

*#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

**FREIDA  
MCFADDEN**

**THE  
CRASH**

Danger lies at the end of the road...

# **THE CRASH**

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**FREIDA MCFADDEN**

The Crash  
Freida McFadden

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*For my father*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Even though my books are thrillers, a genre that traditionally has dark elements, I do my best to keep them as family-friendly as I possibly can. You're not going to come across any graphic scenes of violence or S-E-X. (Mostly because I know *my* family members will be reading!)

However, people have different emotional responses to different things and some of my books delve into more controversial topics. So for this reason, I created a list of content warnings for all my thrillers, which can be found linked off the top of my website:

<https://freidamcfadden.com/>

This is a resource that can be used by readers who need to protect their mental health, as well as for adults whose kids are reading my books. Please also keep in mind that in a few cases, these content warnings are major spoilers for twists that take place in the book.

With that in mind, I hope you safely enjoy this journey into my imagination!

# PROLOGUE

## AFTER THE CRASH

I'VE NEVER KILLED ANYONE BEFORE.

I'm not a murderer. I'm a *good* person. I don't lie. I don't cheat. I don't steal. I hardly ever even raise my voice. There are very few things I've done in my life that I'm ashamed of.

Yet here I am.

I expected a struggle from the person beneath me. But I didn't expect this much of a struggle. I didn't expect this much thrashing.

Or the muffled screams.

I could stop. It's not too late. I have fifteen seconds left to decide if I want to be a murderer—thirty seconds, on the outside.

But I don't stop. I can't.

Then finally—*finally*—the struggle ends. Now I've got a limp, motionless body lying before me. I don't need to be a doctor to recognize a dead body.

*What have I done?*

I bury my face in my palms, choking back a sob. I'm not a crier—never have been—but in this moment, it feels appropriate. If I don't cry, who will? After a moment, I force myself to straighten up and compose myself. I did this for a good reason after all.

It was the only way.

# **PART I**

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## **ONE WEEK BEFORE THE CRASH**

I'M NOT SURE I'LL MAKE IT TO MY FRONT DOOR.

It is approximately fifty feet from my little Ford Fusion to the entrance of the apartment complex where I live. Fifty feet isn't far. Under the best circumstances, I could run it in seconds.

But not tonight.

I live in a studio apartment on the second floor of a small apartment complex in Lewiston, Maine. It's a terrible neighborhood, but right now, I can't afford better. My shift at the grocery store ends after dark, which means that it's pitch-black outside right now. There used to be a streetlight illuminating the path from the parking area to the complex, but the bulb blew out a month after I moved in, and nobody has bothered to fix it. Once I kill the headlights, I won't be able to see two feet in front of my face.

I turned off the engine in the car soon after parking because I can't waste any gas right now. It's cold enough that even within the car, I can see the puff of air from my own breath. In Maine, the temperature in December is always well below freezing. I peer through the windshield, and I can just barely make out the entrance to the building. There's no streetlight, but there's a tiny light just above the doorway that will make it possible for me to see the keyhole to unlock the door.

It's also just enough light to see the man lingering in the shadows near the doorway.

Waiting.

I'm shivering as I shift in the driver's seat, which isn't easy to do these days. A sharp, electric pain shoots down my right leg, which has been happening to me more and more lately. The doctor told me it was something called *sciatica*, caused by an irritated nerve in my spine. I thought my life was about as bad as it could get, and then I went and irritated a nerve in my spine on top of everything else.

I squint into the darkness at the man by the entrance, wondering what his business is here. It's too dark to make out any of his features, but he's relatively tall and lean. He's wearing a long, dark trench coat, which doesn't make me feel any better. He strikes me as menacing, but to be fair, everyone looks menacing when cloaked in shadows.

His intentions could be entirely innocent. Maybe he's visiting a friend in the building. Maybe he's an undercover cop. (Not likely.) Maybe he's... Well, I can't think of what else someone might be doing here at nine thirty in the evening. My point is he isn't *necessarily* here to mug me.

Anyway, I can't sit in my car all night.

I reach into my purse and remove the bottle of pepper spray I've taken to carrying around, and I relocate it to my coat pocket. If this guy wants the meager contents of my wallet, I'll make sure to give him a run for his money. I move my house keys to my other pocket for easy access, and then I grab the bag of groceries on the passenger's seat and heave it into my arms. Mr. Zakir always gives me a massive discount on soon-to-expire groceries, and I refuse to leave them behind just because of some creepy man outside my building.

That lightning bolt shoots down my right leg again as I climb out of my Ford. My coat hangs open, but there's not much I can do about it, because it doesn't zip closed anymore and hasn't for several months now. There's nothing functionally wrong with the zipper, although a broken zipper would be fairly consistent with the state of my life these days. No, the reason my coat doesn't close anymore is that it no longer fits over my distended belly.



I am nearly eight months pregnant.

As soon as I step out of the car, my swollen feet scream in protest. Over the course of a double shift at the supermarket, they have expanded to nearly twice their original size and barely fit in my sneakers anymore. I straighten up as best I can, and the cold air smacks me in the face. I've become increasingly fatigued over the course of my pregnancy, especially later in the day, but that ice-cold wind wakes me right up.

I slam the car door behind me, and the man leaning against the front of the building jerks his head up. I still can't make out much more than a silhouette, but he's now staring directly at me. My arm holding the bag of groceries trembles, and I reach with my other hand into my pocket for the pepper spray.

*Don't even try to take my expired bread, you asshole.*

I suck in a mouthful of chilly air and walk purposefully toward the entrance of the building. I avoid looking at him, like I've learned to do over the years with dozens of other creepy men, but I can feel his eyes following me. My fingers encircle the pepper spray, and I am close to whipping it out when a familiar voice breaks into my terrified thoughts:

"Tegan?"

I pivot my gaze in the direction of the voice. The light from the doorway is bright enough now to make out the man's features, and all the tension instantly drains out of me.

"Jackson!" I cry. "Oh my God, you scared the crap out of me!"

The man in front of me, who I now recognize as Jackson Bruckner, is wearing a trench coat over his usual rumpled white dress shirt, gray tie, and gray dress pants underneath. He's not local, and I'm assuming he's driven at least two hours to get here, but he always looks bright-eyed when he shows up at my door.

Without my having to ask him, Jackson heaves the bag of groceries into his arms, which makes my aching feet hurt a tiny bit less. "I'm so sorry," he says. "I was going to go to the supermarket, but my GPS said it was closed, so I came here instead. I figured you'd be home any minute, so I was waiting."

“You could have texted me,” I mumble, now slightly embarrassed by how frightened I was of this man wearing coke-bottle glasses, with big ears that stick out on either side of his head. Now that he’s not cloaked in shadows, he’s pretty much the least threatening man I’ve ever seen. He’s cute, but in a dorky sort of way.

He is not, by the way, the father of my unborn child. He’s not my boyfriend either.

“I did text you,” he says.

I reach into my purse for my phone, and sure enough, there are a bunch of text messages from Jackson that I hadn’t seen. Of course he texted me. Jackson is responsible. He works as an attorney and graduated summa cum laude at his Ivy League law school. He didn’t tell me that, but I googled him.

“I guess you did text me,” I admit.

He glances at his watch. “I also ordered Chinese food, which will be here in a few minutes.”

My stomach growls at the mention of food. I’m supposed to be eating for two, but I’m barely eating for one. “Chicken lo mein?” I ask hopefully.

“Of course.” He grins at me. “Let me carry these groceries up for you, then I’ll come back down to get the delivery.”

I want to protest, but carrying groceries up the stairs has gotten progressively harder as my belly has grown larger. If he’s willing to do it for me, I’m nothing but grateful.

“Thank you,” I say.

His eyes meet mine under the dim light over the entryway. “Of course.”

Jackson waits patiently while I fumble to get my key in the lock. It always sticks in cold weather, and around here, that’s ten months of the year. When I finally get the door unlocked, he holds it open for me like a gentleman. I really like Jackson. I like it when he comes over with an offering of dinner, which has been happening with increasing frequency lately.

But in actuality, this is not a social call. Jackson and I have important business to discuss.

Soon, I’m going to be rich beyond my wildest dreams.

And it's all because of the baby growing inside me.

ONCE JACKSON AND I GET INSIDE, I BYPASS THE MAILBOXES. I'M NOT excited to see the bills that await me, and I don't have money in the bank to pay them anyway. Instead, we climb up the two flights of stairs to my apartment. The bulbs in the stairwell are low wattage, and the paint on the walls is badly chipped, but nobody here would complain. My feet throb with each step, but soon I'll be home.

I stop at the second-floor landing, taking a few seconds to catch my breath. I'm always out of breath these days. I assume it's because of the fetus growing inside me, keeping my lungs from expanding as much as I would like. Or it could be something terrible. I asked Dr. Google, and I didn't like anything they had to say. It could be a blood clot in my lungs. It could be heart failure. It could be *tuberculosis*.

But my health insurance is awful, so I'm just going to keep my fingers crossed that it's nothing serious.

Jackson's brow creases in concern. "You okay?"

"Fine," I gulp. I nod at the stairwell. "Let's go."

As soon as we reach the top of the last flight of stairs, Jackson's phone buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out and looks down at the screen. "Food is here."