



Overkill

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winner of the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Award

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Overkill

*To my father, Edward Joseph Skurzynski,
for his wisdom and love*

1

THE MAN TUGGED at his stocking mask and crouched lower in her closet. A piece of wire hung coiled in his hand; his breath came shallow, ragged.

Lace from a nightgown ruffled in a summer breeze, wrapping around the girl's legs as she danced to notes from a silver music box. Her hair was long and smooth, gilded by some distant light, and she twirled, spun, then floated until the music left and she heard the harsh breathing of the man. Puzzled, the girl watched the closet door open, so slowly. She tried to scream, tried to run, but stood frozen. The man snapped the wire taut; as he raised his hand to strike she saw the flash of an ax blade . . .

Lacey Brighton jerked awake. Moonlight illuminated her room, bathing its edges in soft light and shadow. The doors of her closet were shut tight, like the lid of a box. Nothing was there. No one was there.

Another nightmare.

Trembling, she pulled a knot of covers under her chin. Her skin felt cold, clammy. Take a deep breath, she told herself, just like her therapist had instructed. Let it out slowly. Anxiety. That's what Mr. Otkin said she had. Inhale, pause, exhale. Relax your hands; let the tension flow out of each fingertip; out of your feet, out of your calves and thighs.

Remember, dreams are the way your subconscious mind lets go of fear. Inhale, hold, now exhale as though you're blowing steam from a bowl of hot soup. Clear your thoughts. Don't think about the dance recital. Don't think about Celeste. Don't think about anything—just relax. As her heart began to slow, Lacey felt the coil of emotion gradually unwind. These dreams that haunted her night after night seemed so real, but she'd been told they were nothing more than poor test grades and family worries. With one more glance at her closet, she rolled onto her stomach, closed her eyes, and sighed deeply. Moments later, Lacey Brighton was asleep.

School began as usual. She was late.

"Where have you been?" Sean Nolan asked as Lacey hurriedly pulled folders from her locker. "We were supposed to study before class, which is now going to start in . . ." He glanced at his watch. "Exactly five minutes."

"I'm sorry, okay? I overslept. Are you ready for the test? Never mind—what was I thinking!" She smacked her palm to her forehead. "Of course you are! Let me just grab my book . . ."

Placing his hands on her shoulders, Sean turned Lacey until she faced him squarely. His eyes, deep set and coffee brown, squinted slightly as he looked down on her five-foot-two-inch height. "Lacey, right now you've got a D in Social Science. A *D*! You have got to bring it up or . . ."

Jerking away, Lacey kicked her locker shut. "Knock it off, Sean."

"We're seniors, Lacey. Our grades count. You've *got* to quit screwing around!"

"Let me remind you that you're my *boyfriend*, not my warden and *not* my mother. Besides," she said, softening her tone when she saw his eyes flash, "I've been busy working on my dance performance, which is giving me nightmares. I've never had the lead before and—rats, there's the bell."

At the sound of the first bell, students scurried like roaches caught in sudden light. Sean stood, unmov-

ing, his eyes locked on hers. Finally he said, “You can’t talk your way out of a test, Lacey. That’s all I’m saying. But you do whatever you want.”

“I’ll be fine. Really! Don’t worry so much. Life’s short.”

She felt a pang of guilt as she hurried beside Sean down the hall. It was just like him to ride her about her grades. A straight-A student, Sean never could understand the way Lacey ran her life. In some strange way her life was like a gamble: gamble that there’d be no quiz that day, gamble that she’d find a last-minute parking spot, gamble she could pull it off.

Sometimes she’d win, sometimes she’d lose, but at least she didn’t march in formation like the rest of them. Like Sean.

“Lacey Brighton, I’d like to see you today after class,” Mrs. Hernandez said, her voice crisp. She slipped a test, ink side down, onto Lacey’s desk top. Pulling back a corner, Lacey sneaked a peek at last week’s quiz. “D—” was scrawled across the top in angry red ink.

“What’d you get?” Sean asked in a loud whisper.

“A grade.”

“Pretty bad, huh?”

“Yeah—happy?”

“No talking!” Mrs. Hernandez warned. During the rest of class, while she racked her brain for answers

on the test she hadn't studied for, Lacey formed the excuses she'd give Mrs. Hernandez. Her teacher would have to understand the dance rehearsals Lacey was involved in, which of course took extra time and concentration. It was perfectly natural that some of her study time would slip. She could always throw in the fact that her mother was going away on yet another business trip; the emotional strain of being left alone took its toll. She'd stress the personal problems, she decided. Go for the sympathy.

But one look at Mrs. Hernandez's face told her that excuses would get her nowhere. Shuffling through a stack of papers, Mrs. Hernandez gave them a nasty snap and then began to speak before Lacey could say a word.

"Lacey, perhaps you aren't aware of this, but I taught your sister, Sara, in this very classroom eight years ago. You Brighton girls are smart, but for a reason I can't fathom, you, Lacey, think you can bull your way through my class."

Cheeks flaming with humiliation, Lacey looked at the ground. Dirt from one of Mrs. Hernandez's plants had spilled from her desk top to the floor, and it made an interesting pattern against the beige tile.

"I'm aware you have only a short time between classes, so I'll make this brief. As of right now you're within a hair's breadth of flunking Social Science. I

like you, Lacey. I really do. You're bubbly, you're fun. You're a very nice person. For that reason and because I admire your sister so much, I'd like to give you a chance to improve your grade. As you know we're about to tackle a unit on our American legal system, and since Sara is a lawyer, practicing right downtown . . ."

"No!" Lacey cried, her head shooting up. "We, Sara and I, don't get along much and . . ."

Folding her arms across her chest, Mrs. Hernandez interrupted, "Whatever your problems, I hope for the sake of your grade that you'll be able to iron them out. It would be an enriching experience for our class, and I'm sure Sara would love helping you with a report. I could arrange for a pass so that you'd sit in on an actual trial." Her teacher's hair, dark and streaked with gray, hung over her shoulders. She flipped it onto her back and added, "Extra credit like this would increase your overall grade to at least a C, maybe even a B. Think about it, Lacey. Come in after school if you're interested. That's all."

"Are you going to eat that orange?" Tamera asked.

"Take it." Lacey tossed the orange into her friend's outstretched hands. "I shouldn't eat anything anyway 'cause I'm being measured for my costumes today."

"So? What you need is more, Lace, not less."

Lacey looked down at her chest. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

"Stop it! That's not what I meant!" Tamera flung a crumpled napkin in Lacey's direction. "You look great and you know it!"

"I've worn a training bra for so long, my chest should be able to do tricks."

"*Lacey!*" Even though Tamera tried to look horrified, laughter exploded from behind her hands. Lacey knew she had her. Tamera always cracked up at Lacey's jokes, which was why she was so much fun to have around. She was an easy mark.)

"What's so funny?" Sean asked, dropping beside Lacey on the cafeteria bench. He pulled the flip top from his Coke. "What'd I miss?"

"Never mind, Sean," Tamera told him, "it's a girl joke. I swear I never know what will come out of her mouth."

Lacey shook an auburn curl off her face. Small and thin-boned, she had what Tamera called a "dancer's body," which Lacey translated to mean flat-chested. Her large eyes were more brown than hazel; her mouth was full-lipped and her smile off-center.

Sean, Tamera, and Lacey had been eating lunch at the same table since the school year started. That's really the way they'd hooked up, Lacey thought. True love had sprung from a mound of runny mashed

potatoes. Sean had taken his lunch tray, slid it right next to hers and asked, "Is this spot taken?" in such a nice way that she'd scooted across the bench to make room. His smile had been wonderful—so deep that commas formed at the sides of his mouth, and he dressed in casual but expensive clothing, straight out of an L.L. Bean catalogue. He'd never been heart-thumping handsome, just nice-looking. Black hair, clipped neatly at the sides, curled like wire on the top of his head. His nose was a shade long; his ears cupped forward ever so slightly.

"Hey, Lace, what did Hernandez say to you after class?" Sean wanted to know.

"Oh, that," Lacey moaned, munching a fistful of chips in the hubbub of the cafeteria. "She wants me to do a report on my beloved sister, Sara, patron saint of legal sleaze. Yuck!"

"Remember, Sara is different than you are, not better," Tamera offered.

"You sound just like Mr. Otkin. 'Do not compare yourself with your sister, Lacey. Take a deep breath, now exhale! Relax and think: You are your own person!' I bet Otkin never had an overachiever for a sibling. It sure ruins the familial curve."

"I think doing this report is a great idea," Sean broke in. "You can make up for a whole quarter with just one project."

"Please do not get on my case about this, Sean. I don't want to have to listen to a lecture from Sara, and I for sure can't handle one from you." Sticking an elbow into Tamera's side, Lacey said, "Hey, I need to go to the girls' room. How about you?" and gave Tamera "the look."

"Oh, yeah, I need to go, too," Tamera agreed. "We'll be back in a minute, Sean."

As the door to the rest room swung shut, Lacey collapsed against the blue-and-white tile wall. "You know, Sean has got to be the oldest seventeen-year-old I've ever met." She dropped her voice low and mimicked, " 'Lace, doing that report is a great idea! Lace, you really need to study more. Lace, you've got to quit screwing around.' He knows how I feel about my sister, but he keeps right on pushing!"

Tamera walked to the mirror, then rifled in her purse until she found her lip gloss and liner. Very carefully she applied a thin, pink line to her upper lip. "I know what you want me to say, Lacey." She paused to outline the bottom of her mouth, then added, "But for once I'm going to tell you what I think. Sean's right. You're an idiot if you don't take advantage of Hernandez's offer." Squeezing a dab of pink gloss onto her finger, she ran it over her lips and smiled. "Hasn't it occurred to you that you'll get a pass out of school? Your sister is bound to help—she

couldn't stand it if you did a half-assed job. I'll bet she'd even type the bloody thing. What a deal!"

"I know," Lacey added, thoughtful. "And for sure this project would get me mileage with my mom, but . . . I just don't know." Tossing back a mane of curls, she stared at Tamera and asked, "Do you really think it's a good idea?"

"Absolutely."

"Even though it's Sara?"

"Even though it's Sara."

"Okay," Lacey said, grabbing the gloss from Tamera's hand. "You're right. I'll do it!"

2

LACEY BRIGHTON WATCHED her sister stand and shuffle papers at the defense table. The courtroom was only half-filled, but Sara Brighton looked as intense as if she were about to argue a case before the Supreme Court. A fan spun aimlessly against the ceiling, moving overheated air onto the heads of restless spectators. Lacey shifted in her seat. The backs of her knees were sweating. Although it was February and freezing outside, the courtroom sweltered. Something had gone wrong with the heating system in the courthouse.

“Due to the hour, and to the temperature of the

room, I feel we should call a recess,” the judge announced. A black woman with severe features, Judge Wilson’s appearance was at odds with her soft, slightly Southern voice. “Do you have any objection to that, Ms. Brighton?”

“Yes, I do, Your Honor. I would like to cross-examine this witness on one point of her testimony. It will only take a moment, and I believe it is important to ask the question now.”

Shaking her head, Judge Wilson answered, “As long as you get right to the point. The ladies and gentlemen of the jury deserve a lunch hour. You may proceed.”

It was an interesting case, and in spite of herself Lacey felt drawn into it. Sara’s client, a tough-looking young man named Earl Crow, was charged with holding up a convenience store. He was so thickly muscled that when he hunched forward, the seams of his brown polyester jacket strained visibly. On the stand, waiting patiently for Sara’s cross-examination, sat a fifty-something woman named Mona Tilborn. She had just finished testifying that Crow was the man who had robbed her.

Against the east side of the room nine women and three men stared solemnly from a jury box. The women fanned themselves with wilted paper; the men, apparently preferring to sweat, wiped at their