



WARD

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FREIDA
McFADDEN

WARD D

FREIDA MCFADDEN

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For my patients

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1

PRESENT DAY

Dear AMY BRENNER,

You have been assigned to overnight call tonight on our primary locked psychiatric unit, Ward D.

In preparation for your assigned shift, please observe the following guidelines:

- You will be given a numerical code that can be used to leave Ward D. Except in the case of an emergency, you **MAY NOT** exit the unit during your shift.
- Do not divulge any personal information to your patients. This includes details about your personal life or your home address.
- The following objects are prohibited on Ward D: alcohol, flammable liquids, thumbtacks, pens, needles, staples, paper clips, safety pins, nail files, tweezers, nail clippers, tobacco products, electronic cigarettes, plastic bags, razor blades, weapons, or any items that could be used as weapons.
- Do not expect to sleep during your shift.

The on-call attending physician tonight is DR. BECK. Please report to the attending physician on arrival at Ward D.

Sincerely,

Pauline Walter

Administrative assistant to the Chief of Psychiatry.

Mrs. Pritchett can't sleep.

Or at least, she couldn't sleep the last time she was here at the psychiatry outpatient office where I have been doing a medical school clerkship for the past two weeks. I am working with a psychiatrist named Dr. Silver, who I have nicknamed Dr. Sleepy (at least in my head) because eighty percent of the patients he sees are here for sleep problems. The medical school psychiatry rotation that I'm on is supposed to expose me to a general outpatient practice, with a mix of depression, anxiety, psychosis, etc., but it's really just sleeping problems here. And I'm fine with that.

I still have the notes I took in my little spiral notebook from Mrs. Pritchett's last visit. I hadn't realized until this very second how illegible my handwriting has become. Aside from her age of sixty-four years old, I can only make out two sentences:

Can't fall asleep.

And:

Cat

I underlined "cat" several times, so it must've been important, but I can't read anything I wrote below that word. Something about cats, presumably. Maybe her cat was sitting on her face when she was attempting to fall asleep. That happened to me once.

Mrs. Pritchett is perched in the exam room, her chin-length gray hair combed into a neat bob, her big pink purse clutched in her lap. Unlike most exam rooms I have seen, this one doesn't have an elevated examining table. It's just a room with two wooden chairs in it. Mrs. Pritchett is sitting in one, I will sit in the other, and then when Dr. Sleepy comes in, he will take the second chair and I will stand, hovering over them awkwardly.

"Amy!" Mrs. Pritchett exclaims when I walk into the room. "I'm so happy to see you, dear!"

"Oh?" This is different from the usual bleary-eyed greeting I get from patients. "How are you sleeping?"

"So much better—thanks to you!"

"Really?" I try not to sound too astonished, but it's hard not to blurt out, *But I did absolutely nothing.*

"Yes!" She beams at me. "Everyone else just prescribed a bunch of sleep medications, but you actually talked to me. More importantly, you *listened*. And that's how I realized the reason I couldn't sleep was that I was missing Mr. Whiskers so much since he passed on six months ago."

Oh, *cat*. Now it all makes sense. “I’m so glad I could help.”

She smiles tearfully. “And that’s why after talking to you, I went out and I got a brand new kitten. Ever since I took home Mr. Fluffy, I have been sleeping like a log. It’s all because of you. Because you took the time to listen.”

What can I say? As a medical student, I don’t have much knowledge, but I have lots of time to spend with patients. And it’s a good thing, because Mrs. Pritchett proceeds to show me about five billion Polaroid photos of her brand new kitten.

“Also,” she says when we finish looking at the photos, “I got you a thank-you gift!”

A thank-you gift? Seriously? Wow, this is the most exciting thing that’s happened to me in about two years.

However, some of my excitement wanes when Mrs. Pritchett stands up from her chair. And I would say it vanishes entirely when she grabs a giant painting that I hadn’t realized was in the back of the exam room. The picture had been turned to face away from us, but now I can see it clearly.

It’s a portrait of a cat.

And it is almost as big as I am.

“This is a painting I had commissioned of Mr. Whiskers,” Mrs. Pritchett says proudly. “And I would like you to have it.”

“Oh,” I say. “Um. Thank you!”

A black cat is prominently featured in the giant portrait. Clearly, this is larger than life, unless Mr. Whiskers was a bobcat or perhaps a small lion. And why does he look so *angry* in the painting?

“Doesn’t it look realistic?” Mrs. Pritchett says.

Yes. He truly looks like he is about to leap out of the painting and maul me.

I lug the painting out of the exam room, unsure where I am going to put this thing in my tiny little apartment. For now, I leave it in the hallway.

Dr. Sleepy is working in the office next door to where I had been sitting with Mrs. Pritchett. This other office has a desk and a computer set up on top of it, and Dr. Sleepy is tapping away at the keys when I rap my fist against the open door. When he looks up at me, he pushes his half-moon reading glasses up the bridge of his nose and gives me one of his mild smiles.

“Hello, Amy.” Dr. Sleepy always speaks in a calm voice that is close to a monotone. I’m pretty sure he could lull most of his patients to sleep with just his voice. They probably leave the appointment and immediately drift off in their cars, possibly while driving. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Well then. Tell me about Mrs. Pritchett.”

I go through the information about Mrs. Pritchett on my little notepad. Dr. Sleepy takes it all in quietly, making slight grunts at appropriate moments. I mention the cat portrait, hoping he might offer to take it off my hands, but no such luck.

“Anyway,” I say. “That’s all.”

Dr. Sleepy rubs his white goatee thoughtfully. “And how are *you* doing, Amy? You don’t look like you’ve been sleeping very well either.”

He’s right—I didn’t sleep well last night. I’m sure I have massive bags under my eyes. “I’m just a little nervous because I’m rotating on Ward D tonight.”

“Ah, that makes sense.” I’m not sure how disturbed to be by the fact that he thinks it’s normal that I have spent half the night awake worrying about my overnight call on the locked psych unit. “It can be challenging on Ward D. But I think you’ll learn a tremendous amount tonight. Who is your attending?”

“Dr. Beck.”

He nods in approval. “One of the finest psychiatrists I’ve known. And an excellent teacher. You’ll have a great experience tonight.”

I highly doubt that.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he says in that calm, reassuring voice of his. “Remember, you will have the code to exit the unit. You can leave at any time.”

Right. There’s apparently a keypad with a six-digit code that controls the locked door to the psychiatric unit. But I can’t memorize a phone number, and that’s only one digit more. What if I forget the code and I’m trapped? *What then?*

He smiles soothingly. “You have done such a great job here the last two weeks, Amy. All the patients tell me you are a wonderful listener. A lot of students seem to forget that psychiatric patients are human beings, just like you and me. They just want to get better, and part of your duty as a physician will be to give them the best possible care.”

“I know.”

He cocks his head to the side and looks at me in the thoughtful way he often does. “What are you so worried about, Amy?”

“It just seems like it could be... dangerous.”

“You’ll be fine.” He levels his watery blue eyes at me. “All the patients are very well controlled on their medications. There’s nothing to worry about.”

That sounds like a lie. If they were well controlled, the unit wouldn't have to be locked, would it?

But that's not the real reason I am dreading my night on Ward D. I can't tell Dr. Sleepy the real reason I was tossing and turning last night. I can't tell anyone the real reason I'm desperately terrified of Ward D.

"Listen." Dr. Sleepy glances down at the gold watch on his wrist. "Why don't you let me finish up with Mrs. Pritchett, and you can take off early? Take a little Amy Time before you head over to Ward D."

A little Amy Time sounds fantastic. I don't get much of that anymore.

"Thank you so much," I say.

He winks at me. "No problem. And don't worry. Once you get to Ward D, you'll see it's not so bad. I promise."

I hold my tongue to keep from telling him the truth. The truth is, I've already seen Ward D. I visited it once before, nearly a decade ago.

Back when my best friend was a patient there.

I still remember her matted hair and wild eyes when I came to visit. She didn't look like my best friend anymore—more like a wild animal closed up in a cage. But the thing that sticks with me most—the thing I will never forget—are the words she spit out at me just seconds before I ran out of the unit, swearing to myself I would never return ever again:

You should be the one locked up here, Amy.

I am going to be spending the next thirteen hours of my life in a locked psychiatric ward.

I try not to think about that fact as I sit in the passenger seat of my roommate Gabby's third hand gray Toyota. (It was her dad's, then her brother's, and now it's hers—any day now, it will be the junkyard's.) She has kindly offered to give me a ride to the hospital for my night shift, which is starting in exactly twenty minutes. It feels like a countdown to my execution.

"Stop freaking out, Amy," Gabby tells me. She's been working on Ward D during the days for the past two weeks, and she doesn't understand my concerns. She's even rotated with Dr. Beck the first week and absolutely adores him. "It will be fine."

Of course, at this moment I am freaking out a bit more about the fact that Gabby just zipped through a stop sign without so much as pausing. Gabby is probably the second-worst driver on Long Island (the first being me, of course). Then again, if Gabby wraps the car around a tree, I will have a free pass to get out of this shift. For once, I'm hoping we get in a terrible crash.

Well, maybe not *terrible*. But something just bad enough to require a visit to the hospital. Maybe a broken bone—an unimportant one like my pinky finger.

"Who are you on-call with tonight?" Gabby asks me.

"Stephanie."

"Oh!" She brightens. "Stephanie is awesome. That's so perfect."

I have to agree with her about that. Stephanie Margolis is one of my more level-headed classmates. She is the kind of person you want to be studying with the night before a test, because she always knows her stuff,

but she's not obnoxious about it. She's a calming presence in any room. Knowing she will be with me tonight makes me feel a little better about the whole thing.

Gabby runs a hand through her tight black curls, but her hand gets stuck and for a moment, I am seriously scared I'm going to have to take the wheel and steer the car myself while she disentangles her fingers using both hands. But then she gets it under control.

My phone vibrates against my thigh. As I pull it out, I cringe at the sight of my badly chewed fingernails—I would be chewing them right now if there were anything left to chew. The name Cameron Berger is staring back at me from the screen of my phone. Followed by a text message:

Hey.

I thought nothing could make me feel worse right now, but there it is. A text message from my ex-boyfriend, who recently broke up with me in a very humiliating way.

"What is it?" Gabby asks me.

"Cameron," I say.

She makes a face. Gabby was the one handing me the tissues after our break up, and she even helped me build a little boyfriend bonfire to rid myself of all Cam's belongings that he left behind at my place. "What does that jerk have to say?"

"He said, 'Hey.'"

"How dare he!" She lays a hand on the horn, probably startling the guy driving the car in front of us, who is doing absolutely nothing wrong. "I hope you're not answering him."

"Of course not."

"I don't know why you don't just block him!"

She's right—I should block him. And I will.

Maybe tomorrow.

We turn a corner and the hospital comes into view—it's a new structure built in a circular shape so that the inpatient units form a loop. It was built to have an ultra-modern appearance, like we're living in the not-too-distant future. For the last two years, I've been taking classes at the hospital: anatomy, physiology, pathology, microbiology, etc. But now we're finally using the hospital for the reason it's intended: to see patients and learn how to become doctors. This is what I have been dreaming about for my entire life.

Although I *never* dreamed about becoming a psychiatrist. Of all the

specialties I have been considering, that is the only one that has never crossed my mind.

Gabby skids to a sickening halt in front of the busy entrance to the hospital, narrowly missing a man in a wheelchair. “Here we are!”

“Here we are,” I echo, clutching the brown paper sack on my lap, containing my American cheese sandwich and a bag of chips I found in one of our cupboards. The sack crumples under my hands.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “You’ll be fine.”

“I’ll text you when I get inside.” I want to add: *If you don’t hear from me every hour, send help.*

“Actually...” Gabby twirls a lock of black hair around her finger. “The reception isn’t great there. It’s actually sort of... nonexistent.”

I gape at her. I didn’t think it was possible to feel worse about tonight, but there it is. “You didn’t tell me that!”

“You were already so upset. I didn’t want to make you feel worse!”

I lean my head back and pout. “At least I could have *prepared* myself then.”

“Look,” she says, “if you go into the staff lounge and hold the phone right up to the window—like, actually touching it—you can get a couple of bars.”

Apparently, I am going to spend most of tonight in the staff lounge, with my phone pressed against the window.

“I’ll pick you up in the morning,” Gabby says. “Seven o’clock sharp. We’ll go get pancakes.”

I feel bad dragging Gabby to the hospital at seven on a Saturday morning, although to be fair, it was her bright idea to attempt to carpool this year. So far, it feels like a mostly failed experiment, but we’re still trying to make it work. And anyway, the thought of jumping into Gabby’s car tomorrow morning and driving to the local diner for pancakes will give me something to look forward to.

“Okay,” I say, except I don’t get out of the car. I don’t budge from the passenger’s seat.

“Amy.” She frowns at me. “You need to calm down. What are you so worried about?”

It’s the same question Dr. Sleepy asked me. I open my mouth, wishing I could tell her everything, but also knowing that I can’t. Only one person knows the truth, and that’s Jade. I can never tell anyone else. Not my parents, not Gabby... I couldn’t even tell Cameron before I found out what a jerk he was.

“What if,” I say quietly, “at the end of the night, they get confused and

think that I'm one of the patients there and they don't let me out?"

For a moment, Gabby stares at me. But then, after a few beats, she breaks out into loud laughter. The kind of boisterous Gabby-laugh that usually makes me want to join in, but not today. "Oh my God, Amy. You are so funny."

She thinks I'm joking.

I raise my eyes to gaze up at the fifteen-story hospital looming above me. Even though it's July, there must be rain coming because the sun has already dropped in the sky and heavy gray clouds are forming along the roof of the hospital, giving it an ominous appearance. I've never dreaded anything quite so much.

But I'm just being silly. What happened was a very long time ago. It's a distant memory, really.

This will be fine.

I love this sweater. Like, so much.

I've never been much of a sweater person. But the shade of pink perfectly complements my skin tone. And when I run my hand over the soft fabric, it feels like I'm touching a cloud. I turn this way and that, admiring myself in one of many mirrors of Ricardo's—a busy clothing store at the mall.

"That looks *amazing* on you."

I jump slightly at the sound of my friend Jade Carpenter's voice. It's funny because she is one of the loudest people I know with one of the biggest personalities, but sometimes she can sneak up on you like a stealth ninja. I turn around and she is standing behind me, leaning precariously against a row of size two blue jeans that would probably be too big on her.

"You think?" I say. I run my hand over the fabric again.

"Yes!" Jade tucks a strand of her pin-straight blond hair behind one ear. She put on far too much eye makeup this morning, and it's caking on her eyelashes. "You never get new clothing for yourself, Amy. You always wear the same stuff."

That's not an entirely untrue statement. Yes, I can usually be found in blue jeans and oversized hooded sweatshirts. But I *like* hooded sweatshirts. They're warm and cozy, and if it rains, you can put up the hood. They're like the perfect clothing!

"Buy it," Jade says. "Trust me."

With those sage words, Jade wanders off to do her own shopping. Jade will leave the store with at least one new outfit, maybe two. And some jewelry. She always does.

For once, maybe I should do the same. My mom gave me some money—two crisp twenty-dollar bills which I broke on a bottle of peach iced tea

(my absolute favorite drink in the universe), but the remainder is still sitting in my wallet. I could buy myself a sweater. I could have something nice to wear that isn't a hooded sweatshirt for once in my life. It would be fun to show off the sweater at school on Monday.

I grab the price tag hanging off the sleeve of the sweater. And my mouth falls open.

Okay, I will *not* be buying this sweater today.

I shrug off the sweater, replace it on the hanger, and stick it back in the rack of clothing, trying to squelch my feelings of longing. How could a stupid sweater cost that much money, anyway? It's just a bunch of yarn, isn't it? I need to walk away before I develop some kind of dangerous attachment here.

While I'm standing in the middle of Ricardo's, trying not to stroke the forbidden sweater, I notice a little girl standing on the other side of the clothing rack. She is about six or seven years old, wearing a pink dress that is the same color as the sweater, and with blond curls around her face. She is adorable, especially when she offers me a gap-toothed smile.

"That sweater would look pretty on you," she says in her sweet little girl voice.

"Oh, thank you," I say.

"You should buy it."

I smile regretfully at the little girl. "Unfortunately, it's a little too expensive."

The girl looks up at me. Her eyes are very blue, like two little pools of perfect ocean water, rimmed with long dark eyelashes. "You should take it then," she says.

What?

I stare at the little girl, thinking I must've heard her wrong. I wonder where her parents are. A girl that young shouldn't be all alone, should she? "Excuse me?"

The little girl flashes her gap-toothed smile again. "Nobody will see," she says. "It's a big store. They won't miss it."

She's right. Ricardo's is huge. And there are very few salespeople working on the floor. If I stuffed the sweater into my backpack, nobody would notice. I could walk out of here with the sweater and it wouldn't cost me a cent.

But I couldn't do that. That would be stealing! I've never stolen anything in my life, not even a pack of gum. I couldn't steal a whole sweater.

Before I can explain to this little girl that stealing is not okay, a hand

closes around my forearm. Jade is standing next to me, a wild look in her blue eyes that are flecked with bits of yellow. She shifts her trademark red purse on her shoulder.

“Hey, Amy,” she says. “I’m ready to go. Let’s get out of here.”

Before I can protest, Jade is pulling me in the direction of the exit. It’s for the best, though. The thirty-seven dollars and change in my wallet won’t be enough to get me anything I really like here.

“Do you want to hit up Sally’s next?” I say as we weave our way through the clothing racks to get to the exit. “They have cheaper stuff.”

“Sure. Maybe.”

“Or maybe I can grab another peach iced tea?”

Jade laughs. “I’m pretty sure that if I cut you open, your blood would be like ninety percent peach iced tea.”

Well, what can I say? I love peach iced tea. There are worse vices.

Jade still has her skinny fingers wrapped around my wrist when we get to the store’s exit. As we walk through, a deafening alarm goes off. I freeze, surprised, and Jade’s grip on my arm tightens.

“Run,” she instructs me.

Before I can even think about it, Jade and I are running. A voice behind us yells for us to stop, but it’s obvious at this point we can’t stop. We run through the mall, stepping between families with little kids in tow, and I nearly trip over a stroller at one point. Jade almost mows down a woman with a cane. But after we turn two more corners, Jade pulls me into a little nook, and we finally stop running.

Jade is breathing hard, but also laughing. Her cheeks are bright pink, and her bleached white-blond hair is wild. “Oh my God,” she says.

I hug my arms to my chest, massaging a stitch in my side. “What was that?” I ask, although I’m afraid I already know.

Jade pulls open her red purse. I peer inside, and there it is: a shirt stuffed inside with the tags still attached.

“Jade!” I cry. “I can’t believe you did that!”

She shrugs. “That store was so expensive. I didn’t have a choice! Anyway, it’s not a big deal.”

Jade and I have been best friends since the very first day of kindergarten, when we discovered we were wearing the exact same dress—white with a pink and purple heart on the chest. We had sleepovers every weekend from ages nine through eleven, she knows about every single crush I’ve ever had, and she swore she’d keep my secrets to the grave. I’ll never have another friend as good as Jade Carpenter.

But lately, I feel like I barely know her anymore. She used to be more

like me: liked to go to school, liked to read, and followed the rules. But over the last year or so, she seems to get all these crazy ideas about things she wants to do. For example, last week she called me at two in the morning and asked if I wanted to break into Mrs. McCloskey's pool and go skinny-dipping! No, I did not.

"You shouldn't steal, Jade." I don't want to sound lame and give her a lecture about how stealing is wrong, so I just say, "What if you get caught?"

She waves a hand like this doesn't concern her in the slightest. It concerns *me* though. Next year, we're going to be applying to colleges. I don't want to have to explain a shoplifting charge on my application.

"Everyone does it." Jade gives me a pointed look. "You should have taken that sweater. It looked great on you."

I snort. "You know, that little girl was telling me I should take it. Can you believe that?"

Jade pulls the shirt out from her bag and holds it up, admiring the glittery lettering on the front. "What little girl?"

"The little blond girl who was standing next to me."

"I didn't see a little blond girl standing next to you. What are you talking about, Amy?"

I roll my eyes. Jade's powers of observation are not exactly stellar. How could she not notice that little girl? The girl stuck out like a sore thumb in her frilly pink dress, all alone like that. And she was right next to me.

Wasn't she?