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An extract from

Lawless

Written by

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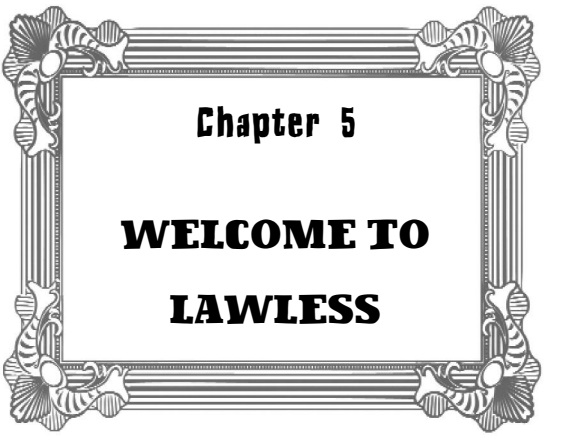
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M was shaking. Not too-cold shaking, not scared shaking, but shaking with an insistent turbulence that can only happen during air travel. The bumps bobbled her head forward, then backward. Her knees knocked against a hard table surface. M tried to open her eyes, but they were wired shut. She could not wake up.

Waves of hissing static reached out to her in her dreams. *Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh. Copy? Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh.* She heard a quiet voice, barely audible among the white noise around her. *Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh. Do you copy? Your nose is too low. Over. Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh.* Then she began to feel something other than turbulence, a buzzing in her hands. She tightened her knuckles and stinging fire shot up her arms. Her arms, they were sore, tired, and rubbery. She felt like she had been rock climbing all day. *Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh. Copy? Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh. Nose too low. Over. Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh. Do you copy? Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh.*

As if waking from a nightmare, M gasped and pulled her body back out of the deep sleep she had settled into. Before she could remember the last thing that had happened to her, she immediately wished she had never opened her eyes.

'I'M IN THE COCKPIT!' M screamed to herself. She looked around and was equally surprised to find that she was *alone* in the cockpit. 'I'M FLYING THE STUPID PLANE!'

'Copy! Do you copy?!' a voice called out through the static coming from a small headset that dangled in front of her. It was the voice from her dreams.

Quickly M put the headset on and called out, 'Mayday! Thursday! Whatever! Someone help!'

Out of the front window, M could see only clouds, but the whiteness was whipping by at an incredible speed. Directly in front of M was a panel full of flashing lights, dials, and signals that were swirling out of control. M's hands were clutching the steering wheel. It was like her entire body had betrayed her and walked her willfully into this death-defying situation.

'Do you copy? Please, do you copy?' The familiar voice came through the headset.

'Ms Watts?' asked M. 'Um, Ms Watts, it's M.' She glanced around the cockpit again. 'I'm . . . I'm in a plane and there's no pilot.'

'M, you're the pilot,' answered Ms Watts.

'No, no, you see, I'm in the cockpit, but I'm not the pilot,' said M. 'I can't be the pilot. I just woke up!'

'M, I need you to listen to me,' Ms Watts said calmly. 'You . . . are . . . the . . . pilot. And whatever happens, you need to land that plane.'

'What do you mean, "whatever happens"?' asked M just as the clouds rolled away. M finally saw something worse than herself alone in the cockpit. The ground.

It was not a welcome sight.



A lush mountainside, filled with thick green trees, was coming up to meet her. The cloud cover she had flown through must have been a descending morning fog. She could see the sun beginning to peek over the eastern range.

'M, can you see the sun?' asked Ms Watts.

'Yes, yes, I see it, on the right,' M shouted.

'Good. Now pull back on the wheel and feel the jet lift upward,' Ms Watts directed. 'Try to get the jet even with the horizon.'

'Not working,' grunted M. 'The wheel is pulling me down.'

'Then pull back as hard as you can,' said Ms Watts. 'Pull back or you're going to crash.'

Crash? The threat worked like a magic word, unlocking superstrength in M, the kind of superstrength that mothers with their children trapped under massive objects must feel. M clenched her jaw and pulled back with every last bit of energy she could muster. Her feet strained against the floor, lifting her slight body out of her seat. As her back started to burn, the wheel slowly rose closer and closer to M, inch by inch, until she had pulled the plane out of its nosedive. When the plane felt level and the control board's instruments seemed to quiet down, M turned her attention back to her headset.

'Level. I think — I think I'm level now,' she whispered.

'Good, M,' said Ms Watts. 'Now steer away from the sun until you find a river. Do you see it?'

'I see a dark line, but in the mountain's shadow, it's hard to make out,' said M, scanning over the forest, while still gripping the wheel.

'Yes, you'll follow that line until you see a waterfall,' Ms Watts said.

'And then?' asked M.

'Let's prepare for then now,' said Ms Watts. 'Do you see the throttles next to you on your right?'

She looked down quickly. There was a control of some sort next to her. 'Does it look like something you would find on a boat?'

'Yes, that's it,' answered Ms Watts. 'When the time is right, you will have to slowly pull that lever from front to back. But remember, the key word is *slowly*.'

M squinted. The sun was almost blinding as it rose over the mountaintops. 'What about the wheels? Like, the landing gear or whatever they're called. How do I get those down?'

'M, you've got a good head on your shoulders,' said Ms Watts. 'I knew that from one minute into the interview. The landing gear controls are located on your left. You can activate them now to make sure everything is still in working order.'

M set off the landing gear and felt a small bump from beneath her seat, followed by the slow mechanical exhale of the pumps lowering down the wheels.

'It worked,' said M. 'I almost for . . .' But before she could finish, her stomach lurched. She broke into a cold sweat and began to take quick, shallow breaths. 'I . . . forgot . . . my . . . fear . . . of . . . heights.'

'Stay with me. Don't lose focus just because you're up higher than you're used to,' coached Ms Watts. 'You are carrying precious cargo. Yourself included, you've got fourteen first years onboard. And I won't be able to face the next Lawless PTA meeting if you crash.'

'I . . .' M paused, as if she were still making up her mind as to whether she was scared or not. 'I see the waterfall. It's dead ahead.'

'Not the best choice of words, M, but that's good,' said Ms Watts. 'Try to find the ledge halfway down the waterfall.'

'Okay, got it,' said M. 'Now what?'

'Just fly directly into the waterfall, aligning so that you're even with that ledge,' said Ms Watts.



'Just fly directly into the waterfall. Check. That doesn't sound totally crazy or anything!' screamed M. 'Don't you people do anything the normal way?'

'This is the normal way,' said Ms Watts calmly. 'We've done it this way for a long time now, long enough that it's normal to everyone involved with the Lawless School.'

'Not normal enough for me, though. Remember, I'm only a first year!' yelled M. She was so frustrated! Waking up from a Fulbright attack to find herself at the helm of a jet plane in a nosedive and then being asked to fly straight into a waterfall!

'We have a visual and it looks like you are in range,' said Ms Watts, ignoring M's outburst. 'If you keep the plane level with the ledge, then we can guide you in remotely. We are taking over the plane now.'

M felt a shift in the plane as the controls stopped yelling at her and, for a moment, everything seemed okay. Her piloting days were over; Ms Watts was flying the plane from somewhere else. M loosened her grip on the wheel as the plane headed closer and closer to the ledge jutting out of the waterfall until —

CRASH! A thunderous jolt hammered the plane down hard against the ledge as the waterfall pounded against the roof. The broad and mountainous horizon was violently replaced with a long cave, dimly lit with lights striping the ground like a runway. The wheel began to fight against M again, pushing and pulling in every direction. That didn't seem right. M tried to hold the wheel in place, but the plane fishtailed, drifting left, then right. The wings smashed against the cave walls, heaving out the harsh sound of metal smashing in on itself. Then, up ahead, M saw the end of the runway — an open port where the air traffic control must be located. They were running out of runway, fast.

'M, we've lost control! You're coming in too hot,' said Ms Watts. 'Throw the throttle all the way back in reverse!'

M let go of the steering wheel and slammed down the

throttle. Instantly she was hurled forward against her seat belt as the engines shifted into reverse. Then, just as suddenly, the plane's power cut off and they drifted quietly and slowly to a stop against the wall of the cavernous terminal.

M's rib cage felt like it had been cracked open. Her arms were as heavy and damp as the ropes on a sailboat after a long voyage. But she was alive.

'Welcome to the Lawless School, Ms Freeman,' said Ms Watts, over the headset.

M sat back in her seat, but her hands stayed tightly wound around the throttle. Her heart pounded. She stared at her own shattered reflection in the windshield, with splintering that spread like a spiderweb of cracks from the crash. Her brown hair was tangled and loose all at once. This was not the glorious entrance into the chic, mysterious boarding school that she had expected.

Slowly M unlaced her pale white fingers from the controls. She stiffly unbuckled the seat belt and stumbled out of the captain's chair. From the cabin behind her, she could hear the plane's door unlock. The tap of footsteps climbing the stairs was followed by a knock on the cockpit door.

'I'd like to complain about the service!' Zara said.

M swung open the pilot's door and slumped in the doorway like a rag doll. 'This is your captain speaking. What seems to be the problem?'

'Yeah, um, the landing was a little bumpy, don't you think?' Zara said, with a smile that might have meant she was actually proud of M or may have just been mocking. M honestly couldn't tell the difference.

'You get what you pay for, roomie,' said M.

'Oh yeah, good reminder,' Zara chirped, and she handed M a lone silver key. 'I forgot to give this to you during all the preboarding ruckus. It's your room key. And in case you were

wondering, I call top bunk.' And with that she stepped back off the plane and down to the tarmac.

M moved forward into the cabin, which was a complete mess. Emergency masks hung from every overhead compartment, suitcases cluttered the aisles. There were fourteen seats on the plane, and thirteen of them were occupied by girls and boys with totally calm, relaxed looks on their faces. They'd slept through the entire ordeal. And they made no move to get up now.

'Um, hello, everybody. We're here,' said M, adding, 'wherever that is.'

She noticed Merlyn sitting in the second row, right behind the empty fourteenth seat. Her seat. Obviously the guardians had taken a different flight. Why was yet another question to add to her list.

Then M saw the discarded Fulbright mask in her seat and a shiver shot through her body.

'All right,' M said to herself, 'that mask is a creep factor nine.' She turned away from it, grabbing Merlyn by the shoulders and shaking him. 'Hey, hey, hey — Earth to Merlyn Eaves. Get up, Merlyn!'

'He can't hear you.' A voice surprised M. It was Foley, Merlyn's guardian. 'He's in a state, you know? They all are. Their guardians are on the way over to gather them and take them to their rooms.'

'My guardian seems to have left me behind,' said M.

'Zara's going to be the best guardian in our class,' said Foley. 'She's great because she knows exactly how much her cadet can handle.'

'Yeah, she seems totally sold on my abilities so far.' M laughed. 'Especially if she thinks I can find my own dorm room in this madness.'

'Well, you did survive a Fulbright attack, then fly a plane

without any prior training,' said Foley. 'I'd imagine that finding a room in a dorm shouldn't be too hard for someone like you.'

M watched as Foley guided Merlyn from his seat and off the plane. The Crimer was in some sort of trance. One by one, the other guardians boarded the plane and took their unresponsive first years away. Once the last of them had left, M sat back down in her original seat and studied the black mask.

'Most people would take that as a sign of victory.' It was Ms Watts. 'An empty black mask is something we don't often see. Usually it comes attached to a Fulbright, and that means trouble.

'At least you made it here safely,' Ms Watts continued. 'May I ask what happened once you were on board the plane?'

'Ms Watts, it's been a long . . .' M paused, 'night? I'm guessing because the sun was rising as I landed, but from all I can remember, we could have circumnavigated the entire globe before landing here.'

'We'll call it a long night,' said Ms Watts.

'Well, we got to the plane and were, I don't know,' M searched for the right word, 'ambushed? Basically a ton of creeps in masks tried to grab us before we got on the plane. Only the attack, I think it was a red herring. There was someone waiting for us on the plane. We were gassed — it came pouring out of the vents. Then I woke up in the pilot's seat.'

'It sounds like someone had a plan for you, doesn't it?' said Ms Watts. 'Allow me to tell you what I know on the walk to your room.'

M followed Ms Watts off the plane. The tarmac smelled of burning metal, gasoline, and damp cave. There were huge industrial lights along the tunnel. They walked toward the silver doors of an elevator that were built right into the wall of rock. A line of glass windows extended up from the doors — an elevator shaft. M lifted her head toward the carved roof of the cave.



'Going up?' said M. The doors opened, and she stepped into the elevator.

'Not really,' said Ms Watts. As soon as the doors closed, the elevator began to move — sideways. Another line of glass panels appeared and M could see the entire airport operation from the windows as they traveled around the exterior of the tarmac.

'The most we can tell, as you know,' started Ms Watts, 'is that your plane was boarded successfully. All the necessary precautions had been taken. The other first years were seated and their guardians had left the rendezvous.'

'Why wouldn't they fly with us?' asked M.

'To confuse anyone who might be following you,' said Ms Watts.

'Like the Fulbrights?' M asked.

'Ms Freeman, I know this will come as a shock to you, but not everyone thinks so highly of the Lawless School. Some people will stop at nothing to shut us down. We go to great lengths to protect this school, its students, and its traditions.'

'Who are they, anyway? At first I thought they were monsters, but when we were fighting them, I pulled that mask off one. She was just a girl, like my age,' said M.

'In a manner of speaking, they are students,' said Ms Watts. 'Students from a rival school, if you will. Now, Zara and Foley did report the ambush, but noted that the plane took off according to plan. But you claim that someone else was on board. This unknown assailant approached you. And from there, it gets fuzzy?'

'Afraid so,' said M. 'The next thing I know, I'm landing the plane.'

'Let's be clear, you didn't land the plane, we did,' said Ms Watts, in a matter-of-fact tone. '*You* weren't even flying the plane, not really. The gas that filled the cabin, it's a special

Lawless School sedative. We administer the gas to all incoming first years.'

'The gas was *you*?' asked M.

'It's better for first years not to know where they are being taken,' answered Ms Watts. 'Given the circumstances, you can understand why we take such precautions. What you will learn is that the gas has two separate effects, which make it very useful. The first is, as I said, a sedative. The second is a suggestive agent.'

'A suggestive what?' asked M as the moving room left the view of the tarmac and entered a tunnel.

'When the sedative takes over, the human mind is open to suggestion. It believes whatever it's told,' explained Ms Watts. 'So when I told you over the headset that you could fly a plane, then you could simply fly a plane.'

'I think, therefore I am,' said M to herself. It was one of her father's favorite sayings. 'Wait, you told me? Where was the pilot in all of this?'

'There never was a pilot, M,' Ms Watts said. 'Everything was handled by remote computers.'

'If there wasn't a pilot, then who came out of the cockpit?' asked M.

'The gas can have unpredictable effects on some people,' answered Ms Watts. 'My guess is that you imagined this mysterious man as a side effect.'

'I saw someone on that plane,' insisted M.

'Perhaps you did *see* something,' said Ms Watts, 'but there was no one else on that aircraft. I am sure of it.'

'So, if the plane was remote controlled, then why even put me in the driver's seat?' asked M.

'To help you conquer your fear of heights, of course.' She smiled. 'You'll find there's little room for weakness at this school, M, and this seemed the best way to help you overcome yours.



You shouldn't have woken up from the gas until after you had landed, though. Which is why we were very surprised to hear your voice over the radio.'

'My voice? But I was in dream land until I heard *your* voice on the radio,' said M. 'What was I saying?'

'Oh, it was a very clear message, though I'm not sure you would understand it now,' said Ms Watts.

'Try me,' she replied.

'Six, seven, nineteen, fourteen, thirteen, three, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, twenty-nine, twenty-eight, thirty-one, thirty-six,' Ms Watts said flatly.

'Hmm, you're right. That doesn't sound like the usual string of numbers I like to recite,' said M. 'What's it supposed to mean?'

'It simply means: Abort mission,' said Ms Watts. 'The numbers are a cipher. A very famous and precise code that is almost impossible to crack.'

'Can't be too tough,' said M. 'You said it was a very clear message.'

'That's the most interesting part, Ms Freeman,' said Ms Watts. 'The only reason we can read that cipher is because it was scripted at the Lawless School, by your father.'

Finally, the room eased to a stop and the doors behind M opened. The bright sunlight took her by surprise, almost as much as hearing Ms Watts talk about her father again.

'This way,' said Ms Watts, taking a step outside.

When M's eyes adjusted, she was still not sure what to make of her surroundings. The buildings, the campus, the library, everything looked so . . . normal. Just like an average boarding school campus. Except for the scene beyond the buildings: a dense thickness of pine trees that reached all the way up the steep mountains surrounding the school on all sides.

'Ms Watts,' said M, as she took everything in. 'Can you help me with one simple question?'

'I can try,' she answered.

'What is this place?' asked M.

'This is your future, M,' she answered. 'And you've shown a great willingness, above and beyond, to — how can I put this best — go with the flow, but your future can wait for you to get some real sleep first. Before you learn anything else about the Lawless School, I'd say you've earned yourself some rest.'

'After the night I've had, I don't think I can wait for my future to explain itself,' M said as she stopped by a bench in the courtyard.

'Very well. You've certainly earned the truth,' Ms Watts said. She took a deep breath before continuing. 'The Lawless School is a special school for the children of master criminals. Your father, M Freeman, was an accomplished art thief, famous in the underworld for many of the most successful and spectacular art heists of all time. You are here to train in his footsteps.'

M was stunned. Her father, a thief? 'And — and my mother?' she stammered.

'Only a low-level con artist, I'm afraid,' Ms Watts continued. There was something she clearly did not like about M's mom. 'But she won your father's heart. He introduced her to the Lawless world and, after he passed, she took over the family business.'

'Stealing art?' asked M.

Ms Watts nodded, looking into her eyes. 'M, this is a lot for one day. More than the average Lawless student has to deal with.'

'The other kids all know, don't they? They know who their parents are, what this school is,' said M. 'They know what they're meant to be.'

'Yes, most first years already know the history of the Lawless School. Most are excited and honored to attend this program,' said Ms Watts. 'You are a rare case. One of the rules of the



Lawless School is that only a graduate of the school can discuss the details. Your mother could never tell you any truth about the school other than that it exists and that your father was a graduate. I'm sure he himself would have told you in time.'

And with that, M followed Ms Watts into a dormitory without another word, as dazed as if she had been exposed to a sedative for a second time. At the end of a hallway they found room 103. And sure enough, Zara was there, sleeping soundly in the top bunk.