

'Prodigal Son' Star Bellamy Young on Jessica Witly's Harrowing Past, Says Season 1 is Horrifying and Delicious

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What if Hannibal Lecter were your father? A question posed to the audience as *Prodigal Son* premiered on FOX Sept. 23. The idea is not only daunting, but the fictional fate of these new characters on this fresh FOX series. But let's really think about it for a second: Can a psychopath be a good father? Good husband? A decent human being? Surely, it's too soon

to see the truth behind Dr. Martin Whitly's (Michael Sheen) intentions over the years (since we just met and all) but perhaps his on-screen ex-wife can take the reins on unraveling a teeny bit of the mystery.

Bellamy Young, well-known for her iconic role as Mellie Grant on *Scandal*, sliced through fall TV as the intimidating Jessica Whitly in the eerily witty show which revolves around Malcolm Bright (Tom Payne), a criminal psychologist with a guarded, but horrifying past. Does Malcolm even stand a chance? With a family dynamic comprised of The Surgeon, a notorious serial killer for a father, and a Manhattan Elitist aka a caring but overbearing mother (played by Young) at the helm of his upbringing, there's sure to be a multitude of dysfunction to sift through.

I was fortunate enough to speak with the incomparable actress, who just came off her 7-season stint on *Scandal*, about her new role and all the highs and lows that come with such a jaw dropping premise. This on-screen family, although damaged, does have a riveting story to tell and with every episode she assures me they'll continue to peel back the layers of Jessica's complicated family history. Who knows- maybe Ainsley Whitly (Halston Sage), Jessica's daughter, will end up following in dear old dad's footsteps, not the "prodigal son" we all have come to know, love, and worry about. Dun dun dun.

Let's get to it!

MCKENZIE MORRELL: First and foremost can you tell the readers who haven't seen *Prodigal Son* yet a little about the show and the character you're playing.

BELLAMY YOUNG: *Prodigal Son* asks the question "what if Hannibal Lecter were your father?" And goes from there. We're all so sure that our parents messed us up, we don't want to turn into our parents. Tom Payne is our Lead — Malcolm Bright, he's called. We are the Whitly family. I play Jessica Whitly, his mom. For the last twenty years, my husband, played by Michael Sheen has been in Hannibal Lecter land, because he was a notorious serial killer named The Surgeon I've been in the prison of the Upper east side trying to raise my children and live through the dagger eyes and the judgement and keep my kids safe and keep our lives going.

MM: Something I've been wondering is why didn't Jessica change her last name like Malcolm did to get away from that stigma? Is that something we're going to learn as the season progresses?

BY: Yeah, we actually cover that in one of the upcoming episodes. I think it's four. Because it was certainly the question on my mind. The question on many people's minds is why stay attached? But sometimes, you can't outrun your face in Manhattan. Especially the

Manhattan Elite, you can't outrun your name. Even if she had changed it people would still know. Plus, her children were Whitly's. She just wanted to stay with that. It's more courageous to stand and fight.

MM: How has the shift from playing Mellie on *Scandal* to playing Jessica on *Prodigal Son* been? Did you infuse any of those Mellie-isms into this new character?

BY: The venn diagram between Jessica and Mellie is rather profound. It's significant. But also they're so different. Jessica has so much more of a delicious bite to her. She really enjoys pushing people's boundaries. She enjoys saying the wrong things. She enjoys tormenting her children. She loves them ferociously but she's seen so much bad that she really wants to come through with biting humor so we can all laugh. Because laughter is the only thing that can get you through the darkest days. Mellie was taking herself pretty seriously when we left her. I hope she's been a few years in office and having a great time but she was still really taking life seriously. Jessica isn't. It's all been burned away, that innocence and protocol. She's just surviving anyway she can

MM: Taking it day by day. We all deal with bad news in different ways. Do you think your character is processing this painful past in a healthy way or is she going to continue to face her demons in a negative way?

BY: I think Jessica made some pretty fast decisions to shut it all down, for the sake of her children is what she told herself but also as the only way of moving forward. It was an insurmountable thing to face of what her husband had done and what her life had become. I don't think she could have not gotten up in the morning because she had two small children. But now that Malcolm has started to have these dreams and recover these memories, it worries her so much. She can't help but go through it with him. It's bringing a lot up for her as well. She'll have a difficult time reconciling what happened in the past in the twenty years intervening and still realizing the children are the reason for her choices, they're all grown up now and making their own choices. That really puts her at square one in terms of dealing.

MM: Do you think it's safe to say that part of her blames herself for those deaths and not noticing signs that could have been right there throughout the time that the Surgeon killed those people?

BY: One hundred percent. We all have intuition and I think she was very clear that something was off but she thought it was another woman or the seven year itch and losing connection as a couple. But she could have never conceived she was married to a serial killer. Now, knowing that, it's just a feat to wake up every day and crawl out from under that stone.

MM: It's been two decades since everything transpired. What do you think Jessica would say to her ex-husband if she were ever in a room with him again? I imagine there would be a whole lot of hostility lingering from what happened.

BY: I think at this moment in time it would be about saving Malcolm and the effect he has on Malcolm. What can she do to change the past? All she can focus on is changing the present. But I think their relationship was always fraught. They had crazy great chemistry and she would have done everything to keep that marriage going, not just because of the protocol of the society in which they ran but because she really loved him. That stuff doesn't go away and all that energy can get transmuted into hate. But you know you're really over someone when you just don't care anymore and I don't think Jessica is there yet.

MM: A simple yes or no answer will suffice for this one. Does Jessica know anything about The Surgeon that her kids don't know or haven't found out about yet?

BY: I don't know! I don't know. Possibly. I like that. That's the right answer.

MM: Jessica seems gung-ho on keeping Malcolm out of Martin's hands and steering clear from investigating murders. Do you think she has strong concerns that her son could turn into her ex-husband?

BY: A hundred percent. A mother always worries. But when your son has seen so much at such a young age, and when you see that this interest in this arena endures through all the visits with his dad for years and years afterward, going to Quantico, becoming a profiler, for it to literally become his life's work has to be terrifying. Because it's a knife's edge between good and bad. In the pilot, we saw him chop a man's hand off. I think that fear is only increasing as we meet them all in this moment in their lives. But I think she's been watching him since he was nine, since this all happened to see, it's nature or nurture. It's will he or won't he? Will he turn into his father? Will he stand clear of a genetic predisposition? Who knows.



Cr: David Giesbrecht / FOX.

MM: Everyone's very focused on Malcolm falling victim to his father's tendencies. He has these night terrors, keeps himself shackled to the bed. But just throwing it out there, wouldn't it be fun if Ainsley ends up following her her dad's footsteps instead? How would that affect your character?

BY: That's so interesting. I've been thinking about it a lot lately. Siblings often define themselves in opposition to each other and all these years, Malcom, it's not that he's been the squeaky wheel but he's been on the frontlines of the trauma. He's taken up more space. PTSD, depression, anxiety, the night terrors. There's been a lot of work to handle and Ainsley has had to be the good one. And she has been, incredibly so. Now that Malcolm is trying to be productive and work on himself and facing his dreams and recovering his memory and trying to work on it all and live an honest life, it really leaves room for Ainsley to spin out a little. It's interesting to see how she handles all of that latitude and free space and ask the questions she never got to ask until now.

MM: We shall see! It seems we're kind of on the cusp of Malcolm remembering some crucial points in his past as a child. Can we hope to find out if Jessica was the driving force in suppressing those memories like finding the woman in the trunk and what Martin made his son endure during that revelation?

BY: I think there's always more to the story, you know? It'll be interesting to see how much Malcolm is able to remember. He was a child and it was such a stressful, emotional time. But just like life, no one gets out alive. It was enough guilt to spread around in those days. From a child's point of view, a grown-up child, we always love to blame our parents for everything. I think there will be plenty for Malcolm to remember and judge Jessica for.

MM: On the lighter side, what's one element of the show that people might not be expecting, whether it's a romance, comedy, and so on?

BY: The humor of it. It cracks me up. Every script we get has laugh out loud moments for me. That's just like life. Even the hardest moments in my personal life, that's what gets you through, even if it's macabre laugh, you just have to laugh, even if it overwhelms you. That's what I think is delicious about the show. And yes, there will be romance and there will be intrigue. But for me it's the family aspect and the humanity of it all and the humor.

MM: Can you use three words to describe the season?

BY: You'll never guess.

MM: Oh boy!

BY: I haven't. It keeps surprising me. It's the best.

MM: I like to throw in my signature question to all of my interviews. If you were to construct a donut based on Jessica's personality, what kind of donut would it be and what kind of toppings would be on it?

BY: I love this question! First of all it would be a plain cake donut. No glaze. Because that gets on your fingers and gets on your clothes and that just can't be. On top she'd have a few barbiturates, a little Cornish hen, topped with a little martini olive that has been well, well, well soaked.

MM: I love it. I think that is the most creative, best answer I've ever gotten. Finally, what's coming up for your character? Can you tease anything without going into spoiler territory? Why should viewers tune in each week?

BY: Oh my goodness, let me think about what I can say and what I do know. For me, it's a real nature/nurture story. What keeps me on the edge of my seat is when or will Malcolm succumb to his darker urges and watching that unfold is just horrifying and delicious. For Jessica, it's more a question of now that she sees the effect that he has on him, how long can she keep herself away from Martin Whitly?

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