he passed away,” said Ms. Watts. “Were you close?”

M had only a shadowy idea of who her father had been. She was not quite six years old when his plane crashed into a

remote mountaintop somewhere in the Andes. He was also an art historian and had been on his way home from a collector's house in South America. There was an ice storm in the jet stream that night, and the pilots didn't want to fly, but her father had insisted that he get home as soon as possible. It was M's birthday the next day, and he had wanted to be there to make her breakfast in bed.

After the accident, M's mother had taken over the family business, running whatever artistic empire it was that her mother ran and becoming an unstoppable workhorse in the process. "Business never mixes well with pleasure, dear" was her response whenever M asked her why she had to travel so constantly — and why M could never come along.

M knew only four things about her father for sure. He had been a good man. He was her namesake, M Freeman. He had loved her with all of his heart. And he had attended the Lawless School.

"Yes, we were very close," M spoke a little above a whisper. "I mean no disrespect, but is it important that you know about my family beyond what I've included in my application?"

"No, you are quite right, there's no need to live in the past," said Ms. Watts with a bright smile. "Shall we proceed, then?"

"Yes, ma'am," said M, happy to be away from the subject of her family.

"Wonderful. If you found a wallet on a street near your house, what would you do?"

"Is there anyone around the wallet when I find it?" asked M.

"No, the street is empty," said Ms. Watts.

“Is it a well-traveled street or a side street?” M followed up.

“A side street.” She smiled. “It’s not on your regular route, if that’s what you’re hinting at.”

“If it’s not on my regular route, then why am I there?” asked M.

“Good question,” said Ms. Watts. “Let’s assume that you are on that particular side street for a similar reason that you’re here today. Because it is a path less traveled, which leads to some place unlike anything you can imagine.”

M thought for a moment. “I would look to see what was in the wallet. To see if there was a driver’s license or a library card or any sort of note that the owner may have left to remind him or herself of anything, anything that may give me a hint as to who the owner may be. Once you have someone’s name, you can easily find them. Then I could return the wallet through the mail along with a kind letter that would let them know where I had found their wallet and that I would like to return it, no reward necessary. If I could avoid calling the police, that would be best. I like to handle these types of situations myself. Why spend taxpayers’ money on lost wallets?”

“Of course,” added M, “all this happens only after I rule out that the wallet isn’t a trap.”

Ms. Watts smiled at this answer. M could feel even the mysterious Ms. Smith lean in closer, too. This was certainly turning into an interesting interview.

“Can you tell me about a time that you have worked with a team to solve a problem?” asked Ms. Watts as she turned her attention back to her notepad.

The question caused M to pause. Instantly she recalled her surprise when her mother had first mentioned the Lawless School. Homeschool was fine. M was thriving in every subject — except for the subject of friends, of course. Her lessons were private and her days were filled from morning till night. On the occasions that she had contact with kids her age, they seemed a little, well, not all there in the social skills department. They were always yelling, being overdramatic, and talking about the most mundane things, like clothes, movies, their friends, or their friends' friends. And judging by the sometimes vicious way these kids talked about their friends, M wasn't sure if she ever wanted to be included in any clique.

“Well, I've been homeschooled up until now, Ms. Watts,” said M. “All by myself. My work generally begins and ends with me.”

“So you're a loner?” asked Ms. Smith.

“Not on purpose,” said M.

“Fascinating,” said Ms. Watts. “And thank you, M, for being honest. Now please look at this photograph.” She pointed toward Ms. Smith, who was holding up an eight-by-ten black-and-white photograph.

“What do you notice?” asked Ms. Watts.

For one thing, M had noticed that Ms. Watts left very little time between her questions.

“Well,” M started, “it's the inside of a restaurant. It looks busy. There are fourteen tables, eleven with patrons seated at them.”

“Hmmm. And is that all?” asked Ms. Watts.

“Well,” continued M, “the waiter on the left is struggling to hold up his coffeepot, but the waiter on the right isn’t, so he must be running low on coffee, but it’s likely that the first waiter is serving decaf, which no one wants. The waiter by the bar isn’t wearing his flower lapel pin like the others, so he probably just got off his shift. The people at the tables toward the front of the picture seem to be enjoying their food, but the people sitting by the windows and the front door have hardly touched their meals.”

When M turned from the picture, Ms. Watts simply looked down and ticked off a single mark in her notebook. Then she looked up and asked, “And if you were in this restaurant and you had to leave, how would you do so?”

M glanced at Ms. Smith, who sat calmly two seats away, holding the photograph. What was she in here for? M wondered.

“Well, I wouldn’t go through the front door. That’s for sure. The two women at one table by the door are eating their salads with dinner forks, and this is too fancy a place to get a window seat and not know to use your cutlery from the outside in. Then there’s the guy at the next table who isn’t wearing a tie. . . . Who’s he fooling? So that leaves the service entrance or the bathrooms. But the bathrooms are out, because the direction sign says that they’re downstairs. I might go talk to the waiter getting off work for a bit, pretend to be an aspiring chef, ask to see the kitchen, then leave through the back door. But then again, I have no idea who or what may be in the kitchen, so if I were forced to leave . . . I’d use the front door.”

Ms. Smith laughed out loud, but fell silent as soon as Ms. Watts gave her a glance. M couldn't help but grin. It felt good to have finally figured out the angle of the interview. It was a "shake-up, shakedown." A fairly simple power play, but only if you understand your role in it. Ms. Watts was the interrogator. Her job was the easiest: Ask the subject questions, shake the tree, and see what falls off the branches. Ms. Smith was the second fiddle. She played the harder role: Support the interrogator and keep the subject off balance. While that may seem like the easier part to play, it actually requires the ability to read two people at once . . . to know where the interrogator is leading the subject and to guess how far the subject is willing to be led.

Then there's the subject, who is part of the play, whether they realize it or not. M had picked up on it in time. Ms. Smith had balked with her laugh. Ms. Watts had balked with her reaction to it: a simple look, just a cut of her green eyes. And like that, the interview had taken on a completely different light.

"And if Ms. Smith would hand me the photo, I could tell you how many cooks were in the kitchen, the number of staff working that night, and maybe even what city the restaurant was in," M said with total confidence.

"I have no doubt that you could, Ms. Freeman," said Ms. Watts. "You *are* a delightful subject. Now be a doll, Ms. Smith, and leave the room for the remainder of the interview."

Ms. Smith stood up slowly, keeping her eyes on M as she walked out of the room. M tried to read the girl's look, but it was unlike anything she'd encountered before. There was a

sharpness to it, like she was staring daggers at M, but at the same time, there was a hint of satisfaction, and perhaps even respect.

After Ms. Smith had closed the door, Ms. Watts shut her notebook and pulled out an envelope.

“Ms. Freeman, in this envelope is the ticket to your future. Or maybe not. I don’t know; that is, I have not been informed as to your acceptance or rejection to the Lawless School. I am only a point person chosen to ask you several questions and hand this to you. I have my own thoughts on the matter of your future, but I have been instructed to keep my thoughts to myself.”

Then Ms. Watts clicked her ballpoint pen, and a slight humming sound whirred within the room. Ms. Watts’s expression did not change, but her shoulders tensed faintly.

“Ms. Freeman, I’m going to go off record for a moment, which is why I’ve excused Ms. Smith from this room. If you repeat anything I say from this moment on, I will deny everything. I knew your father. I knew him very well. You are your father’s daughter, and I hope you’ll understand in time why I’m telling you this. Forget the Lawless School. Forget everything that just happened. Walk out that door, do not talk to Ms. Smith, get in your car, and go home. Do not open that envelope I’ve handed you. Burn it and scatter the ashes.”

Click went the ballpoint pen again, and the humming was gone as quickly as it started.

Ms. Watts continued in her full interview voice, “That said, I’ll ask Ms. Smith to see you out. Thank you for coming in to

meet with us. I understand that you've traveled a long way, but unfortunately we are not set up to meet anywhere near your home upstate. I trust the limo we sent was a comfortable enough ride?"

"Yes, it was. Thank you," said M, who was confused and alarmed, but knew she should take Ms. Watts's lead.

Ms. Watts rose from her chair and Ms. Smith came back into the room as if the entire thing had been rehearsed a million times.

"Ms. Smith, please escort Ms. Freeman to her car," Ms. Watts said flatly. "Ms. Freeman, there is one more thing. I have to ask that you do not read what's inside the envelope until you get back home. I know it seems mysterious, but you must understand that the Lawless School is known for being just that. Best of luck to you."

With that, Ms. Watts stayed behind the table and gave M a knowing nod, as if the two of them had exchanged a grave secret . . . except that M had no idea what it was. She lifted the envelope from the table, smiled, and left the room, followed closely by Ms. Smith.

The elevator ride was completely silent except for the clicks between floors as they descended. Ms. Smith did not make eye contact with M, and M was busy trying to put the pieces of the interview together.

When the elevator door opened, the limo was already waiting for them. Ms. Smith walked over to the rear door and opened it for M. M slipped inside and turned back to Ms. Smith.

“Um, I’m . . . I’m not sure what exactly happened back there,” M said aloud, more to herself than to anyone else.

“Seriously?” Ms. Smith said. “Dear, you need to clear your head and get with the program. You just got into the Lawless School. Your life will never be the same.”

Then she slammed the door, and the limo took off into the darkening light of the late afternoon.