

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**FREIDA
McFADDEN**

**DEAD
MED**

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DEAD MED

FREIDA MCFADDEN

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*For my anatomy lab partners. We're all lucky to still be alive.
Especially you, Megan.*

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PROLOGUE

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE ANATOMY FINAL EXAM

DANIELLE

“I WISH I HAD BECOME AN ASTRONAUT INSTEAD.”

I use the back of my forearm to swipe at strands of dark hair that have come loose from the tight bun at the back of my head. The attempt fails, and the escaped locks fall back into my field of vision. This is getting annoying—I wish I could use my hands to clear my hair from my face. Unfortunately, my hands are clad in two pairs of latex gloves that are covered in preserved bits of Agatha’s insides.

Agatha is dead.

“Or maybe a boxer...”

I try to tune out the ramblings of my lab partner, Victor Pereira. Victor’s jittery voice has been a soundtrack to every dissection I have ever done. It might have been more tolerable if Victor offered to help. Instead, he sits perched on a stool, intently watching my handiwork. I’m tempted to rub my dirty gloves on his face.

“Anything but a doctor,” Victor concludes.

You’re not a doctor yet, I nearly point out, but I hold my tongue. I need to focus right now, and the last thing I want to do is get drawn into an argument.

It’s close to midnight on a Sunday night, and Victor and I are the only two medical students in the first-year cadaver lab. I specifically chose this time because I knew the lab would be quiet and free from any distractions. I was right—all I can see are rows and rows of dead bodies covered in a layer of clear, thick plastic to prevent desiccation; all I can hear is the whir of the fans working above my head. This would have been the perfect studying atmosphere if Victor hadn’t insisted on coming along.

“I’ll miss Agatha,” Victor says. “I mean, when the class is over.”

During the first week of anatomy class, we named our cadaver Agatha. I hadn’t wanted to name her—after all, this had once been a real person who had a real name of her own. But I felt silly voicing my objections, so I stayed quiet as the other members of my lab group tossed around name suggestions. It had eventually come down to Agatha or Medusa. I was relieved when the group settled on Agatha.

Agatha does seem like an appropriate name, somehow. “Agatha” is a frail old woman who has metal rings around her sternum and blood vessels grafted onto her heart. Of course, it’s

impossible to know for sure, but I can make an educated guess that Agatha died of heart problems.

I try to imagine what sort of woman would make the decision to dedicate her body to a medical school. After everything I've seen this year, that's one thing I myself would *never* do. The last thing I want is a bunch of snotty twenty-two-year-olds making fun of all my subcutaneous fat.

I hold up the musculocutaneous nerve between my forceps. The nerve is thick and yellow.

"I'm hungry," Victor announces. "Are you hungry?"

"You're joking."

When I'm in the anatomy lab, food is the last thing on my mind. The smell of formaldehyde combined with the image of lacerated flesh is enough to kill any appetite I might have had. A few times, I've seen one of my classmates popping candy in their mouth, and I'm always in awe.

"Of course I wouldn't eat in here." Victor snorts, even though it wouldn't have been the most ridiculous thing he's ever done in the anatomy lab. For example, he once wore a hoodie in the lab and then *wore it home*, despite it being stained with cadaver juice.

"I'm going to the vending machines," Victor says. "You want something?"

"No, thanks."

Take your time, I'm tempted to add.

Victor hops off the stool and sprints out of the lab. That guy never does anything at less than ninety miles per hour. The heavy metal door slams behind me, and the room is plunged into complete silence.

It's heavenly.

Our final exam in anatomy is tomorrow. It's the biggest exam we've taken so far in the short course of our medical school career, and I want to do well because I hope to land a position in a good dermatology program when I graduate. As part of our exam, we have to go around this very lab, identifying labeled structures on different cadavers. I have to know every identifiable structure back and forth if I want to do well.

It's not that Victor is a bad person or anything, but I've always considered myself a loner. I prefer solitary activities, and I hate when solitary activities turn into group activities. Studying is a solitary activity.

"Now it's just you and me, Agatha," I whisper. I add apologetically, "Although I know that's not your real name."

I dig my fingers into Agatha's forearm, attempting to separate the muscles. When I tug on the muscle I'm holding, Agatha's fingers curl into a partial fist. I shiver slightly.

And that's when I hear the sound.

It's a loud noise that comes from outside the lab. It's a crash or... No, not really a crash. It's more like...

A bang.

What *was* that? Even though the sound originated outside the heavy metal doors of the anatomy lab, it still resounded through the room, loud and clear. And then, while the echo of the noise is still in my ears, I hear it again a second time.

What could have made a bang that loud? The only thing I could think of is...

A gun.

But it couldn't have been a gun. Why would there be a gunshot in the hospital? Much less *two* gunshots. It doesn't make sense.

Where are you, Victor? How long does it take to pick out a bag of chips?

While I'm contemplating my next move, a noise from across the room grabs my attention. It's the heavy door to the anatomy lab swinging open, squealing on its hinges. Thank God—Victor has *finally* selected his snack and has returned. Maybe he'll be able to tell me what that unsettling noise was.

I squint through my thick lenses at the doorway, and I feel a rush of relief at the sight of the familiar face of my classmate.

"Hey!" I call out. "Did you hear that noise a minute ago?"

He doesn't answer me, which I find a bit odd. It's also odd that there's something splattered on his scrubs. His dark-brown jacket is hanging open, and his hands are shoved deep into the pockets. He walks toward me, the expression on his unshaven face completely blank. A drop of saltwater trickles down the side of his face.

"Is everything okay?" I ask him.

Again, he is silent. He just stares at me.

Now that he's closer, I get a better look at the splatter across his chest. It's dark red and still slightly damp. I'm not entirely sure what it is, but it looks almost like...

Oh God.

I take a step back. "What—"

Before I can complete my sentence, something dark obstructs my vision. It takes me several beats to realize there's a gun pointed at my face.

My knees go weak. I grab onto the edge of the table, trying to keep myself upright. I lower my eyes to Agatha's mutilated corpse, clearly unable to offer anything in the way of aid. The gun is inches from my forehead, and I can feel the heat radiating from it. There's no doubt in my head anymore about what that bang was.

He's already fired this gun tonight.

Oh God. I don't want to die like this. Not here, not now. It can't end this way. I've done some bad things in my life, but I'm pretty sure I don't deserve this...

All I can think about is how pathetic it would be to die in the anatomy lab. The janitor will probably discover me here tomorrow morning. Will he even notice that I'm a medical student and not *one of the bodies*?

"Please..." I whisper.

His eyes are as black and impassive as the barrel of the gun. When he speaks, his voice is flat and toneless: "Do exactly as I say if you don't want to die."

PART I

HEATHER

“LOOK TO YOUR LEFT AND LOOK TO YOUR RIGHT.”

My eyes lift at the words of our dean of students at DeWitt Medical School, Dr. Marvin Bushnell. He has a huge, Santa Claus-esque belly and sweats with the mere effort of speaking. He’s been talking to us for about five minutes, and he’s already got a shiny forehead and huge pit stains. But he barrels on, totally oblivious to the amount of fluid his pores are secreting.

I obligingly look to my left because it’s clear everyone else in the auditorium is doing it. Two seats over is a male student with a messy brown ponytail and ratty leather jacket that smells of cigarettes and possibly some illegal substance. I can understand not dressing up in a suit and tie for your first day of medical school, but I’d think at least you’d want to *shower*.

And now for the look to the right: that one is my new roommate, Rachel Bingham. Rachel is not looking left or right. Rachel is rolling her eyes quite dramatically.

I had this fantasy in my head that my med school roommate and I would become BFFs and we’d braid each other’s hair and have pillow fights, et cetera. So far, I’m ninety-nine percent sure Rachel hates me. Maybe I’m being paranoid, but it’s something about the way she’s looked at me since she arrived a week ago in our shared suite, her stringy brown hair falling in her face, ripped jeans held together by the grace of God, and only a single suitcase to her name. She even mocked my long-distance relationship with my boyfriend and soulmate, Landon. *Hey, you might last a few months. Maybe.*

I turn my attention back to Dr. Bushnell, who is about one passionate speech away from a serious cardiac event.

“In four years,” he says to the hushed crowd, “both of these people will be physicians.”

Rachel snorts audibly now. I try to flash a friendly smile in her direction, but she’s having none of that. She rewards me with another eye roll, and I focus my attention back at the dean. Fine. Rachel won’t be my friend. I’ll find another friend in the class.

Probably.

“It’s not true anyway,” Rachel stage whispers in my direction.

I raise my eyebrows at her. I’m so pleased she’s talking to me that I don’t even care that she’s speaking over the dean on our first day of medical school.

“What isn’t true?” I ask.

“We won’t all be doctors,” she says. She tucks her dark-brown hair behind her ear so that I can get my first good look at her deep-brown eyes.

“We won’t?”

Rachel laughs. “Don’t you know?”

“Know what?”

Her lips curl into a slightly evil grin. My roommate may be genuinely evil. Are people really evil in real life? Or just in comic books?

“In every class,” she says, “ten people flunk and need to repeat the year. Five drop out, never to return. And, of course, in the last few years, there’s always one who...”

Now she pauses and draws an ominous line across her thin white neck with a well-chewed fingernail.

“One who *what?*” I prompt her.

Rachel frowns at me. “You really don’t know?”

“Know *what?*”

She shakes her head. “Why do you think the school is nicknamed Dead Med?”

I did *not* know that nickname.

She can’t be serious. She’s just messing with me. She’s just pissed off that I left too many bottles of moisturizer in our bathroom. (I have really dry skin.)

Dean Bushnell is saying something that I completely missed, which is followed by a round of applause. I need to start paying attention and quit my doomed attempts to befriend my roommate. The dean shifts away from the podium, and another man walks up to take his place. This man is far younger than the dean, maybe fortyish, but he carries an old-man cane in his right hand and walks with a pronounced limp.

“Hello,” the man says, pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose with his forefinger. I can’t help but notice he’s wearing a bowtie. Who wears a bowtie in everyday life? “I’m Matt Conlon, your anatomy professor.”

Right—Dr. Conlon. When I interviewed here at DeWitt, the first-years had been singing praises about this guy. “Dorky but really fun,” they’d said. “He’s the best thing about the first year.”

Up on the stage, Dr. Conlon is now gesturing wildly as he describes how totally awesome anatomy is.

“The human body makes perfect sense,” he explains. “It’s the most intricately constructed machine in the world. And after you finish my class, you’re going to understand how that machine works, inside and out. And you’re going to realize how amazing it is.”

I don’t even need to look at Rachel to know that she’s rolling her eyes.

“Thank you for letting me act as your guide on this incredible journey,” Dr. Conlon says, and he gives a little bow.

Really, he bows. God, could this guy be any dorkier?

Following Dr. Conlon is a string of other professors: an elderly guy with a monotonic voice who will be teaching us biochemistry, a wild-haired female epidemiology professor, and a short, dapper man who will be jointly teaching physiology and histology. Lastly, a thin fortyish woman wearing a sharp blue dress suit steps up to the podium.

“My name is Dr. Patrice Winters,” she says. “But you can call me Patrice. I’ve been acting as the school’s wellness counselor for the last four years.”

Have you ever met a person who you just disliked instantly? For me, that’s Patrice Winters. I don’t know what it is about her exactly. Maybe it’s the way her makeup is applied so perfectly and not even a single hair in her blond-streaked pixie cut is out of place. Maybe it’s the way she talks to us like we’re a bunch of children who need to be told what to do. Maybe it’s her voice,

which somehow grates on my very soul.

“Whatever happens to you,” she says, “I’m here for you. And I’d like each of you to make an appointment with me sometime in the next month.” She pauses meaningfully. “It’s not optional.”

Rachel leans in toward me now and whispers, “You know why we have to see her, don’t you?”

I’m afraid to hear the answer to this one. “Why?”

“They don’t want any more of us overdosing,” she says. “The drug problem is out of control here. Every year for the last three years, there’s been a student who OD’d and died.”

“That’s not really true.” I shift in my seat. “Is it?”

“Of course it is.” She says it like it’s common knowledge, which makes me wonder if it is. “Last year, the girl who OD’d did it in the bathroom by the anatomy labs. You can still see the crack in the sink where her head smacked against it before she hit the floor—they never fixed it.”

And then she leans back in her seat, smiling at the way my mouth is hanging open.

AS I WAIT in the slow-moving cafeteria line to get lunch during our break from orientation, I mull over what Rachel told me about the drug problem at DeWitt. I never heard about it, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true—med school is stressful, and it wouldn’t be surprising if some students turned to drugs in order to deal.

But not me. I would *never*.

I’m so deep in thought that I haven’t noticed the line has moved forward but I have not. Before I have a chance to get moving, a horrible weight lands on my foot, crushing the delicate bones that Dr. Conlon has not yet had a chance to teach me about. I gasp in pain as I instinctively grab my foot.

What the hell was *that*?

That’s when I notice a frightening bearlike creature looming over me. Actually, it turns out to be a human being, but he’s roughly the size of a bear. The foot that he used to crush mine with is practically the size of a tennis racket. This guy is big in all directions.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry!” the bear cries. “Are you all right?”

No, I am *not* all right. My foot is broken, you stupid bear. Well, maybe not broken. But definitely badly bruised.

Still, I manage to nod and look up at his face, which is nowhere near as scary as the rest of him. The bear has a shock of red hair that’s disheveled despite being very short and freckles pouring over either end of the bridge of his nose.

“I’m really sorry,” the bear says again. He looks like he means it. “I didn’t realize anyone was behind me.” He hesitates. “I’m Abe.”

“Heather,” I say. I release my broken foot just long enough to grab his outstretched hand. Thankfully, he doesn’t crush my hand in his when he shakes it. I hate it when men do that, and it’s pretty clear Abe could easily demolish my hand if he got the inclination to do so.

“You’re a first-year?” he asks.

Nope, I just hang out at med school orientations for kicks.

“Yep,” I say.

“Neat,” Abe says then appears to run out of things to say. He rubs his gigantic hands together, clears his throat, and awkwardly turns back to the lunch line to examine his food options. It’s going to be either arroz con pollo or fish. And the fish is scary looking. So chicken

and rice it is.

LANDON IS SUPPOSED TO CALL ME TONIGHT AT NINE P.M., AND IT'S NOW EIGHT MINUTES AFTER nine. With each passing minute, I'm getting more and more ticked off.

I don't want to be that kind of girlfriend—the kind where he has to call at the exact time he said he would or else I get all pissy. But then again, how hard is it to call on time? Is it really so difficult to pick up the phone and call me at the time I asked him to? He knows it's my first day of school and I'm all keyed up. Why is he doing this to me?

It doesn't help that Rachel is driving me out of my mind. First, she was going on and on about how eighty percent of college relationships end during med school. I don't know where she got that ridiculous statistic, but she wouldn't shut up about it.

Then, she asked me what I wanted to specialize in when I graduated. When I told her I wanted to be a pediatrician, she looked at me with utter contempt for falling into the “traditional gender stereotypical role.” Apparently, *she* wants to be a surgeon.

The other weird thing is that Rachel hasn't bought any books. Not even Dr. Conlon's book, *Anatomy: Inside Secrets*. You'd think if she wanted to be a surgeon, she'd be studying her ass off right now in anticipation of our first anatomy lab tomorrow. Or at least half-heartedly trying to read the lab manual like I'm doing.

Instead, she's sitting on her bed in a lotus position, just watching me. It's a little creepy. Our bedroom is too small for two people to share—we're always on top of one another. There's just barely room for both of our beds, our desks, one dresser, and a single bookcase. We have to share a single closet. I can't even walk into the room without tripping on something.

“Are you waiting for your boyfriend to call you?”

I look up at Rachel, who is blinking innocently. I make a face. “His name is Landon. And... he's going to call any second now.”

Rachel snorts. “Just don't get too hung up on the guy. If he dumps you, you might turn to pills. And I don't want to be the one who finds you when you...”

“What?”

Rachel makes a choking sound as she clutches her neck.

I stare at her, horrified. “I'm not going to overdose on pills!”

“You never know. I mean, who walks into medical school thinking, ‘Hey, I'm going to become a drug addict?’”

My mouth falls open.

“The question is,” she goes on, “where are the drugs coming from?”

I shake my head. “What do you mean?”

“Three students in three years got their hands on enough pills that they accidentally died. Someone is giving them those pills.”

“So... another student?”

“Maybe.” She twists her body to one side then the other. “But for so many years in a row? More likely, it’s one of the professors. A first-year professor, who can get to all the students early.”

We got introduced to every single one of the first-year professors this week, and none of them seem like drug dealers. Especially not Dr. Conlon with his dorky bowtie. The idea is laughable.

I’m about to tell Rachel that she’s full of it when my phone starts ringing with Landon’s number. My ringtone is Miley Cyrus’s “Party in the USA,” which resulted in some choice comments from Rachel last night. But screw her. I like that song.

“Hello,” I answer breathlessly.

I hear chewing on the other line. “Lo?”

“Hey,” I say, rising from my bed. Rachel is still staring at me, so I back out of our bedroom into the living room. “What’s up?”

More chewing. “Not much.”

“Um,” I say. “Are you eating?”

“Just an apple.” I hear him swallow.

“Didn’t you get dinner?”

“Yeah,” Landon says. “But, like, I got hungry again.”

Typical Landon. He always gets hungry about an hour after dinner.

“Oh,” I say. I grip the phone tighter. I wish I could give Landon a hug, feel his body against me. The person on the other line almost doesn’t seem like it’s him. We’ve barely been apart for a week, and already, this long-distance thing sucks. I didn’t expect it to feel so... distant.

Landon and I first met in freshman chemistry. We were assigned to be lab partners, and I got taken in by his dimples and brown curls. Also, he was just so *smart*. I would have burned the lab down with my Bunsen burner if not for him.

For months, Landon and I were just friends. Then, one day, while we were walking together, I felt his hand slide into mine. We’ve been together ever since.

“I miss you,” I say to him.

“I miss you too,” he says.

I grip the phone tighter, pushing it against my ear. “How much do you miss me?”

He sounds baffled by the question. “What do you mean?”

“Like, on a scale of one to ten.”

“Oh.” He considers this for a moment. “Maybe... seven?”

“Seven!” I burst out.

“Is that too high or too low?”

I let out a huff. “I miss you a *ten*.”

“Well, it’s only been a week, Heather. Can you give me a little time to work up to a ten?”

“I guess so,” I say grudgingly. I suppose he’s right—it *has* only been a week.

We spend the next half hour or so chatting about our respective days. I fill him in on all the weirdo students I met today. He clucks sympathetically when I tell him about how that bearlike student stepped on my foot and almost broke it. And I laugh when he tells me about how a ripe

pear that he packed in his backpack exploded and got over all his new books and papers.

“I wish I’d been there to see that,” I say.

“Yeah,” Landon says. “I wish you’d been there too. You would’ve pissed your pants laughing.”

I close my eyes and imagine that Landon is sitting beside me. My left hand squeezes my knee.

“I miss you so much,” I say.

“I miss you too, Heather,” Landon says. “I miss you a ten.”

“I miss you a ten too,” I say. It’s all I can do to keep from covering the phone with kisses.

When I hang up, I have a good feeling in my stomach. It helps to know Landon is here for me. Landon is my first... well, no, he’s more like my second... well, anyway, he’s my first *love*. I love him. And he loves me. This is going to work out. I’ve got nothing to worry about.

DEWITT MED DOESN'T HAVE A LOCKER ROOM PER SE. WHAT WE'VE GOT IS A LONG HALLWAY OF lockers, not segregated in any way by gender. Meaning that I've got two choices:

1. Be a prude and run to the ladies' room to change into scrubs for lab
2. Change my clothes in front of *boys*

I stand in front of my locker, clutching my scrubs for far too long, trying to make a decision. The ladies' room is all the way at the other end of the floor, so I'll save some serious time if I change my clothes right here. And it's not very crowded, at least not yet. However, I'm still retaining a modicum of modesty, and I'm not sure if I can make myself do it. My body isn't quite as bikini-ready as I'd like it to be.

In any case, I need to decide soon. Because I look like an idiot just standing here.

I'm just about ready to start pulling my shirt over my head when a door swings open and about a dozen students filter into the hallway, most of them male.

No, *all* of them male.

And loud.

I quickly pull my shirt back down.

One of the students yanks open the locker three doors away from mine and gives me a charming smile. And oh my God, this guy is cute. I mean, seriously cute. If someone made a movie about our med school class, he'd be playing himself. His face is classically handsome, but most of all, I can't stop staring at his hazel eyes, and I have to admit, at this moment, Landon is the farthest thing from my mind.

Especially when Dreamy McCutie pulls off his shirt.

Wow, look at that chest. Sheesh.

"What's wrong?" he asks me as he fishes through his locker for his scrub top. "You forget something?"

Oh God, I need to stop staring at this guy.

"No," I mumble, still clutching my own scrubs to my chest. "I just... need to go change."

Dreamy McCutie yanks a crisp green scrub top from his locker and winks at me. "So what are you waiting for?"

I swallow, feeling like a silly little girl at a boy-band concert. I should not be swooning over

random guys in my class. I have a boyfriend who I love, who I want to marry. And even if I didn't, I *still* shouldn't be swooning.

And I definitely shouldn't be changing my clothes in front of this guy.

"Excuse me," I say, and I race off in the direction of the ladies' room.

I arrive at the ladies' room about a minute later. It's a comforting sight, packed to the brim with other female students who are also too chicken to change clothes in the hallway. We prudes definitely make up the majority.

The stalls have already all been claimed, but I feel comfortable enough in the female company to get undressed by the sinks. I stand next to the sink at the far end and grab onto it to keep my balance while I pull my feet out of my pants legs. But as my fingers grip the sink, they hit a defect in the otherwise smooth white porcelain. It's a significant crack, which has not yet been repaired.

Last year, the girl who OD'd did it in the bathroom by the anatomy labs. You can see the crack in the sink where her head smacked against it before she hit the floor.

Rachel's words echo in my skull as I yank my hand away from the sink. My head is spinning as I stare at that crack in the flawless white. This is it. This is where it happened.

The girl responsible for this crevice was standing right where I was a year ago. She was changing into her scrubs in anticipation of her very first lab. Like me, she was probably a mix of excited and nervous.

She had no idea that only a short while later, this would be where she would die.