

FREIDA MCFADDEN



IT WAS HER HOUSE FIRST...

THE WIFE
UPSTAIRS

The Wife Upstairs

a novel by

FREIDA McFADDEN

The Wife Upstairs

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To my girls

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Chapter 1

October, 2019

If I had hesitated even half a second, everything would have been different.

There would have been blood all over the pavement. Screeching wheels. Screams from passersby. Then an ambulance. A firetruck. Or maybe just a trip straight to the morgue. Somber calls to relatives—a husband, a daughter, a son.

I've never done anything heroic in my entire life. The leading candidate would be this cat I used to feed in an alley next to my building. But I'm not sure if feeding a stray cat counts as heroic. Also, I heard that cat eventually bit somebody, so maybe I was just aiding and abetting a bad-tempered cat.

But today, I saw the red Ford Taurus rushing towards the red light with no intention of stopping. I saw the hunched old lady struggling with two grocery bags she could barely lift, blissfully unaware of the impending collision. And a split second before the Ford burst through the red light into the crosswalk, I grabbed her and pulled her back.

I saved her life. For the first time in my life, I'm a hero.

"What in God's name is *wrong* with you? Are you crazy?"

The old woman is not as grateful as I would have expected. Actually, that's an understatement. She's glaring at me with venom in her watery blue eyes, her jowls trembling with fury. She looks like she's going to pop me one with her oversized light pink purse.

It could be because when I grabbed her (in the course of saving her life, as you recall), I wasn't as delicate about it as I might have been if time weren't of the essence. That is to say, I knocked her down. But to be fair, I fell too. And I think most of the impact of her fall was blunted by her landing on me.

Also, she dropped her groceries during the fall. And now there are groceries everywhere. I mean, *everywhere*. There are cans of chicken noodle soup, cans of creamed corn, cans of green beans, all rolling around the pavement, trying to make a break for it.

"You tried to attack me!" the woman yells at me as she struggles to her feet. A fleck of her spit hits me in the chin as she briefly loses her

balance. I reach out to steady her, but she belts me with a loaf of white bread, so I take a step back.

“A car was going to hit you,” I try to explain. I reach for a can of tomato soup about to roll into the street. Christ, there are a lot of cans. Why did she buy so many canned foods? Doesn’t this woman have a *refrigerator*?

The woman snorts like she’s never heard something so ridiculous in her entire life. “There was no car. You *attacked* me. I was minding my own business and you pushed me down! And now I’m going to sue you for assault! And I’ve got witnesses!”

She looks around at the pedestrians that are mostly stepping over her groceries as they cross the street. Nobody but me is even attempting to help clean this up. Are people really this rude? Do they think this is some new game we’re playing where we chase down cans rolling across the sidewalk?

Finally, a man in a business suit stops in front of us, and without being asked, he starts picking up the groceries. The old woman rewards him with a grateful smile that’s a stark contrast from the way she’s still glaring at me. It seems sort of unfair, because *I’m* the one who saved her life.

“Thank you so much, young man,” the old woman says as she pats her puff of white hair. “You’re so kind to help.”

“No problem,” the man says. “How could I see you struggling and not stop to help?”

He flashes a grin that reveals a row of straight, white teeth. My parents couldn’t afford braces, so I’ve got two crooked incisors that I’m self-conscious about. My dream, if I ever have enough money, is to get them fixed. But that’s not going to happen, short of winning the lottery. And I can’t even afford a ticket.

“Well, nobody else stopped,” the woman points out. She shoots me a look. “And this horrible girl over here pushed me down! You saw it happen, didn’t you?”

He doesn’t say anything. He’s busy chasing down a can of cranberries.

She clutches her neck and moans. “I think I have whiplash! I should probably call an ambulance.”

I let out an involuntary gasp. “An ambulance?”

“That’s right,” she snaps at me. “I’m going to sue you for everything

you've got. I've got a witness now!"

She's going to sue me for everything I've got? Well, good luck. My bank account is mostly cobwebs at this point. She can have my debt if she wants it.

"*You're* my witness," the old woman says to the man. "You saw how she pushed me down, didn't you?"

He scoops up a carton of eggs from the sidewalk. He cracks it open to find three casualties inside. "Yes, I saw it."

The old woman smiles triumphantly. "I thought you did."

He glances at me with a raised eyebrow, and I just shake my head. "She saved your life, you know," he says. "There was a car that ran the red light. It was about to hit you."

Her eyes widen. "You're making that up!"

"No. I'm not." His voice is flat, leaving no room for argument. "She saved your life. You'd be dead if not for her." He shoves a can of onions into her bag. "You should thank her."

The old woman looks between the two of us, the wrinkles in her face darkening. "Oh, I get it. The two of you are in cahoots."

"*Cahoots?*" A smile touches the man's lips. "I promise you, I've never met this woman before in my life."

It suddenly occurs to me the man is quite nice looking. He has a thick head of chestnut hair, vivid green eyes, and also, he fills out that suit pretty nicely. I don't usually notice things like that, but it's hard *not* to notice.

"I don't believe you!" The woman clutches the pink purse to her chest. She fumbles for the two grocery bags, which have mostly been restored. I suspect there are still a few cans rolling around somewhere that will eventually fall into a sidewalk grate. "This is some kind of scam. I've heard about this. You probably want me to buy a bunch of gift cards for a prince in Nigeria."

The man's mouth falls open. "*A prince in Nigeria?*"

But the old woman doesn't want to hear another word. She stomps off with her grocery bags, nearly getting floored by a taxi cab as she rushes across the street. But she makes it.

I straighten up from my crouched position, my calves screaming with pain. That's the last time I try to save somebody's life. I learned my lesson. All I got was yelled at. And now I'm running late.

"Hey." The hot guy with the green eyes and business suit is still standing next to me. "There's a coffee shop right there with a bathroom if

you want to get cleaned up.”

Cleaned up?

I look down at my clothing. This morning I had put on my best clean white dress shirt and gray pencil skirt because I’ve got my first job interview since I was laid off two weeks ago. It’s nothing great, just bartending, but I need it—bad.

Unfortunately, it rained early this morning. And because it’s the end of October and there are leaves all over the ground, the rain mixed with the fallen leaves, and it all turned into some kind of disgusting brown paste. And that brown leaf paste is now all over my clean white shirt and gray pencil skirt. I look like I just rolled around in the mud. This is not salvageable. My only real option is to go home and change. Except my interview is in...

Fifteen minutes. Damn.

I’m new at this saving people’s lives business. Does it always end up so crappily? Then again, I shouldn’t be surprised. Everything going wrong unexpectedly seems to be a pattern in my life.

The man is looking at me with his eyebrows bunched together. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” I look down at my ruined interview outfit. “Totally fine. Absolutely, completely fine.”

He just looks at me. I don’t know what it is about this guy, but something about the way he’s looking at me makes me want to pour my heart out to him.

Or rip my clothes off. A little of that too. He *is* pretty hot. And it’s been a while for me. A *long* while. I think there was a different president in office at the time. Kevin Spacey was still a respected actor. Brad and Angelina were a happy couple. You get the idea.

“I have a job interview,” I admit. I raise the sleeve of my shirt, which is caked in leaf paste. “*Had* a job interview. I don’t think it’s going to go well. In fact, I think I should just call it off.”

He raises his eyebrows. “You’re looking for a job?”

I shrug. “Yeah. Sort of.”

Desperately, actually. My landlord informed me yesterday that if I don’t have the rent by Friday, there’s going to be an eviction notice on my door by Saturday. And then I’ll have to live in a cardboard box on the street, because that’s my last option.

“What kind of job was it?”

“Well, this one was bartending.” At a seedy bar that would have paid minimum-wage. “But... I mean, that’s what’s available. At this point...”

I stop talking before I let on how desperate I am. This man is a stranger, after all. He doesn’t want to hear my depressing life story.

But he’s got that smile on his face again. It’s an infectious grin, the kind that makes me want to grin right back, despite the fact that I am covered in leaf paste and about to blow my only chance of making the rent this month.

“Do you believe in fate?” he asks.

I cock my head to the side. Do I believe in *fate*? What kind of question is that? It seems like the kind of question that somebody who’s had a very good life might ask. Because the cards I’ve been dealt so far have all been losing ones. Starting with my parents. And then Freddy. If fate exists, then all I can say is it doesn’t like me very much.

“I’m here in the city for an interview myself,” the man goes on, without waiting to hear my answer. “I was actually going to interview somebody for a job. Except she didn’t show up. So...”

I stare at him. Is he saying what I think he’s saying? “What kind of job?”

“Well, it’s...” He hesitates, then nods his head at the coffee shop. “Listen, why don’t we go inside to talk about it? I’ll buy you a cup of coffee—you look like you could use it.” He grins at me. “I’m Adam, by the way. Adam Barnett.”

“Sylvia Robinson.”

“Nice to meet you, Sylvia.”

He holds his hand out to me, and I shake it. He has a nice handshake. Warm and firm, but not like he’s trying to crush the bones of my hand. Why do some men shake your hand like that? What are they trying to prove?

Of course, then I notice my own hand is slick with leaf paste. This just isn’t my day. But Adam doesn’t wipe his hand on his pants when we’re done shaking—he doesn’t seem at all concerned that I’ve just given him a handful of muddy leaves.

“So what do you say?” he asks.

“I, uh...”

I don’t know why I’m hesitating. A job is a job. And this man seems nice enough. He’s the only one in the street who bothered to help clean up that old woman’s groceries. And he defended me when she was attacking

me. I need a job badly, and this is my only shot right now. Plus, it would be nice to sit down and get some coffee after the morning I'm having (and also wash my hands).

But for some reason, I can't shake this awful feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I once read that when people have near-fatal heart attacks, they get a sense of doom. They describe a sinking sensation before the chest pain even begins, like the world is about to end. It's a commonly described phenomenon that nobody can explain. But when something terrible is about to happen, people *know*.

And when I look at Adam Barnett, for a moment, I get that sensation. Doom.

Like something terrible will happen if I follow him into that coffee shop.

But that's ridiculous. I've had a run of bad luck over my life, so of course, I'm going to be suspicious of everything. I don't believe in fate and I don't believe in premonitions. What I do believe is that I will be homeless in a few days if I don't get my hands on some money. And turning tricks in Times Square is not my cup of tea.

"Okay," I say. "Let's get some coffee."

Chapter 2

It's even worse than I thought.

I look at myself in the bathroom mirror in the tiny coffee shop where Adam brought me. I knew I had leaf paste on my shirt, but I didn't realize quite how much. There are chunks of leaves dotting the sleeves of the shirt, all over my back, and stuck to my butt. My skirt, at least, isn't white. So I can just wipe that off and it's good enough. But the shirt is a lost cause.

Moreover, I look like a woman who just slipped in a big pile of muddy leaves. There are a few flakes of detritus on my neck and chin, and my dirty blonde hair has become partially unraveled from the elaborate French twist I learned how to execute from a YouTube video. I remove the clips and shake it loose, knowing I'll never be able to re-create it without step-by-step instructions from Yolanda the Hair Guru.

I turn on the faucet for the sink. The water is ice cold, of course. I wait a few seconds for it to heat up, but I'm not that lucky today. Instead, I have to splash cold water all over my face. Unfortunately, that makes my cheap mascara leak like I'm the Bride of Frankenstein, so I have to wipe it all off. I wore a lot more black eye makeup when I was younger, but I still wear a fair amount, and without it, my face looks pale and plain. But I don't have any in my purse, so there's not much I can do about it.

I start splashing water on my muddy shirt. It gets the dirt and the leaves out (mostly), but now I've got dark wet splotches all over me. Also, it's becoming increasingly obvious that the wet fabric is see-through.

Goddamn it. I can't go out there like this. Not when this is potentially a job interview. Or potentially... something else. Whatever it is, I look totally inappropriate.

There's a rap on the bathroom door. I've been in here for too long and someone else needs to come in. "I'll be out in a minute!"

"It's Adam," the voice says from behind the door. "I've got something for you."

I crack the door open just enough that I can see his eyes peeking through. He's holding something in his right hand.

"It's a shirt," he says. "I got it from my car. I could tell yours was wrecked."

I reach my hand through the gap and take the shirt from him. It's a T-

shirt in a size small. It's pink. I'm guessing it's not his.

Before I can ask, he says, "It's my wife's."

"Oh!" I say. But what I'm really thinking is: oh.

Of course he has a wife. He's a nice, thirty-something guy who looks great in a suit. *Of course* he has a wife. Those guys are never single. I hadn't noticed a ring, but to be fair, I was distracted.

This is a good thing though. Because if he legitimately has a job for me, the last thing I need to do is muck it up with a pointless flirtation. I'm terrible at flirting anyway. If he's happily married, that will be off the table. And I can focus on a new job and getting my life back on track.

"Thanks, Adam," I say. "I'll be out in a minute."

"Take your time."

I lock the bathroom door and take off the white shirt. I roll it into a tiny ball and stuff it deep inside my purse. Then I slide on the pink T-shirt. I turn left and right, admiring my reflection. It fits me like a glove—it's very flattering. Thank you, Mrs. Barnett.

Before I go out, I reach into my purse and pull out a tube of red lipstick. I apply a fresh layer, which brightens up my pale face. Yes, he's married. But still.

The diner is cramped, and Adam snagged a booth that seats only two people. He's already ordered us coffee, and there's a cup waiting for me in front of the empty side of the booth. His eyes light up when he sees me, and he gestures for me to sit down. I take a second to check out his left hand, and sure enough, the simple white gold wedding band is there. How did I miss that?

"I got you a cup of coffee. Hope it's okay. There's cream and sugar on the table."

I slide into my seat. "I take it black."

Bitter and black. That's the only way I ever drink coffee.

"Same here." Adam lifts his cup of coffee and takes a long sip. He shudders. "What a day, huh?"

I nod. I know *I've* had a shit day. But I don't know what sort of day he's had so far. Is it just that the person he was supposed to interview didn't show? Something in his expression makes me think it's more than that, but it seems like it might be off-limits to ask. I don't want to be rude, especially since I'm now counting on this guy to keep a roof over my head.

"Do you want anything to eat?" he asks. "My treat."

I'm starving. I'm currently on the poverty diet. All I ate for breakfast this morning was a banana. I have eaten spaghetti every night in the last week for dinner, which means I only had to buy that one box of spaghetti and one can of tomato sauce, totaling \$5.39. But the last thing I want to do is stuff my face in front of a potential employer. The coffee will have to be enough. "No thanks."

He stirs his coffee with a spoon, even though he hasn't added any cream or sugar. He tugs on his tie with his other hand. I don't know why he looks so nervous. *He's* the one offering a job. In this economy, it seems like anyone offering a job is in pretty good shape. I'm the one who's about to be homeless.

Of course, I don't know what the job is. Maybe it's something really awful. I try to imagine a job I wouldn't be willing to do for a reasonable salary. I would clean toilets. I would shovel snow for him on the coldest day of winter. I would take out his trash.

I wouldn't *eat* his trash. If that's the job, I wouldn't take it. I suppose that's where I draw the line. No eating of garbage.

"So I'm sure you want to hear about the job," he finally says. "Cut to the chase, right?"

"Well..."

He smiles crookedly. "You'd be working for me—at my house. Well, technically you'd be working for my wife."

I take a sip of coffee and shudder much the way he did. Wow, this stuff is high octane. "Your wife?"

"Yes." He plays with his wedding band, turning it in circles around his fourth finger. "Victoria has... she's been ill."

My heart sinks. "I don't have any nursing training..."

"Oh, you wouldn't need that." He takes another swig of coffee. "She's got a nurse to help her in the morning. And she's got me at night. But when I'm working, I want somebody around to keep her company."

She has a nurse who comes in every day? It sounds like this woman is pretty sick. I'm dying to ask what happened to her, but I feel like that might be rude. And he's not volunteering any information. If he wanted me to know, he would tell me. If I take the job, presumably I'll find out.

"She's alone all day," he explains. "I work from home, but I can't be with her twenty-four hours a day. I just want somebody to spend time with her. Maybe read to her. Sit with her during meals. Just be a friend to her."

"You're hiring me to be your wife's friend?" I blurt out before I can

stop myself.

Adam's ears turn slightly pink. "Well, when you put it that way..."

"Sorry," I say quickly. "I shouldn't have said that. What you're doing for your wife is... nice. You don't want her to be lonely."

And I mean it. I don't know what's wrong with his wife, but it's obvious he cares about her. He's willing to pay somebody to be with her while he's working. If something happened to me, I'd probably end up in some nursing home or something.

"You said you work from home," I say. "What sort of work do you do?"

I expected him to say he worked in computers, since that's what most people who work from home seem to do. But then he surprises me by saying, "I'm a writer."

"You're kidding!" I take a sip of my coffee. "Anything I would have heard of?"

He shrugs. "Maybe."

I'm not much of a reader, so he could be a bestselling author and I wouldn't know it. Presumably, he does okay if he's able to pay me to be his wife's friend. Or else, he's got a big inheritance. Or maybe Victoria has the money.

"Anyway..." He rakes a hand through his dark hair. "There's one other thing about the job..."

I raise my eyebrows. Uh oh, here comes the catch. Let me guess: I have to perform my duties while completely naked. "Yes?"

"It's not local."

"Not... local?"

"Victoria and I live out on Long Island."

I frown. "Where in Long Island?"

"All the way out."

"Like the Hamptons?"

"Montauk."

I stifle a groan. Montauk is at the tip of Long Island. Like, as far as you can go without being in the Atlantic Ocean. It would take me over two hours to drive there from my studio apartment in Brooklyn. And that's if I had a car, which I don't. I suppose I could take the Long Island Railroad. I can't even imagine how long a ride that would be.

"That's a bit of a trip," I admit. "And I don't have a car."

"Right." He stirs his coffee cup again. "That's why... I mean, if you

took the job, you could live in our house. Rent-free, of course. And you can use Victoria's car for whatever you need."

My mouth falls open. I hadn't expected him to offer that. Of course, it makes sense. If you live out in Montauk, you can't expect to find somebody in the city to come work for you unless you offer accommodations.

"That's very generous," I say.

He offers that crooked smile again. "Work is keeping me very busy lately, and I hate the thought of Victoria being lonely all day. And I need to find someone before the winter sets in. The snow will make it more difficult for me to arrange interviews."

This job would solve all my problems. I'd have money coming in. I'd have a place to live. I'd be able to start crawling out of the hole my medical expenses left me in. I could start fresh. It would be amazing.

But for some reason, every fiber of my being is crying out for me to tell him no. It's that same sense of impending doom I had outside. That if I take this job—if I go out to that house in Montauk—something terrible will happen to me.

Not just terrible. Worse than terrible.

I can't take this job.

"We should probably discuss salary," he says.

I clear my throat. There's no point in continuing this discussion. I have to tell him no. "Listen, Adam..."

"Would fifteen hundred dollars a week be okay?"

My mouth drops open. Is he *serious*? He can't possibly be. He's going to give me a free room *and* board *and* fifteen hundred dollars a week to hang out with his wife? How does he even have the money to pay me that much? It sounds too good to be true.

But if it's true, that money will change my life.

"And I can arrange health insurance too," he says quickly. "Also, you'll have Sundays off. And... two weeks of vacation? Is that enough?" When he sees my expression, he adds, "Three weeks. Three weeks of vacation."

I think I'm going to choke on my own happiness.

There's no reason not to take this job. Yes, my gut is telling me to turn him down. But so what? Freddy used to say to me that I always thought something bad was going to happen to me. *Doom and Gloom Sylvia*. But to be fair, I was right a lot. Bad things *did* happen to me. I've

gotten burned so many times, it makes sense I'd be wary of an opportunity that seems too good to be true.

This job is a chance to turn things around.

"When do you need me to start?" I ask.

Chapter 3

The train ride out to Montauk is endless.

Adam offered to pick me up and drive me there, but I couldn't in good conscience make him drive six hours round-trip, and then another six hours to drive me home. If he drove twelve hours for me, I would feel obligated to take this job. Like when you go on a date with a guy and he buys you a lobster dinner, and then you feel like you owe him something.

Not that I date anymore. I'm done with that for at least the rest of this decade.

So I'm on the Long Island Railroad, and Adam has promised to reimburse me for my round trip ticket. I've snagged a window seat by myself, which wasn't that difficult considering I'm going against traffic, and I'm pretty sure nobody is commuting all the way out here on a daily basis anyway. I've got my earbuds in, but I've tuned out the music as I watch the scenery fly by. At first, there are lots of houses and buildings. Then fewer houses and fewer buildings. Then just houses. Now it's mostly green.

And I've still got another hour to go.

I get out my phone to try to find something to entertain me the rest of the journey. There's a text message from Freddy on the lock screen. I changed my number, but somehow he keeps getting it. One of our mutual friends must be giving it to him. He hasn't changed his number though, so I recognize the digits even without his name on the screen:

Please give me another chance. Please Sylvie.

I snort at the phone. By now, Freddy should know better than to think I'll ever give him another chance. It's because of him that I'm trekking out to Montauk to keep from living out on the street. This is his fault. My whole life is his fault. I start to block his number but before I can, another message pops up:

Please. I love you. I'll do anything you say.

And then he is officially blocked. But knowing Freddy, he'll figure out a way around it.

Adam told me he'd be waiting at the train station to pick me up. By the time the train pulls into its final stop, my neck feels stiff as a board. I take a moment to stretch myself out and gather my courage. That awful sensation has gotten worse and worse during the long train ride out to the