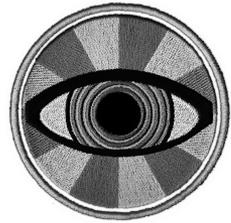


CHAPTER 1

THE WRONG QUESTIONS



“I always knew I had a purpose. . . .”

M Freeman stirred at the sound of her own voice. It was distant, grainy, airborne, and it wasn’t coming from her.

“I’m sure you do, Ms. Freeman, but allow me to ask you a few questions first.”

The second voice jolted her to the core. “Watts?” gasped M.

Her eyes flicked open and she whipped her head around, searching her new environment, but Lady Watts was not in the strange room. M was alone, but from the looks of the place, she wouldn’t be alone for long.

The room was unlike any space she had ever been in. It was entirely made of glass. Glass walls, glass ceiling, glass floor, glass furniture; it was all crystal clear and cold to the touch.

In fact M was sitting in a glass chair at a glass table. It was not a comfortable or cozy place. She tried to move her hands, but they wouldn’t listen. Instead they stayed firmly glued to the table in front of her.

M stared down at her unresponsive hands, then she looked past them, through the glass table and the glass floor into

the room beneath her. It was a control room of some sort, crammed with oversized servers and people focused intently on screens, typing and speaking into their headsets. But even with all of the activity below, the only sound in her room was the soundtrack playing over an intercom system. It was a recording of her Lawless School interview.

M wasn't sure if it was the lack of a horizon that made her stomach lurch and her head spin, or if it was hearing the sound of her own voice from several months ago. Several months ago when she was innocent, just a seminormal kid with a hardworking, single mother; a loving but deceased father; and a slightly wacky homeschool education.

But the Lawless School hadn't changed *everything*. She still had a hardworking mother — only now she knew that her mother's business was stealing works of art. And her father was still gone — but new and disturbing truths about his life and his death meant that he hadn't been the person she'd thought he was. The schooling had been the only change she had voluntarily signed up for, sort of. She'd been so excited to attend her father's alma mater. But she hadn't expected the criminal masterminds of Lawless to pull back the curtain on every other aspect of her life.

The Lawless School felt far away now, like a distant dream, but the audio confirmed that it wasn't. No, it hadn't been a dream. It had been a nightmare.

"An art historian can be a demanding job. Is your mother around much?"

That was Zara's voice slithering into the room. Zara, her roommate and guardian at Lawless. Zara, who she'd begun to think of as a friend. Zara, the girl who should not be trusted. Where was she now? She had been on the Lawless campus when disaster struck. When the Fulbright agents had unleashed a junior-sized black hole — with M's unwitting help.

All signs pointed to an air-sucking ending for Zara. But M supposed if anyone could survive such a gravitational grab, it was probably her.

The prerecorded interview kept on playing over the intercom, which M finally pinpointed directly above her, just a set of tiny holes in the glass ceiling, showering her with ghostly voices from her past. As she listened, she began to hear the true meaning behind the Lawlessly slanted questions from Ms. Watts.

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

"Can you tell me about a time that you have worked with a team to solve a problem?"

"And if you were in this restaurant and you had to leave, how would you do so?"

M had known the interview was a test, but hearing it a second time, she noticed there was clarity about what the Lawless School had expected from her. And, boy, from her answers, she had really lived up to the hype.

Outthink the world. Build a team. And always have an escape route.

Ms. Watts was definitely still alive. M didn't know how she knew, but she knew. It's next to impossible to get rid of vermin like that. Ms. Watts could probably survive a nuclear explosion and a zombie apocalypse . . . mostly because odds were that she would have been the one who sold the nuclear codes and unleashed the zombies. M had experienced Ms. Watts's diabolic sweet talk firsthand, and now she felt like a pawn that had been pushed to every corner of the chessboard — from South America to London to Germany and back, all in search of the *umbra mortis*, a doomsday weapon M never would have sought if she'd had all the facts. But finally M was free.

She tugged at her restraints. Well, free of Ms. Watts, anyway. She may have escaped the woman's velvet handcuffs, but these new handcuffs were made of glass.

M studied the room again. No doors. No visible ventilation or air ducts to crawl through. No obvious way out as far as she could tell. There looked to be an empty hallway that surrounded all four sides of the room, but beyond the hallway, everything was dark.

"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."

The intercom erupted into a scramble of deafening white noise that made M cringe in her glass seat. This was the point in the interview in which Ms. Watts had clicked her pen and

the buzzing in the room had started. The woman had known that their interview was being recorded and she didn't want what she said next to be heard.

Now over the mind-twisting hiss of static, a booming voice echoed through the small room. "M Freeman, what were you told here?"

"Not until you answer my questions first," M said calmly, though her heart was racing. "And show yourself, why don't you? Let's sit down and discuss this, Lawless to Fulbright."

The recording ended and the room fell deathly silent.

"What were you told?" the disembodied voice repeated.

"Where's my mother?" M asked. "And my friends Merlyn and Jules, what have you done with them? Answer me, and then maybe we'll talk."

"What were you told?"

"What's the matter," M said, smirking, "afraid of a little girl in handcuffs?" There was no doubt; she had learned a thing or two from Zara.

Suddenly bright white lights illuminated the hallway that wrapped around M's interrogation room. Now she knew how a shadow box felt. A line of masked Fulbright soldiers marched into the hallway and stood at attention. She counted forty Fulbrights, each standing over six feet tall and facing M, forming a blockade of black suits that were coiled with glowing wires and green ember eyes. Behind them, M could see movement. Someone was hidden, walking behind the goon squad.

A seamless door slid open in the far glass wall and the row of Fulbrights there stepped aside. Into the room walked a boy

with a military-grade haircut. He must have been close to M's age but was a good foot taller than her. He was a rope of muscles twisting under his black uniform and his clear blue eyes didn't betray any emotion that M could read as he purposefully slipped off his gloves and walked toward the empty seat across from her. The door behind him slid shut with a *shush* that made it feel as if the air itself had been stolen from the room.

The boy sat down, staring deep into M's eyes and waiting for her to say something. M's eyes, though, were flittering over every inch of her silent captor. His suit held no information about him. It looked like every other suit worn by every other Fulbright who had attacked her in the past. There was no name, no rank, no badge to declare what this secret society was or where this boy belonged in its structure. Leaning back in his seat, the Fulbright put his hands casually on the table between them. He was wearing a strange, thin ring on one hand. It fit around his middle two fingers, but the top of the ring stretched the length of his fist, like a delicate set of brass knuckles.

The stare-down didn't last much longer than a minute. Then the boy rapped his knuckles on the table. At the command, the entire mob of soldiers outside the room turned their backs on M.

"You're right," the boy said with a British accent. "We should do this a different way with you. You've earned that. My name's Ben Downing and I'll be your direct, assuming all goes well in this interview."

“Oh, that’s what you call this?” asked M. “Feels more like an interrogation.”

“You say tomato,” Ben answered with a slight smile. “Believe me, if we were interrogating you, we’d know what we wanted to know already. Now, you had questions. Fire away.”

“My mother,” M started.

“Alive and well,” finished Ben. “She’s in our protective custody.”

“That’s a nice way to say it,” said M, keeping eye contact with Ben. “Another person might call it holding her hostage.”

“Hostage?” Ben said with a small laugh. “I’m afraid you’ve got us pegged all wrong. *We* saved your mother’s life. Lady Watts had your place swept clean five minutes after you left for that school of hers. There was barely time to extract your mother before the Lawless losers made their house call.”

“Merlyn and Jules, where are they?” M asked.

Ben shrugged. “Eaves and Byrd are under surveillance in another Glass House.”

M looked around the room. “So that’s what you call this place. . . . Real original. Why are you holding my friends?”

“We’re not sure where their allegiances lie.”

“Oh, but you know mine, right?” snapped M.

“Maybe *you* don’t know whose side you’re on.” Ben smiled. “But we have it on good authority that you’re one of us.”

She recalled Devon Zoso’s comment back in the hangar at Lawless: *You’ve always been the weapon against the Lawless School!* But if M had been helping the Fulbrights against Lawless, it hadn’t been by choice. “How do you expect to get

away with creating a black hole on Earth? What kind of monsters are you, anyway?"

"Black hole? I'm not sure what you mean," said Ben. "You must be referring to the world's largest sinkhole, which has recently opened up in a remote forest in Peru. It's a media flash in the pan that filled a news feed between some actress's new haircut and what fashion trends to expect this spring."

"You killed people, you know."

"We made the world a safer place," Ben said without emotion. "With your help. And now we'd like to help you in return."

"Help me what?" asked M coldly. "Make the world a safer place with you?"

"In time, maybe," said Ben, "but today we would like to help you figure a few things out. You've got a lot of questions, but you're asking the *wrong* questions. Let's start with your so-called friends. Do you know anything about Merlyn Eaves's family?"

"I know Merlyn," said M pointedly. "And I know I can trust him."

"The Eaves family," Ben continued, "have been behind numerous cyberattacks across the globe. They have shut down entire law enforcement divisions, intercepted emergency services communications, incited riots, and in more than a few instances, laid the groundwork for uprisings and riots with higher casualties than what you witnessed at the Lawless School."

"It doesn't mean Merlyn wants the same thing," said M.

"Well, we don't know that, do we?" claimed Ben. "And the Byrd family is a breeding ground for grifters. Miss Juliandra

Byrd herself helped steal a set of rubies that were on loan to Sotheby's from the British royal family."

"That doesn't sound so bad." M shrugged. "A kid's got to eat. A thief's got to steal."

"Yes," agreed Ben, "except two guards and an innocent bystander went missing during the heist. The insurance covered the jewels, but the people were never found and were presumed dead."

"I . . ." started M, but she couldn't think of what to say.

"Lawless raises irredeemable thugs," Ben said. "But you're a special case, aren't you, Freeman? You didn't know what you were in for with that pitiful excuse for a miseducation. And we know you didn't mean to help Lady Watts track down her precious lethal weapon, either. You were just retracing your father's footsteps. So no harm, no foul. Jonathan Wild's fabled *umbra mortis* ended up in Fulbright hands at the end of the day. And we used it to wipe that school clean off the map."

Ben sat in his chair with perfect poise, oozing the smug, relaxed attitude of someone who thinks he has the upper hand in an argument. M realized something then. Unlike Ms. Watts, this kid didn't know there was another moon rock — one half of the *umbra mortis* — still out there. And if he didn't know, chances were the rest of his people didn't, either. Which meant M had a secret. It was a small secret, but it empowered her to be bolder with the Fulbright, even in this glass room surrounded by other Fulbrights, deep inside what was probably the Fulbright hive.

“How do you know what I did or didn’t mean to do?” she asked. “How do you know the first thing about me?”

“Simple,” said Ben. “Your father told us.”

A double agent. The phrase left a bad taste in her mouth. M’s father had attended Lawless, but, if recent sources were to be believed, he had ended up working for the other team. And while M wasn’t exactly on Lawless’s side anymore, to align herself with the Fulbrights felt . . . wrong.

“The destruction of the Lawless School was a happy but unexpected outcome of your involvement in our centuries-old crusade,” said Ben. “But the battle isn’t over. Fox Lawless, Lady Watts, Lendium Bandit, and dozens of other maniacs are still out there, preparing their next move. And we know that your involvement isn’t over, either, even if you haven’t figured that out yet.”

M fidgeted in her seat. The room was not getting colder or hotter. The air was not stale or moist. There was no obvious temperature tactic meant to make her uncomfortable, which made the fact that she felt so awkward, well, all the more awkward.

“Prove it,” she said through her clenched jaw. She felt like she was dismantling an explosive. “Prove to me why I’m involved and why I should care.”

“Oh,” said Ben with a smile. “I thought you’d never ask.”

He turned to face the glass wall to his left and M followed his gaze as the lights around the room dimmed. An oversized projection flashed to life upon the wall, showing a still-frame image of a photo booth. The empty black bench was worn

down from years of use and vandalism. Initials + initials were written onto and carved into the wood. The tattered red velvet curtain shrugged carelessly in the wind: The picture was moving. The picture was a movie. A movie whose star stepped into view then, his huge face lighting up the room with beaming brown eyes, a shock of brown hair, and the same tired smile M would never forget.

“M, if you’re watching this, congratulations on a job well done . . . and I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I can’t be there in person to have this talk with you. Because if you’re watching this, I’m most certainly dead.”

M’s father always knew how to make an entrance . . . even from the afterlife.

Seeing him again, six years after his death, touched M in unexpected ways. Her legs started bouncing like they had when she was a child. It was a nervous habit that she’d rid herself of years ago, but she couldn’t stop herself now. Seeing the younger photos of her father at Lawless had been one thing, but this was her real father, exactly as she remembered him — laugh lines, receding hairline, and all. This was the father she knew best.

“There’s so much,” her father said, “so much more to tell you, but you’ve probably figured out a lot on your own by now. You’re a smart girl. M, you’ve inherited a very heavy load. I’ll take the blame for that. But listen, my time is running out. You’ll be safe with the Fulbrights for now. Trust me. And if you get in trouble, I’ll come back for you.”

M could see from his sly smile that this was obviously a joke.

Just like her dad to send a sarcastic message from beyond the grave.

Then turning quietly serious, her father continued, "There's evil in the world, M. The Fulbrights are going to need your help to combat that evil because it's bigger than even they can imagine. Please, for me, help them before the evil consumes the world and burns it to the core."

An audible scuff of footsteps came from the video and M's father peeked through the red curtain before turning back to the camera. He was nervous about whatever was out there. Softly, someone whispered his name. There was someone else with him. Someone standing guard anxiously, pacing around, someone who also whispered, "Speed it up. They're getting closer."

"M, I'm proud of you," said her father, regaining his composure. "I love you. Always remember that you are greater than the sum of the parts your mother and I gave you. I'll be watching you from above, ever in awe of what you've done and of what you're going to do. Be the best, M. It's a tall order, but the world needs you."

Her father's face froze, eyes forward. She could see herself in him. Then as the lights around the Glass House came back on, her father faded until his picture disappeared completely.

What an unexpected gift that had been, to see her father, alive and well, talking to her just like old times. But these weren't old times. They were new times, strange times, times in which she was trapped in a glass room surrounded by guards.

"So?" asked Ben from across the table. "Proof enough?"

She held still and weighed her options. If what her father said was true, the Fulbrights needed M. “If I help you,” she said, “what’s in it for me?”

“The Fulbrights represent the greater good,” said Ben. “We don’t encourage personal interests.”

“Well, I’m not a Fulbright yet,” said M. “And I have a few demands. First, you let me out of this handcuff restraint. Second, you bring in my friends. If you want me to help you, they have to be part of the team. I need to be with people I can trust.”

Ben smiled. “I’ve never heard of Lawless slime sticking together.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not the standard Lawless slime,” said M. She didn’t show it, but she was a little taken aback at Ben’s coarse words. It was the first time he’d shown any ill will toward her. Well, besides the whole handcuffed-prisoner thing.

“Let’s hope we can say the same for those friends of yours,” he said. “So we have a deal, if you get out of the cuffs and we reunite the old crew?”

M nodded slowly, thinking that this arrangement was a little too easy.

“Great, then first things first,” said Ben as he stood up and pulled out a syringe. Uncapping it dramatically, he leaned over the table and showed it to M. “This is the first step toward becoming a Fulbright.”

The hypodermic needle’s gauge was very large, gaping, even, with a blade-sharp edge that gleamed in the light. The

syringe was filled with an amber fluid that roiled with a shimmering glow. Ben slid M's left sleeve up to reveal her soft white wrist. Her veins pulsed and jumped against her skin as she readied herself for what would surely happen next.

Slowly, almost as if with pleasure, Ben pushed the needle into M's forearm. The pain jolted her upright, but M held her eyes on Ben, determined not to show him any weakness. But she could feel the fluid pour into her. It ached like a sunburn, seething under her skin, and she could trace its path as the solution moved up her arm, past her collarbone to her chest, until the odd sensation blossomed through her entire system. She broke out into a heavy sweat, the temperature of the room going from perfect to infernal.

"What was that?" asked M woosily when Ben had removed the needle.

"A little magic potion that will tell us more about you," said Ben.

M studied him and noticed that he wasn't sweating. The heat was coming from inside her. She slumped over in her seat when her muscles went dead all at once. The only thing holding her upright was the glass handcuffs. As she struggled to regain control of her body, she whipped her limp neck around to see Ben walking through the open glass door.

"Oh yeah," said Ben, turning around absentmindedly. "You wanted those cuffs off." Then, with a press of a button, the cuffs clicked open and M fell to the hard glass ground with a resounding thump. She could see the people below her again,

sitting at their computers' flashing screens. No one looked up at the girl lying facedown on their ceiling.

M heard the door slide shut. She was alone again. As she lay there, a background buzz came back on over the speakers.

"Did she take the bait?"

It was Ms. Watts's voice again. The recording had restarted. There was something more that the Fulbrights wanted M to know, apparently.

Hook, line, and sinker, answered Zara. I'm on my way to collect her now.

Keep her alive, said Ms. Watts as offhandedly as if she were asking Zara to pick up milk from the grocery store on the way home. She might not look it, but she's very important to someone very important to me.

Affirmative, said Zara.

There was the sound of a door closing, the shuffling of papers, and the clicking of Ms. Watts's high heels. It was like Ms. Watts was a ghost in the Glass House with M. The sound bounced and resonated off the floor, ticking and ticking against M's immobile body.

M puzzled over Watts's last words as the thrumming pain inside her finally conquered her efforts to stay awake, and a heavy sleep smothered her like a thousand-pound blanket.