

"Andrew! Get the door!" There were potatoes in the microwave, fish sticks in the oven, and broccoli on the stove. The two-year-old was screaming. Andrew and his friends were playing Dr. Mario in the living room. Mrs. Brothers wondered how many of them were staying for dinner. "Andrew!" Lacy's mother heard the "dee-too-dee-too" sound the Nintendo made when you paused it. She heard the door opening. "Ask who it is first!" Several cats scrambled into the kitchen. Then Andrew was behind her, tugging on the back of her shirt. "Who is it?" She turned around.

Big blue eyes stared up at her. "The police."

She turned off the stove. "Go sit on the couch." Lacy's mother picked up the screaming two-year-old and left the kitchen, stepping over waist-high stacks of compact discs in the dining room. Three boys sat motionless on the couch, staring at the TV screen.

Two uniformed officers stood outside the open door. "Mrs. Brothers?"

She nodded.

"Is Lacy here?"

"No. Is she okay?"

"We just need to take her in to answer a few questions when she gets here. When do you expect her?"

"I expected her an hour ago. I couldn't pick her up from school today, I had this little one," she explained, switching the two-year-old to her other arm. "Is she okay?"

"We don't have any information to the contrary, Mrs. Brothers. We just need to take her in to talk with Detective Wasserman as soon as she gets here."

"I haven't heard from her today. What does he want to talk to her about?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Have they found Merlin?"

The officer shook his head. "We'll be in the car."

Mrs. Brothers closed the door and went to the kitchen. She set down the two-year-old and turned on the stove. The two year old sucked on the middle fingers of her own hand. The Dr. Mario music started from the other room.

"Turn it off!" the mother screamed. She was answered by the Nintendo's "dee-too-dee-too" and then the only sound was the hum and rattle of the microwave. Mrs. Brothers stood staring at the hands of the stove's analog clock. Andrew put his hand under the afghan and made shapes with his fingers. He moved his hand back and forth. One of the cats saw the surface of the cloth moving. He crouched, then pounced on the mystery animal. Andrew's friends looked toward the windows at the front of the house. Red and blue strobed into the room and flickered on their faces.

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When Lacy got home, she ignored the patrol car and went in the front door. The boys on the couch looked up from their game without pausing it. Andrew pointed toward the kitchen. Lacy went upstairs to her room. Before she had taken off her bag someone was banging on the door. The girl threw her trench coat on the bed. She looked at herself in the mirror on her dresser. She took off her sweatshirt. Underneath, she was wearing a sleeveless shirt decorated with a faint pattern of winged piglets. She gently combed her earlocks and was applying red lipstick when she heard the front door open.

Her mother's voice. "Lace!"

"Just a minute!"

"The police would like to talk with you!"

"Hold on!"

Lacy put on the black trench coat and went downstairs. She walked past the cops without looking at her mother.

Her mother shouted, "Lacy Brothers!"

One of the cops grabbed Lacy's arm.

"How long have you been here?"

"Forty seconds," Lacy said, without turning toward the house.

"Detective Wasserman wants to ask you some questions."

"I know. They're arresting me."

"You're arresting her?" Mrs. Brothers gasped.

"We're not arresting her." The cops eyed the girl. "Unless she gives us any trouble. Wasserman wants to talk to you, is all."

"Lacy, answer their questions. Where exactly are you taking her?"

"Downtown."

"Bring her back as soon as you're through." The officers started to leave. "Call me if you need to. Take care of her." Mrs. Brothers stepped onto the porch as the threesome went down the stairs toward the patrol car. The two-year-old followed Mrs. Brothers, hiding behind her on the porch. "Lacy!" her mother yelled, "Be nice!"

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A pair of officers also knocked on the door of Benjamin's parents' house, but no one answered. The house was dark. Wasserman called the house phone from downtown and left a message. He had showered and changed into clothes from his locker, faded jeans and a white T-shirt. The detective sat at his desk, waiting for the phone to ring. He paged the Chief, but the Chief was gone for the day. At six-thirty-eight, officers Brown and Spence arrived with Lacy in their custody. They took her to Chamber C while Wasserman called Ben's house again. He checked with the officers in the car. "Hang out until he gets there, okay?"

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Lacy looked the detective up and down. She chuckled. "What happened to you?"

"I took a dip at your favorite hangout. What's this?" He was holding a thirty-five millimeter negative between his thumb and middle finger. Lacy folded her hands on her lap and puckered her lips. "While you're at it," Wasserman said, "what's this?" He held a transparent bag next to his face. "And before you answer, remember that you may be testifying in a murder trial someday. Obviously I haven't had time to verify that this braid belonged to your pal Merlin, but, clearly, that's my running theory. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"Has Benjamin arrived yet?"

"Tell me Merlin is hiding somewhere and this," he lifted the bag, "is just you kids fucking with me. Which is serious business, Lacy. But I could learn to forgive that if you can help us both

out of this mess by magically producing six of your former classmates. Alive would be preferable."

"Did you like my drawing?"

"The pigs? Very nice."

"Piglets," she said, pursing her lips. Her eyes and forehead frowned.

"Eventually we're going to figure this thing out, Lacy. You know that, right? You know that people eventually find bodies that other people hide?" Wasserman lifted the complete negative.

"Tell me this is a frame from a movie I never saw. Please."

"It is," Lacy said saucily. "You must not watch many movies."

"What movie is it from?"

"That? Let me see it again." Wasserman held the frame up, careful not to let her get too close.

Lacy leaned forward. She squinted. "Asylum of Satan."

"And now I'll be forced to spend some evening tracking down Asylum of Satan, if there's even a movie called that, and I'll be forced to spend ninety minutes of my life watching Asylum of Satan, hoping to God that this," he indicated the negative, "is in there and that somehow you got ahold of a still from that movie and manufactured negatives in the lab at your school, and you're just planting copies of it around the city for me to find because you think...in light of recent disappearances of six of your classmates...you think for some reason that this is funny. Did you take this picture, Lacy?"

"No, that is from the movie." Lacy's eyes and forehead claimed she was intensely distraught, but Wasserman filed that under "Part of Her Act."

"I thought Sherman Brocius gave it to you and told you to destroy it or else he was going to kill you."

Lacy bowed and shook her head.

"If someone is threatening you," Wasserman said, "it would be in your best interest to tell me about it now. I'm sure you haven't forgotten, as I certainly haven't, that your friend Merlin has been missing for...twenty-seven days now."

Lacy said, "Is Benjamin here yet?"

"Not last I checked," Wasserman said, "Do you have any thoughts on why that is?"

Lacy's eyes were fixed on the detective's. Her hands gripped the front edge of the molded plastic chair. Lacy made no sound, but, as Detective Wasserman watched, tears welled in her eyes, and she started to cry.

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Officer Davies knocked on the door of the Harrison house after inside lights went on around eleven p.m.

"We need to speak with your son, Mrs. Harrison."

"Well, there's just one small problem with that, unless you happen to know where my son is."

The officer shook his head.

"Would you like to come in?"

"No. Just let us know if he gets here, will you?"

"He was here this morning. After that..." she threw up her hands, "who knows? Is he in trouble?" The way she asked the question indicated to the officer that she would have been surprised had the answer been no.

"The detective wants to ask your son some questions."

"About...those missing boys? Do they know anything about Merlin?"

"No that I've heard."

"Well," she sighed.

"I'll be waiting in the car," the officer said, and Mrs. Harrison closed the door forcefully behind him. Her head fell against it, and she pounded her clenched fists against the door. Davies and Crabtree waited in the car until three a.m., when Wasserman relieved them with another team. Over the next few days, Reuben Wasserman cumulatively spent four hours on the phone with Mrs. Harrison. Against both of their most desperate prayers, Mrs. Harrison's first and only son, Benjamin, never came home.

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Detective Wasserman put Lacy in a safehouse that night. The next day her parents were on the phone with the Department. Then the Chief and two other men were standing beside Reuben Wasserman's desk.

"What about school?"

"The tradeoff is worth it."

"Surveillance won't cut it?"

"If someone wants to kill her?"

"That Sherman Brocious story? Please."

"Maybe someone else."

"If it's someone else, then surveillance is enough. We're not talking about drive-by shootings here. Her parents are committed to stinking this thing up. There's not even a credible threat here. I understand if you want to put people on her for a while, but--"

"I want people on her all day and all night, okay? I want my phone number tattooed to these people's foreheads, okay? I want someone sitting in class with her at school, not outside the door, not on the street, inside the goddamn classroom, okay? In front and back of her house at night when she's sleeping, okay?"

"We'll make that happen for you, don't worry." The Chief gripped Wasserman's shoulder.

"Sorry about this one."

While they were still in earshot, Reuben held up his cellphone and said, "Tattooed to their fucking heads." Everyone paused at this, but the Chief shepherded them out. Wasserman slammed the front of his desk with the bottom of one shoe. Folders and paper fell off the edges onto the floor. He just left them there.

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That Friday the Dayton Daily News ran another article about the disappearances, with special emphasis on Merlin and Ben. The article didn't explicitly say the Department had dropped the ball, but Wasserman felt a hint of that when he read it. He slammed the newspaper down on the pile on his desk and grabbed his coat. While he was in the drive-through line of the Taco Bell at Brown and Wyoming, he checked with the team watching Lacy inside the school. They verified she was in class. Instead of going back to the office, Wasserman turned right on Wyoming and went to the cemetery. Parked on Waldo, he ate four soft tacos, then locked the car and followed

what he had come to know as Lacy's usual path through the cemetery. When Wasserman got to the pool, he walked all the way around three times. The surface was frozen. Snow drifts caked the corners. White hills blackmarked with the trunks of trees and thousands of stone monuments stared at him from all sides. KLINE. SCHAEFFER. GENGNAGEL. W.A. CHRYST. McCANN. Wasserman's mother was buried in that cemetery, on the other side of Stewart Street, past a sign that said, "Sections 300-310. LAWN CRYPTS." He remembered attending the funeral when he was twenty-seven. Patricia had been there. His brothers had been there. Reuben swiveled slowly, scanning the hills. He saw a large portion of the cemetery from there. Due to the hills, most of the land was always hidden from anywhere you stood. He looked to the top of an obelisk that stood at the other end of the pool. From where he stood, he couldn't see its dedication. Lacy had memorized it: CHARLES ROESCH, BORN IN OBERDINGEN, OBT MAULBRUNN WURTTENBERG, DEC. 16, 1844; DIED IN DAYTON OHIO, MAY 4, 1895. Wasserman left the pool and walked to the highest part of the cemetery. He remembered going there when he was younger, looking out over the buildings and the church steeples that rose from among the trees of the Miami Valley. He went to the top and stared out over the landscape. The valley was blanketed in white. Highway 35 cut across the south side of Dayton in a long, gray stripe. He saw the blue and green emblem on the side of Chaminade-Julienne High School (A National School of Excellence). They had decided Lee would be going there in three years. He had no way of knowing that, on Lee's first day, she would lose one of her top front teeth when three students tripped her in the hallway. He had no way of knowing that they would call his daughter "skippy doodles" while she lay bleeding, face down, on the stone floor. Wasserman turned away from the city and faced the cemetery. He saw PRICE, MAYNE, LOCKE, SHAW. He hiked diagonally down the steep side of the hill. He crossed a narrow, winding road and continued around the back side of the hill. CRAIGHEAD. SCHMIDT. INGLESFINGER. POOCK. Towering obelisks for STODDARD, ANDERSON. Flowers had recently been placed in front two tiny square stones. Reuben went closer. The flowers were real. A small envelope had been worked into each arrangement. First names corresponding to the initials on the squares had been written on each envelope. Reuben checked with Spence. "She's in the hallway."

"What's she doing?"

"She just got out of lunch."

"Is she...with anybody? Who'd she eat with?"

"Some girl. They're still together."

"Are they talking? What's going on?"

"They're kissing."

"In the hallway?"

"Right in front of everybody."

"Does she know you're there?"

"She's been taking pictures of me all day."

"Get her friend's name."

Reuben continued down the hill. FENTON (AT REST). GREER. KNOUSE. Lacy is kissing another girl in the hallway at school, probably just to entertain the officer, Wasserman thought, and we're paying him for this. As the detective continued to walk, he came to a place that was too steep for graves. He saw a mausoleum set completely into the hillside. It was three times wider than any mausoleum he had ever seen. Earth and grass shrouded all but the front wall of

the structure. It was overgrown with black, leafless vines. The entrance was flanked by identical copper engravings of a fish with an elephant's trunk. It was jumping from the sea. Strands of vine had been ripped from the doorway and thrown aside. For a second, Wasserman wondered if they had been cleared by mourners. Then he noticed a chain lying at the foot of the iron gates of the entrance. Kneeling at the gates, Wasserman saw that the padlock that secured the chain had been cut. An identical lock lay nearby. The steel doors behind the gates were open a crack. Wasserman stood up. He reached for his gun. He stepped back and looked at the earth covering the mausoleum. He moved closer, throwing aside vines. He pulled at the iron gates, opening them wide. He pushed each of the steel doors open. Through the opening, Wasserman saw a granite structure housing a set of crypts. He stepped into the tomb. The crypts had iron pulls the size of his hand. The stack went all the way to the top of the room. Wasserman looked behind him. Nothing. He holstered the weapon. His heart relaxed. The air was so cold the place didn't even smell musty. The detective turned his back to the crypts.

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When he saw it, his hand instinctively covered his mouth. A kaleidoscope of prints. He looked left. Brown markings on the wall. Same thing on the right side. Handprints, stamped at every angle. From the base of the granite floor to the height of his shoulders. Adult hands. Maybe smaller. Delicate fingers. The pattern made him dizzy. He moved closer. He grabbed the Maglite from the side pocket of his coat and aimed it at one of the prints. It was blood.