

FREIDA McFADDEN



THE
PERFECT
SON

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FREIDA MCFADDEN

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The Perfect Son

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To Libby and Melanie (as always)

Prologue

Transcript of police interview with Erika Cass

"Can you please tell us what happened, Mrs. Cass?"

"Am I under arrest?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I know what you found. I know what you must be thinking."

"What do you think we found, Mrs. Cass?"

"A... a dead body."

"And can you explain how this happened?"

"I..."

"Mrs. Cass?"

"Am I under arrest? Please just tell me."

"At this time, no, you are not under arrest. But obviously, we need to know what happened."

"He was... stabbed to death."

"And who did it?"

"..."

"Mrs. Cass?"

"I did it. I killed him, Detective. And I would do it again."

Chapter One

ERIKA

About one week earlier

You're not supposed to have a favorite child.

If you ask most mothers, they'll say something along the lines of "Sammy is really smart, but Nicole has a great heart." They refuse to choose. And some of them are sincere. Some mothers genuinely love both their children equally.

Others, like me, are lying through their teeth.

"Good morning!" I say as my fourteen-year-old daughter Hannah pads into the kitchen. She's in her bare feet and an old pair of gym shorts, and her reddish-brown hair is in disarray around her face. She's supposed to be dressed and ready for school, but clearly she's not. She always waits until the last possible second to get ready. She likes to keep me in suspense over whether or not she's going to make the school bus. But I've learned from experience that nagging her doesn't help at all—in fact, it only seems to slow her down—so I turn back to the eggs I'm scrambling in a frying pan.

"Mom!" Hannah can't seem to say that word anymore without the whiny edge to her voice that draws the word out for at least two syllables. *Mo-om*. I remember how happy I was the first time she said "mama." I shake my head at my old naïve self. "Why do you have to say it like that?"

"Say it like what? I just said 'Good morning.'"

“Right.” Hannah groans. “Like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like... oh my God, you know what I mean.”

“I really don’t, Hannah.”

“You say it like... I don’t know. Just don’t say it like that.”

I’m not sure how to respond, so I focus my attention back on the eggs. I pride myself on making fantastic eggs. It’s one of my superpowers. My eggs are so good that when one of Hannah’s friends ate them on the morning after a sleepover, she said that I should be the lunch lady at their school. It was the highest compliment.

Hannah yawns loudly and scratches at the rat’s nest on her head. “What’s for breakfast?”

I ignore the irony: if I asked Hannah what she was making for breakfast while she was very clearly in the middle of cooking eggs, she would have a meltdown. “I’m making eggs.”

“Eggs? I *hate* eggs.”

“What are you talking about? I thought eggs are your favorite breakfast.”

“Yeah. When I was, like, eight years old.”

I put down the spatula I’ve been using to slowly stir the eggs. That’s the trick to making good eggs. Cook them low and slow. “I made them for you this weekend and you ate them up.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean they’re my *favorite*. God, Mom.”

I don’t know what to say to that. It seems like lately, every conversation I have with my daughter is an exercise in trying not to say something mean back to her. I close my eyes and repeat my mantra to myself: *I am the adult. This is just a phase.*

After fourteen years, it’s harder to convince myself it’s all just a phase.

“What else is for breakfast?” Hannah asks, even though she is two feet away from the refrigerator and three feet away from the pantry.

“Frozen waffles?”

“Yuck.” She sticks out her tongue. “What else?”

“You can make yourself some cold cereal.”

“What kind of cereal do we have?”

I sigh. “I don’t know, Hannah. Go look in the pantry.”

She lets out a grunt as she stands up which would make you think she is ninety years old rather than a high school freshman. She limps over to the

pantry and studies the boxes of cereal intently.

While Hannah contemplates the cereal selection, my son, Liam, joins us in the kitchen. Unlike his sister, Liam is fully dressed in what is a surprisingly nice blue button-down shirt and khaki slacks. I bought a new wardrobe for him over the summer when he shot up four inches and all his old clothes looked comically short. He recently turned sixteen, which means he went to the DMV last month with my husband to get his learner's permit to drive. I had thought my son getting his learner's permit would fill me with terror, but I'm oddly calm about the whole thing. Liam will be a good driver. He'll be careful, he'll pay close attention to the road, and he'll never drink and drive. I'm certain of that much.

That's not why I'm worried about him driving.

"Eggs. I love eggs. Thanks, mom!"

Liam's lips spread into an appreciative smile. He was always an attractive kid, but in the last couple of years, he's grown downright handsome. We were out at a restaurant as a family last weekend, and I caught a woman who was in her twenties giving him a second look. A full-grown adult was checking him out! There is something about his thick dark hair and chocolate-colored eyes that almost twinkle when he smiles. Unlike Hannah, Liam never needed braces, and his smile reveals a row of perfectly straight, white teeth.

According to my mother, Liam looks very much the way my father did when he was young. My father died when I was a child and I barely remember him, but I've seen pictures, and I agree the resemblance is uncanny. I keep one of those photos in a drawer by my bed, and lately, every time I look at it, I get a pang in my chest. It was hard enough knowing my dad never got to see me grow up, and it's another sting to know he'll never meet the grandson who looks just like him.

Hannah pulls a box of Cheerios out of the pantry and studies the label, her nose crinkling.

"What's in Cheerios?" she asks me.

"Poison."

"Mom!" That was at least four syllables right there. *M-o-o-m*. "You *know* I'm trying to lose weight and be healthy. Don't you want me to be healthy?"

Hannah has always been a little on the chubby side. I think she looks cute, but in the last year, she's been obsessed with losing ten pounds,

although she has not done anything to lose it. In fact, when I brought home a bag of chips that I had been planning to pair with guacamole to bring to a mom's night out last month, Hannah demolished it before I made it out the door. I ended up bringing some sliced-up apples. They haven't invited me back.

"Of course I want you to be healthy," I say.

She rolls her eyes. Hannah has mastered the eye roll. It's her favorite facial expression. It can be used when I've asked her to do something she doesn't want to do. Or when I've said something so terribly uncool, she just can't bear it. Or best of all, when I express any sort of love or affection.

"Eggs in two minutes," I say to Liam.

"No rush. I'm gonna have some orange juice." Liam goes for the fridge, but he's not quick enough. Hannah shoves him aside to get to the quart of milk. He lets his sister get away with it without commenting.

"What are you all dressed up for, Liam?" I ask as I turn off the heat on the stove. Usually, my son wears jeans and a T-shirt, regardless of the weather. I'm just happy when they're clean.

"Debate." He finally gets his turn and grabs the orange juice from the fridge. He pours himself a heaping glass, so full that the juice is licking the edges, threatening to spill over. Like every other teenage boy in the world, Liam has a huge appetite even though his build is lanky and athletic. "We're competing against Lincoln High after school."

"Can I come to watch?"

Hannah rolls her eyes. "*Seriously?* Liam's debates are mega boring."

Liam smiles crookedly and takes a swig from his orange juice. "She's right. It won't be fun for you."

I scrape the eggs onto a plate for him, giving him his portion in addition to the eggs I made for Hannah. I'll make more for my husband later if he wants it—Jason should be back from his run before long. "It will be fun if you're up there."

"Okay, sure." Liam digs into the plate of eggs. For some reason, I get a lot of satisfaction out of watching my children eat. It dates back to when I was breast-feeding. (Hannah says it's super weird.) "These eggs are great, Mom."

"Why, thank you."

"What's your secret ingredient?"

I wink at him. "Love."

Hannah lets out the longest sigh I've ever heard. It lasts for at least five full seconds—which is a long time for a sigh. “Oh my *God*, the secret ingredient is Parmesan cheese. Mom *always* put Parmesan cheese in the eggs. You know that, Liam. God, you're such a...”

He lifts an eyebrow. “I'm such a what, Hannah.”

“You know what.”

For a moment, the two of them stare at each other, and it's so quiet in the room that I could hear the coffee machine humming. But then Liam snorts loudly and goes back to his eggs. I envy his ability to ignore his sister's irritability. If eggs are my superpower, ignoring Hannah is Liam's. Nothing she says ever gets to him. And the truth is, despite their sparring, Hannah adores Liam. The minute she started walking, she was following him around. These days, he's probably her favorite person in the house. I suspect I come in fourth, after Jason and probably her phone.

“Well, I think the eggs taste especially good today,” Liam says. And he smiles, blinking up at me with those eyelashes that Hannah complains are unfairly long. “Thanks, Mom. You're the best.”

And Hannah rolls her eyes.

I love Hannah. I really do. I love her more than I love my own life. She's my daughter. She's my little girl.

But Liam is my favorite. I can't help it. From the moment he was born and I became a mother, I knew no matter how many other children I had, he would be my favorite. Nobody else had a chance. Even if Hannah liked my eggs better and didn't roll her eyes, it wouldn't matter. Liam would still be my favorite.

He's my favorite, even knowing what he's capable of.

And I will protect him with every fiber of my being.