

FREIDA McFADDEN



THE
PERFECT
SON

The Perfect Son

a novel by

FREIDA MCFADDEN

The Perfect Son

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To Libby and Melanie (as always)

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Chapter 1

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 2

About one week earlier

Erika

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-om*. "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 lame, 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.

Chapter 3

Erika

Just as Hannah and Liam are finishing up their breakfast, the back door slams shut. It's Jason, back from his jog.

About a year ago, I purchased a scale for our master bathroom. The first time my husband stepped on it, he was horrified. "Did I really get that fat, Erika?" he asked me about twenty times over the next several days. Followed by, "How could you let me get that fat?" By the end of the week, he made a solemn oath that he was going to get back in shape. He was going to eat right and exercise and get back to the weight he was when we got married. (To be fair, he was at least ten pounds overweight when we got married.)

At the time I laughed. But then he actually did it. He jogs every morning now. He doesn't buy giant jugs of M&Ms. He switched from regular Coca-Cola to diet. (Or Coke Zero, which he says tastes much better than diet, although I am skeptical.) I don't know much about what the numbers should be on the scale, but it's obvious that at age forty-five, Jason is in the best shape of his life. I never noticed that he had been getting a gut until it vanished. And recently, when we got together with some other couples, another wife commented on my husband being "hot." I was oddly proud. Although it made me feel like I need to start taking kickboxing or Zumba or something to firm up some of those soft, saggy areas on my middle-aged body.

"Erika!" Jason limps over to the stove to join me, his T-shirt damp with sweat. His knee has been acting up for the last few weeks, but he's trying to push through it. "Are you making eggs? I'm starving."

I crack an egg into the sizzling pan. "You got it."

He leans in to kiss me on the neck, which is nice, despite how sweaty he is. "Egg-cellent."

Hannah groans. "Oh my God, Dad. Please."

"What's wrong?" Jason blinks at her. "I'm just egg-cited about your mom's cooking."

Liam laughs. We're all used to Jason's puns. The general rule is that they're always terrible, but sometimes they're so terrible that it's funny.

"Please stop, Dad." Hannah shakes her head at him. "You're being so cringe-y right now."

Cringe-y is the word Hannah frequently uses to describe basically everything that Jason or I do. I hate that it bothers me on some level, although Jason seems to find it amusing. His reasoning is that he was never cool, so why would it bother him that his teenage daughter doesn't think he's cool?

"Don't you have to get ready for school, Hannah?" Jason says. "Don't you have an egg-xam today?"

Even I laugh this time, although it's more because of the look on Hannah's face.

Hannah dashes upstairs to get dressed and hopefully brush her hair so I don't get accused of child neglect, while Liam wanders into the living room because he gets a sense of when we want privacy. I continue to stir Jason's eggs. Low and slow.

"You know I've been eating your eggs for twenty years?" Jason muses as he runs a hand along the back of my neck. "Twenty years of Erika's eggs."

"Aren't you sick of them?" I say it as a joke, but there's a tiny part of me that's serious.

After all, Jason spent the last year getting in great shape. He's gotten a lot hotter. All he needs is a shiny new car and contacts to replace his wire-rimmed glasses, and he'll be in full-on middle-age crisis mode.

"Hell no." He pulls me to him and presses his lips against mine, which totally interrupts the egg cooking process, but I don't mind. He hasn't shaved yet and his chin tickles mine. "I hope I get to eat your eggs for another twenty years."

"Gag!" Hannah coming down the stairs interrupts what *had* been a very nice little moment between me and Jason. She's dressed in blue jeans and an oversized T-shirt with her hair pulled back into a messy ponytail. She's probably going for stylishly messy, but it's just messy. "You two need to get a room."

"Um, this is *our* house." Jason raises his eyebrows at her. "If you want to start paying rent, then you can tell me when I'm allowed to kiss my sexy wife."

Hannah just rolls her eyes.

"All right, Hannah," I say. "You've got to get a move on. The school bus is going to be at the corner in..." I look down at my watch. One minute ago. "Damn it."

"Oh no. I guess you have to drive us."

"Gosh, funny how that worked out..."

Hannah hates the school bus with a passion. From the moment she wakes up every weekday, she's plotting a way for me to drive her to school. We've already agreed that when Liam gets his license, he can drive the two of them to school every morning. Of course, he'll be in college in less than two years. And the thought of Hannah being behind the wheel is nothing short of terrifying.

I finish cooking Jason's eggs and reluctantly pile Hannah and Liam into my green Toyota 4Runner. I never thought I'd be the sort of mom who drove an SUV, especially one so freaking big. I held onto my little Honda Civic even after we had Liam. But then Jason pointed out how hard it was going to be to strap two car seats into the backseat of the Civic, and I knew it was time to upgrade. So we got the SUV. I know this sounds melodramatic, but the first time I saw it parked in my garage, I almost burst into tears. But now I'm used to it. It makes me feel safe, which is important when you've got your kids in the car. That's why when Jason took Liam out for a driving lesson last week, he used the 4Runner.

Hannah has called shotgun, which is unfortunate, because it means that she's going to be controlling the music in the car. She's very much partial to music from young men who don't look like they're capable of growing facial hair yet.

"Can we *please* listen to something different?" Liam complains about two minutes into the drive. I have to agree. "*Anything* else?"

"You know," Hannah says, "Justin Bieber is an incredibly talented singer."

"Oh, is he?"

"Yes, he is!" She adjusts her messy ponytail. "He has a phenomenal vocal range."

Liam smirks. "Sure. That's what you like about him. His vocal range."

"So I think he's cute. So what? It's not like you're interested in *Olivia* for her intelligence."

Olivia? Who is *Olivia*? I glance in the rearview mirror just in time to see Liam's entire face turn red. He has become incredibly skilled at masking his reactions to things, but he couldn't hide it this time. But when I look away for a moment and check the mirror again, he's regained his composure.

The car skids to a halt at a red light. "Who is Olivia?" I say as casually as I can manage.

Liam looks out the window. “Nobody. Just a girl.”

But thank God Hannah is in the car with us. “*Just a girl?*” She snorts. “Liam is totally in love with her.”

He laughs. “No, I’m not.”

“Oh my God, you so are. Don’t even deny it.” Hannah gives me a look, like I’m her new confidante. “You should see the way he looks at her. He’s *totally* into her.”

“Whatever.”

I glance in the rearview mirror one more time to look at my son. Liam is the most composed sixteen-year-old kid I’ve ever known. That’s why he’s so good at debate, in addition to his natural intelligence and his diligent preparation. He *never* loses his cool. He never lets anyone know what he’s thinking. But I’ve known him long enough that I can usually tell. Usually.

I’m really glad I’m going to this debate after school. I wanted to see Liam perform. That was the reason I told him I wanted to come. And I meant it. But now I’ve got a new, more important reason for going.

I’ve got to figure out who Olivia is.

And I’ve got to keep something terrible from happening to her.

Chapter 4

Transcript of police interview with Sharon Anderson:

“Can you tell me how you know Liam Cass?”

“He attended kindergarten at the school where I work as the principal.”

“For how long did he attend?”

“About four months.”

“And this was eleven years ago?”

“That’s correct.”

“So you still remember a child who attended your school for four months over a decade ago?”

“Yes. I remember Liam. Very well.”

“And what was your impression of him?”

“At first? He seemed like a great kid. Real cute. Smart—certainly the smartest kid in the grade. I remember he got up during assembly and gave this long speech he memorized. I couldn’t believe a kindergartner could remember all that. I was impressed.”

“How come he only attended the school for four months? Isn’t the school year nine months long?”

“Liam was... expelled.”

“A kindergartner was expelled?”

“It’s unusual. But the circumstances called for it.”

“I see. And why was that?”

“There was an incident.”

“Can you describe the incident to me?”

“Yes...”

“Will you please describe the incident, Mrs. Anderson?”

“It was... there was a girl...”

“Yes...?”

“Well, she and Liam were friends. They often played together at recess, or so his teacher told me later. And then one day during recess, the girl... disappeared.”

“I see. And did they find her?”

“Yes. They did. And she was... fine.”

“Where did they find her?”

“Does this have to do with that girl from the high school? The one who...?”

“I’m afraid we can’t discuss it at this time.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. But do you think Liam is the one who...?”

“Once again, Mrs. Anderson, this is not something I can discuss.”

“Of course. I’m sorry.”

“Now can you tell me where they found this girl?”

“So... the story I was told is that Liam and the little girl were playing janitor. They sneaked away and went to the custodial closet during recess. It seems she was quite infatuated with Liam and he talked her into it.”

“And what happened in the custodial closet?”

“They found a roll of duct tape. And they were playing with it.”

“How were they playing with it?”

“...”

“Mrs. Anderson?”

“I’m sorry. It was just... so shocking. I still can’t get over it. That a kindergartner would...”

“Would what?”

“He convinced her to let him bind her wrists with the duct tape. Then he put tape over her mouth. And then...”

“Yes...?”

“Well, we’re not sure what he did next. The one thing we know for sure is he locked her in the closet and walked away. And even when she was noticed to be missing and teachers were looking for her, he didn’t tell anyone where she was. It was several hours later when we finally found her—she was bound on the floor of the closet and refused to speak to anyone. For days, actually.”

“What do *you* think he did?”

“I don’t know. He was just a little boy. It’s hard to imagine he could have done anything that bad, but the look in that girl’s eyes when we found her...”

“I see.”

“Of course, her parents were hysterical. And given everything that happened, we had no choice but to expel Liam from the school.”

“When you confronted him about what he did, how did he react?”

“He apologized. Of course he did. He claimed it was all just a fun game and she had agreed to it. He even cried. But...”

“But what?”

“But I never believed him. Even when he was sobbing in my office, it seemed incredibly fake. I don’t think he was sorry at all. Not even a little bit. The only thing I think he was sorry about was that we found her.”

Chapter 5

Erika

I make it to the school about sixty seconds after the school bus arrives.

Hannah says a quick goodbye and then darts out of the car. I remember when she was in preschool, how she used to cling to my leg with both arms when I tried to drop her off in the morning. When I would try to leave, she would shriek at the top of her lungs like somebody was trying to murder her. Now if I attempt to even kiss her goodbye, she's mortified beyond all belief.

Liam is the opposite. When he was younger, he never had any trouble at all separating from me when I dropped him off. He would kiss me goodbye and then run off to play without a second thought. And now, he leans forward from the backseat and kisses me on the cheek, oblivious to anyone who might witness this show of affection.

"Bye, Mom." He opens the back door. "I love you."

I smile. Liam has an incredible knack for saying the exact right thing. "I love you too, sweetheart."

He swings his backpack onto his shoulder and hurries towards the front door before the bell rings. I watch him, looking out for any girl who might be Olivia. Anything that will make my job easier. And this isn't an easy job. It's just going to get harder as he gets older.

"Is that Erika Cass in there?"

I jerk my head up. Jessica Martinson is standing outside my car, peering through my cracked open window. I don't know where she came from, because her car is nowhere in sight. She must have been meeting with somebody within the school, which is not unusual for Jessica, who is head of the PTA. Jessica and I used to be close, years ago, when Liam and her son Tyler used to be friends.

Jessica and I only became close because of Liam and Tyler's friendship, and we've grown apart since the boys stopped spending time together. I have to admit, it concerned me when they stopped being friends. I asked Liam why he didn't have Tyler Martinson over anymore, and he just shrugged. If it had been Hannah, that question would have sparked an hour-long monologue about everything Tyler had done wrong. But Liam isn't like that. He doesn't talk about things the way his sister does.

Kids grow apart. Both of them are older, and they don't share any clubs or interests in common. Tyler is more popular than Liam, and they run in different circles. Tyler plays football, and Liam does track and debate. Also, Liam doesn't have any close friends—he doesn't seem interested in having the sort of tight friendships that other kids have. But I always worried about what caused their friendship to fracture. Growing apart—that's fine. But it scares me that Liam might have done something to accelerate the demise of their friendship.

It certainly wouldn't be the first time.

"Actually," Jessica says, "I'm so glad I saw you, Erika. There's something I need to speak with you about. It's urgent."

Urgent? A knot tightens in my stomach. What's Liam done this time? "Oh..."

She tucks a strand of her golden blonde hair behind one ear. She has a messy ponytail, like

Hannah, but unlike Hannah's, hers is painfully stylish. "Can we grab some coffee? Do you have time?"

I have a long list of errands to take care of this morning, but I can't say no. "Sure."

"Great! How about Charlie's?"

Charlie's is a diner about five minutes away from here. Good for a quick cup of coffee in the morning. Jessica and I have met up there dozens of times over the years. "I'll drive right there."

She winks at me. "See you in five."

As Jessica hurries away to her own monster SUV, I look down at my hands gripping the steering wheel. They're shaking. What does Jessica want to talk to me about? It can't be that bad, could it? She seems friendly enough. But that's the thing with Jessica. She could tell you something horrible right to your face with a smile on her lips. I've seen her do it before.

I throw my car back into drive and make my way to Charlie's.

Chapter 6

Olivia

Thanks to Liam Cass, I'm failing math class.

No, I probably won't fail, but things aren't looking good for me. I'm good at math—I've always gotten A's, if not an A+. But this semester, I'll be lucky to swing a C. And it's all because of Liam. It's because from the moment I step into the classroom at ten-thirty to when the bell rings forty minutes later, all I can focus on is the boy sitting in front of me.

I've never been boy crazy. I can't say the same for my best friend Madison, who thinks about boys nonstop. Madison has *definitely* failed classes before because of a cute guy sitting in front of her. She has blown off studying for tests to hang out with the boys she liked. It's sort of her *thing*. And I always made fun of her. Like, how could you prioritize a *boy* over your education? I mean, boys my age are all pretty idiotic and not even that attractive—they mostly have greasy faces and scraggly little beards.

I want to get into a good college—that's my priority. How could you jeopardize your entire future for a cute guy? That's so lame.

Then on the first day of school this year, Liam sat down in front of me in math class, turned his head to flash me a smile, and I was gone. He didn't have a greasy face or patchy facial hair—he was *gorgeous*. I hate myself for it, but I can't help ogling him. Every time he smiles at me, my heart speeds up. He has a *great* smile. And *really* beautiful brown eyes. His eyes are like creamy, endless pools of milk chocolate. I could write bad poetry about this guy. In another month, I'll be etching our initials in a heart scratched into the wood of my desk—that's how bad it is.

We had a test a few days ago, and it was a bona fide disaster. I can't focus when I'm studying, because the second I crack open the textbook and see sines and cosines, my mind goes to Liam. And of course, I couldn't focus when I was actually *taking* the test—not with him sitting right in front of me. I passed by the skin of my teeth—a seventy-two. Liam, who isn't having any problem at all focusing with little old me behind him, got a ninety-eight.

I've got to stop thinking about this boy. He's just a boy. My education is much more important. I've got to focus.

Focus, Olivia.

Except when Liam comes into the classroom today, he's not wearing his usual jeans and a T-shirt. He's dressed in nice khaki slacks and a dress shirt. And a tie. Oh my God, he's wearing a *tie*. Usually, he's cute, but in dress clothes, he's upped his game. It's like a sneak peek into how handsome he'll look when he's an adult. Against my will, my stomach starts doing cartwheels.

Focus, Olivia!

As Liam slides into his seat in front of me, he flashes me that grin that makes my legs weak. "Hey," he says.

"Hey," I say back. I search my brain, trying to think of something clever or funny to say. I spend most of math class trying to do that. "You're all dressed up."

Good one, Olivia.

"We have a debate today," he explains. "It's sort of a big deal. We're competing against another school."

“Wow. Are you nervous?”

“A little.” He laughs, although there’s a bit of a tremor in his voice that makes me think he’s more nervous than he lets on. “If we win, we get to go to the state competition up in Albany. That’s pretty cool.”

“What do you do during a debate anyway?”

He scratches at his dark brown hair. “Argue, mostly. It’s sort of fun.” He raises his eyebrows at me. “Do you, um... do you want to come watch?”

“Me?” I say in an embarrassingly squeaky voice.

Oh my God, that was *such* a stupid thing to say. *Obviously* he’s inviting me. Who else would he be inviting?

And what does this *mean*?

“Uh...” His smile slips slightly. “I mean, if you want. It’d probably be pretty boring for you. You probably don’t want to go.”

Oh no, he’s taking it back. “No, it sounds like it could be fun. I don’t have anything else I’m doing.”

That’s an outright lie. I’m supposed to be at chorus practice after school today. But the truth is, I’ve soured on chorus since I didn’t get the last two solos I tried out for. And even if I had, I can’t say no to Liam. This is the first time he’s ever invited me somewhere.

His eyes light up. “That would be great. I mean, if you can come. But if something else comes up, that’s cool too. No big deal.”

I can’t believe it. He actually seems really happy that I’m coming. Oh God, there’s no way I’m going to be able to focus in class now. I’m going to get a terrible grade in math this semester. And the scariest part is, at this moment, I couldn’t care less.