

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.