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DEAR DEBBIE

FREIDA McFADDEN



CHAPTER 1

FROM DEAR DEBBIE DRAFTS FILE

Dear Debbie,

You always tell us in your fabulous column that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, and I believe you! But is my family ever willing to sit down and eat it? Not a chance.

Every morning it's the same circus. My kids are searching for missing shoes or homework assignments that vanished overnight, and my husband can't find his keys or reading glasses. Nobody is interested in taking five minutes to sit down at the kitchen table to enjoy the perfectly good breakfast that I just spent the last fifteen minutes cooking up.

I've tried everything! Quick meals, grab-and-go options, bribery (don't ask!), but no matter what I do, my family always leaves the house with empty bellies!

How on earth am I supposed to get my family to take a few minutes to eat a nutritious breakfast before

Hungry in Hingham

Dear Hungry in Hingham,

Indeed, breakfast is the most important meal of the day. It boosts your energy levels and alertness, and if you don't get a healthy breakfast, you can feel sluggish all day long. In children and adolescents, a nutritious breakfast can improve recall and focus for school.

If your family isn't interested in having breakfast, try to probe to see what sorts of foods might tempt them to take those crucial extra 15 minutes in the morning. Some people prefer a bowl of cereal, others might want pancakes, and others might want a full breakfast with eggs and bacon and whole grain toast. Find out what your family likes best, and cater to those desires!

And if that doesn't work, I would recommend installing a padlock on the front and back door of your house. First thing in the morning, lock both doors from the inside, and keep the key in your pocket. Let everyone know that they will not be leaving the house until they have consumed a healthy breakfast. If they seem hesitant, a simple threat to swallow the key unless they sit down and eat will surely move things along.

I have no doubt you will soon be enjoying a wonderful daily breakfast with your family!

Debbie

CHAPTER 2

DEBBIE

I have been forbidden to speak to my daughter Lexi in the morning.

Lexi imposed this rule around when she started high school, and now that she is a senior, it remains rigidly in place. The rule was implemented when Lexi decided she didn't like it when I dared to ask her "How are you?" first thing in the morning, and she simply didn't "feel like talking right now, my God, Mom."

So midway through freshman year, Lexi officially announced that I was no longer permitted to speak to her during early morning hours. And if I attempt any form of communication—verbal or nonverbal—she will snap at me and say, "What did I tell you?" Or possibly worse, glare at me with *that look*.

You know what look I mean. At least if you have teenagers, you know.

So when Lexi marches into our kitchen on this Wednesday morning, I don't say a word. I just keep eating

my bowl of cornflakes—the kind with extra fiber. (Now that I'm in my forties, anything that has a lot of fiber is an auto buy.) It's easy to remember not to talk to Lexi, because she has a pair of giant headphones covering her ears. She's always wearing those headphones. It's possible they have fused with the temporal bones of her skull.

Lexi has her hair in a messy ponytail that looks as though she tied it last night or perhaps even several days ago and hasn't gotten around to adjusting it. She's wearing an oversize hoodie, which looks like something one might sleep in, and that impression is not helped by the fact that she's wearing plaid pajama pants. It's not pajama day at school or anything. This is what kids wear now. I find it distasteful, but on the other hand, I'm also jealous. I wish I could wear pajama pants every day.

Between my two kids, Lexi is the one who looks like me—a fact I'm sure is terribly embarrassing to her. She has the same delicate bone structure in her face and a similar dark shade to her slightly wavy hair. Like me, schoolwork comes easy to her, which is why she's taking four AP classes this year and a number theory class because she already took AP Calculus BC last year.

Like me, she might be a little too smart for her own good.

Lexi doesn't so much as glance at me as she makes a beeline for the refrigerator, although she casts a derisive look at the cans I have stacked on the kitchen counter for the canned food drive. Everything I do is a combination of embarrassing and aggravating. However, my most unforgivable crime of all was naming her Alexa. In my defense, how was I supposed to know Alexa would become a *thing*?

Lexi casts a look over her shoulder and does a double

take when she sees me. She's itching to comment, but that would break her eternal vow of silence. The internal struggle is real.

Finally, I break her. It's the lipstick—I never wear lipstick.

"What are you so dressed up for, Mom?" she wants to know.

I take another bite of my fiber cereal, then dab my lips with a napkin. I'm more of a T-shirt-and-yoga-pants kind of mom, so it surprises her to see me in a dress and full makeup. I even blow-dried my hair instead of leaving it damp in a ponytail.

"The photographers from *Home Gardening* are coming today," I remind her. "They're taking pictures of the yard."

It was an honor to be chosen by the magazine for this particular spread. As a stay-at-home mother to two girls, there have been times when my life has felt a bit... well, empty. I'm proud of my daughters, but I wanted to be proud of something that was all my own. This photo shoot gave me a nice boost to my confidence. I work hard on my garden.

There have been times when I felt that if I didn't have my flowers, I wouldn't even be able to get out of bed in the morning.

"I didn't know that," Lexi says, even though I mentioned it dozens of times. I don't point out the irony that if I had forgotten something she told me only yesterday, she would be lambasting me at this very moment. "Well, good luck."

That was a nice thing to say. And another miracle has occurred: my seventeen-year-old is now *speaking to me in the morning*. It feels like some sort of wacky, wonderful

dream. Dare I hope the difficult teenage years might be coming to a close?

"Thank you," I say cautiously, not wanting to do anything to disturb the peace.

Then Lexi wrinkles her nose. "You're not really going to bring all these cans to our school today, are you? You're going to look like a garbage woman."

Okay, maybe the difficult years aren't behind us *quite yet*.

Before I can come up with a suitable response to my daughter's criticism of me collecting food for those who need it, my other daughter, Isabel, pops into the kitchen. It's probably for the best, because she wouldn't have liked whatever I said.

Izzy is a sophomore at Hingham Prep, two years below her sister. While Lexi reminds me disturbingly of myself, Izzy is much more like her father. She has his lighter brown hair, earnest grin, and solid build. And like him, she's happy-go-lucky.

Unlike me and Lexi, Izzy has always been very athletic. I have hypothesized the endorphins might make her more pleasant than her sister. That's my running theory anyway. If I didn't force myself to go to the gym several times a week, I would murder everyone on my block.

"Hey, Mom." Izzy grabs an apple from the bowl on the kitchen counter. "Gotta run. The bus will be here in a minute."

"That's all you're eating for breakfast?" I protest.

"Mom, I gotta go."

In life and motherhood, *especially* motherhood of teenagers, you have to pick your battles. "Okay, I love you," I call out. "I'll pick you up after soccer."

Izzy hesitates, her high ponytail swinging slightly behind her head as she stands there, seeming to debate her next words. She stuffs the apple into the pocket of her hoodie. "That's okay," she finally says. "I'll take the bus home."

"But wait." As I rise quickly to my feet, my bowl of cereal tips over enough that some milk splashes on the kitchen table. It doesn't spill on my dress at least. "The school bus won't be around after soccer is over. I can get you."

Izzy doesn't reply.

"It's no problem at all!" I assure her, trying not to think of the days when I'd pick Izzy up at day care and she'd run to me so fast and hard that she'd nearly knock me off my feet.

I'm not sure how long Izzy would have stood there staring at me with her hands shoved into her pockets if Lexi hadn't blurted out, "For God's sake, just *tell* her, Iz."

I look between both girls. I hate it when they share secrets, although it's better than when they're fighting. "Tell me *what*?"

Izzy still doesn't say anything.

Lexi lets out an exaggerated sigh and says, "She got kicked off the soccer team."

"Lexi!" Izzy hisses, her face turning pink.

"*What*?"

Okay, this is flat out ridiculous. Izzy has been playing soccer since she was in kindergarten. She could dribble that soccer ball in her sleep. How could she have gotten kicked off the team? She's one of the best sophomores they have. Hell, she's one of the best *players* they have.

"I don't understand," I say. "Why were you kicked off the team?"

Izzy won't meet my eyes. "Mom...?" This has got to be some sort of mistake. There's no other explanation. "I'm going to give Coach Pike a call."

"Mom, *no*." Her eyes widen in panic. "I have to go now. Don't call Coach Pike."

"Izzy..."

"Please don't call him." Her eyes are full of desperation. "Promise me you won't call him, Mom."

I don't want her to miss the bus. I can't afford to drive her right now, since I need to be here for the photo shoot. But she's not going to budge until I agree, so I finally spit out, "I promise."

I promise I won't *call* him. But I didn't promise I won't go to his office and ask him what the hell he was thinking when he cut my daughter from the team.

Izzy gives me one last look, and then she dashes out the door. That girl is always running. She's an *amazing* soccer player. I don't know what happened to get her kicked off the team, but I'm determined to get to the bottom of it.

I turn my attention to my older daughter, who has picked up a can of creamed corn and is reading the label with a sour expression on her face, like the ingredients have personally offended her.

"Do you know what happened?" I ask Lexi.

"Oh my God, Mom, *no*, I *don't*." Lexi grunts. "Can you please stop asking, like, a million times?"

This is the first time I asked her, but whatever. "You haven't heard anything at all?"

"*No*." Lexi gives me a seething look but then adds, "She's better off ditching the team anyway. Coach Pike is such a perv."

"A perv?"

She rolls her eyes, irritated that she has to take the time to explain every little thing to me. "My friend Mira was on the soccer team, and she said he was always, like, 'accidentally' walking into the locker room when the girls were changing. He'd say sorry and leave right away, but... well, that doesn't sound like an accident to me."

He did *what*?

The cereal sticks in my throat as I contemplate this new revelation. Izzy never said anything like that, but I know Lexi's friend Mira, and she's not the type of girl who makes up stories. Is it possible that it's true? And if it is, do I even *want* Izzy on the soccer team?

"Ugh, could you quit it, Mom?" Lexi says irritably.

I force myself to swallow the mouthful of cereal. "Quit what?"

"Chewing," she says.

"Chewing?" I repeat incredulously.

"The way you chew...it's so loud. Like, nobody else in the world chews that loudly. Trust me—it's super weird. They can probably hear it next door."

Nobody has ever criticized the volume of my mastication before. For a moment, I'm at a loss. "Sorry. I'll try to chew more *quietly*."

"It's so *loud*," she reiterates. "You're always chewing, and it's, like, *so* annoying."

I am momentarily distracted from my thoughts of Coach Pike by the more immediate issue of what on earth happened to my relationship with my firstborn. I remember a time when I used to make pancakes for Lexi in the morning. I would go all out. I formed a smiley face on each individual one using blueberries or, if it was a special

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Lexi looks

day, chocolate chips. When Lexi saw those smiley face pancakes (especially the chocolate chip ones), her eyes would light up. She would eat all the blueberries or chocolate chips first, and then she would smother the stack in maple syrup. After a few bites, she would look up at me with a sticky, happy smile. *You make the bestest pancakes in the world, Mommy!*

I take another bite of my cereal, wondering if there's any activity I could suggest we do together. Maybe a shopping trip. Lexi has always loved to go shopping, even when she was little, and now she still loves clothes. Finding the clothes she likes might be a challenge though.

Maybe I could offer to take her to a pajama store. Is there such a thing? If there isn't, they should make one. It's a million-dollar idea.

A car horn blasts from outside the house, loud enough that both of us startle. I can't make my daughter smile anymore, but that horn does the job. It's her boyfriend, Zane, who recently turned eighteen and got his full license and now can drive her to school every single day.

He never comes inside the house though. He only blasts that damn horn loud enough to let everybody in the neighboring towns know that he has arrived. It might even be a little louder than my chewing.

"Gotta go," Lexi chirps.

My daughter grabs her backpack off the floor, which is heavy enough that when she's wearing it, she walks with a slight backward tilt. She opens her mouth as if to tell me goodbye, but then she remembers her rule about not speaking to me in the morning, so she instead darts out the door without another word.

I've only finished about half my cereal, but I don't have

much of an appetite anyway. I follow the path through the living room that Lexi took to the front door, knowing she didn't bother to lock it on her way out. Why should she, since I always lock it behind her.

I am always here for my family. Always.

I peek out the window at the broken-down red Kia that is pulling out of my driveway. Whenever I see that car, I think to myself that he should just drive it straight to the town dump and leave it there. I'm not thrilled about the fact that my oldest child is being transported to high school in that piece of junk, but I recognize that I don't have much of a say in the matter.

My thoughts about the boy driving the piece of junk are even less charitable.

I catch a glimpse of Zane as he pulls onto the road in front of my house. He has long, shaggy hair and is skinny as a rail, even though the times he has been in my house, he has devoured a small truckload of food. If half of my refrigerator has been emptied, it means Zane has been by for a visit. Especially if the refrigerator has been left slightly ajar and the toilet seat is up. Not to mention the fact that I'm pretty sure he vapes. I don't even entirely know what vaping is, but I know I don't want my daughter dating a boy who does it. Not that I have a choice.

But most of all, I don't like the way he looks at Lexi. There's something in his expression that makes me uneasy. It's something I've seen before—a memory that I can't ever block out.

Lexi and Zane have been dating for about four months, and I was ready for it to be over three and a half months ago.

But I can't forbid her to date him. She is seventeen

years old, and that won't go well. If I tell her not to see him, she'll only see him...harder. No, the smart thing to do is to wait this out. She's a smart girl, and she'll wise up. Eventually, Zane will be gone.

And if not, well, I intend to protect my daughter. Both of them. Whether they like it or not.

I am about to return to the kitchen but stop when I notice another flash of movement out the window. It's my neighbor Brett Carlson, walking down the driveway that separates our houses. Actually, he's not so much walking as *stomping*. He's making his way toward our front door. In another minute, he's going to be pounding on it.

This day is about to get interesting.

CHAPTER 3

Even though I'm standing only a few feet away from the door, I don't open it right away. I give Brett a chance to ring the doorbell. Repeatedly. Then, as predicted, the pounding starts.

"Open up!" he shouts as he slams his fists uselessly against our door. "Right this minute!"

What a drama queen.

Brett Carlson moved into our neighborhood about a year ago. I know most of our neighbors fairly well, but I barely know Brett. All I know is that he works in finance, drives a sports car much too fast, and blasts music in his home office while he's working, loud enough to bother the whole neighborhood. He always seems to manage to turn it down just before the police arrive for noise complaints.

Taking my time, I open the door. But before I do, I snatch the box cutter that we keep in a cabinet in the foyer and slip it into the small pocket in the skirt of my dress. Just in case.

Brett is standing on my front porch, his hands balled into fists, his whole face a deep scarlet. He's glaring at me with menacing eyes. I keep the fingers of my right hand wrapped around the box cutter I've tucked away.

"Good morning, Brett!" I say cheerfully. "How can I help you?"

"I know what you did," he hisses at me. "I know what you did, Debbie! And you're not going to get away with it!"

I blink at him. "I don't know what you're talking about. What on earth do you think I did?"

"I know it was you!" All the veins in Brett's neck are standing out. "You think after all those noise complaints, I wouldn't figure it out?"

"Honestly," I say, "I don't know what you mean, Brett."

"My fuse box," he clarifies. "You went into my basement and snapped off the switch for my office. I've got *no power* in that room. This is going to cost me thousands of dollars to fix!"

I clasp a hand to my chest. "Oh my!"

"*Oh my*," Brett repeats mockingly. "You are so full of shit. You hate how loud I play my music, so you cut the power." He narrows his eyes at me. "I know you're the one who did it. And you're going to pay for it, one way or another."

He looks like he is attempting to shoulder his way inside the house to continue the conversation. I block his entrance, ready to pull out that box cutter if I need to. It won't come to that though. Brett is all talk.

"I'm *so* sorry about what happened to your fuse box, Brett." I furrow my brow. "But I swear it wasn't me. I

barely even know how to use our own! All that wiring stuff...it's just a big mystery to me. Ask Cooper. He always resets the breakers."

Brett is still glaring at me, unconvinced. "I know it was you."

"Do you have any proof?"

"Proof?"

I smile politely. "It's a simple question, Brett."

"I don't need proof," he snaps. "I know it was you."

I laugh, which only seems to infuriate him. "This is so preposterous. How would I even get into your basement?"

He pauses for only a split second to consider this. "I had a key hidden under the lantern in the backyard. You must've figured out it was there."

It's true that there are certain naive people who hide the keys to their front door in an easily found location: under a rock, in a flowerpot, or even under the welcome mat. It's like sending an engraved invitation to burglars. When we visit friends, Cooper and I play a little game where I have to guess where the spare key is hidden before we reach the front door. It always makes him laugh. When we recently visited one of his coworkers for dinner, I informed him their spare key was hidden under a garden gnome by the door. When we lifted it up, sure enough, there it was. I have a knack for these kinds of things.

"So you're saying," I begin, "that I found this key that you hid in your backyard, and then I broke into your house in the middle of the night and somehow snapped a switch in your fuse box? I'm just a housewife, Brett. You really think I did all that?"

For the first time since Brett showed up, there's a twinge of uncertainty on his face.