

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

FREIDA MCFADDEN

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEATH ROW

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**FREIDA
McFADDEN**

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ROW**

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PROLOGUE

My name is Talia Kemper, and with my time running short, there are a few things I need you to know about me:

First, I am currently on death row for murdering my husband.

Second, my attorney has filed one last appeal, but if that is rejected, I will be executed by lethal injection in two weeks.

And last, I am innocent.

I didn't kill my husband.

CHAPTER 1

PRESENT DAY

It's entirely possible that being on death row is worse than death. I can't say for sure, since I haven't yet experienced death (will have an update on that soon), but I have experienced death row, and it's hard to imagine anything much worse.

The worst part about death row is the seclusion. Prisoners on death row are kept isolated from the rest of the prisoners. We get a single cell, and we don't eat in the dining hall with all the rest of the prisoners. When we go out in the prison yard, it's always alone with a guard.

You might think, hey great, who wants to share a crowded cell with a bunch of other women? When I first heard that I'd be avoiding gen pop, I didn't think it sounded so bad. I had heard horror stories about maximum security prisons. I imagined being beaten or raped or stabbed with a shiv while the guards were looking the other way.

But no, this is worse. *Much* worse.

Currently, I am lying on the bed in my cell. I spend twenty-three hours of the day in this cell, which is roughly the size of a parking space. Humans are not designed to be locked in a cage for 95 percent of the day. I have a small bed that is really just a metal slab attached to the wall, covered by a thin mattress. Actually, calling it a "mattress" is a stretch. It's more like a thick blanket that has been folded over a couple of times. There is a small desk with a stool that is also welded to the wall. And of course, a metal toilet and sink.

If I roll to my side on this sorry excuse for a bed, I can just barely see the one tiny window, only slightly larger than my hand, which is close to the ceiling. I'd have to stand on my bed in order to see outside, although there's not much of a view, which Noel always says is the most important thing

about picking a place to live. That was what he used to say, at least, before he was murdered.

Occasionally, I get to shower—a rare treat—but I often wash my body at the sink with a rag and chemical-smelling soap. The only people I ever talk to are the guards, and it's not like we're having any great conversations. Visitors are rare. Usually, it's just my lawyer, Clarence Bowman.

Whenever I leave this cell, I am shackled. I am allowed to go into the yard for one hour each day, although I am put in a different cage within the yard. They treat me like a wild animal that could turn on them at any time. But I suppose if they really think I'm a murderer, that makes sense. Who knows what I'm capable of?

"Kemper." A voice jerks me from my self-pitying thoughts. "Food."

I sit up from the faux mattress, my back screaming in pain. It's supposed to be good for the back to sleep on a hard, flat surface, but there's nothing good about this bed. There's also nothing good about the food delivered to my cell, which is slid through a narrow slit in the door. Breakfast is delivered at six in the morning, lunch at eleven, then dinner at four thirty.

"It's dinnertime," the voice adds. It's Correctional Officer Rhea Clark. I'm supposed to call COs by their last names, the same way everyone calls me by my last name, but she introduced herself to me as Rhea, so I feel I have license to call her that.

"Thank you," I say as she passes my tray to me through the gap. My voice is hoarse, because I hardly use it anymore and don't drink enough water. Sometimes when I try to swallow, it feels like there are glass shards in my throat.

I take the tray to my desk and sit on the stool to eat. I read somewhere that the state pays less than fifty cents per meal for each prisoner. When I look down at my tray, I believe it. My dinner consists of a fish patty, which was almost certainly recently frozen (and still sort of is), and a pile of soggy green beans from a can. When I bring my face too close to the plate, the smell turns my stomach.

Noel wouldn't have minded prison food as much as I do. He lost his sense of smell when he was younger during a game of peewee football. He broke his nose during a tackle, and that was all it took to shear the delicate olfactory nerve fibers transmitting scents to his brain.

"I didn't know you were allowed to tackle other kids during peewee football," I said to him when he told me the story for the first time.

He winked at me and tapped the bump on the bridge of his nose. "Oh, the way *I* used to play it, you did."

Sometimes I fantasize about a greasy fast-food burger with a side of crisp french fries. After years of prison food, I don't fantasize about filet mignon or lobster—mostly just fast food. I wonder if I could ask for a Big Mac for my last meal.

I'm meeting with Bowman tomorrow about my appeal. Sometimes he calls me, but this time he wants to meet in person, which means whatever he has to say is important.

I am naively hopeful about the appeal, although I am always hopeful. How could anyone think that I killed Noel? I had no motive—he was the love of my life. And most of all, I have an alibi.

Yet here I am, about to be executed for his murder.

And the worst part of it all is how much I miss him.

CHAPTER 2

BEFORE

In all my time waiting tables, I've never spit in anyone's drink before. But it looks like there's a first time for everything.

It all started last week, when my boyfriend of two years dumped me for a trashy blond. It was bad enough that he was cheating on me and that he ended what I'd *thought* was my best relationship to date—the one that might stick—but then today, the blond who ruined my life just walked into the café where I work and plopped down at one of my tables. I can't tell if she didn't recognize me or didn't care, but she sat right down and ordered herself a salad and Diet Coke.

She'll be getting a little more than she ordered, though.

After filling the cup from the fountain, I expectorate a decent amount of saliva into my mouth. Then I lower my head and regurgitate it into the fizzy liquid.

There. I won't get Franklin back from her, but it's *something*. A start.

"Oh my God, did you just *spit in that drink*?"

I wrench my gaze away from the Diet Coke, my cheeks flaming. Naturally, I got caught—I always do. I'm the worst criminal ever.

I hazard a look at the source of the voice. It's the new waiter who started a few days ago—Noah, I think. He's about my age, maybe midtwenties. I haven't had a conversation with him yet, but he seems competent, like he's worked in the service industry before. I heard he's a grad student supplementing his flimsy stipend, like I am. He has pretty eyes the color of hazelnuts (my favorite nut) with long, dark lashes, although he is saved from being too pretty by a bump on the bridge of his nose, which looks like it's been broken before and gives him a bit of a rougher look.

"Uh . . . I . . .," I stammer. "I wasn't . . ."

“Spitting barely does anything,” he lectures me. “You’re supposed to hawk up phlegm. That’s the best way to do it.”

“Oh.” I clear my throat. “Well, I wasn’t aware of that.”

“Let me show you.” The boy seizes the drink from my hand and hawks up a pretty impressive glob of phlegm, which he spits into the cup. I almost want to applaud. “Okay, now you try.” When I hesitate, he gives me a stern look. “This is important to learn. It’s a life skill.”

He spends the next minute or so coaching me on how to hawk up phlegm into the Diet Coke. By the time we’re done, I would say the blond’s drink is about 25 percent phlegm (and 15 percent spit, leaving about 60 percent actual soda).

“Well done,” he says. “You’re a fast learner.”

I grin at him—my first real smile in a week. “Thanks, Noah.”

“Noel,” he corrects me. “Noel Kemper.”

“I’m Talia,” I say. “Talia Monroe.”

“I know,” he says in a way that makes me think he’s been waiting for an opportunity to introduce himself. “So who are we serving this phlegm cocktail to?”

“The blond at table nine. She cheated with my boyfriend. *Ex-boyfriend.*”

He nods in understanding. “Sounds like it’s deserved then.”

“Yes,” I agree, although it’s far less than she deserves. Him too.

“Any interest in getting a drink after the shop closes?” he asks me. He says it in a casual way, like it’s no big deal, but there’s an eagerness on his face that’s unmistakable. “I can give you tips on how to piss in the soup.”

He’s cute—that’s undeniable—but my head fills with protests about just having gotten out of a relationship and how I barely know him. But I don’t say any of that, because I realize right then that none of it matters. Because somehow, I sense there’s something special about Noel Kemper, who made me smile for the first time since that asshole broke my heart.

“Okay,” I say.

“Great!” His face lights up with a grin so infectious, all I can do is smile back. “There’s only one thing you need to do first.”

“What’s that?”

“Wake up.”

Huh? I frown at him. “What did you say?”

“Wake up, Talia.”

CHAPTER 3

PRESENT DAY

I wake up, my heart pounding.

For a moment, I forget where I am and think that I am lying in bed with my husband. There's a distant beeping sound coming from somewhere within the prison that almost sounds like my alarm clock at home. Any moment now, Noel will silence the alarm and stumble in the direction of the bathroom, where he will pee for so long, it's amazing that he has any fluid left in his body when it's over. Then he will crawl back into bed and cuddle with me for a few more minutes before we have to start our days.

And then I remember. I remember that I'm in a prison cell, all alone, and Noel is dead. The only place he's still alive is in my dreams.

The dreams seem to be getting more vivid, which is even more frustrating. I still remember the day Noel and I met at that café, and in my dreams, it's like I am *there*. I can almost reach out and touch him.

I grab the flimsy blanket, trying to cover my body. It must be winter because it's ice cold in the cell. During the winter, it's freezing, and during the summer, it's a sauna. There is no air-conditioning whatsoever. Honestly, I'm lucky they give me a toilet and not just a bucket in the corner of the room in which to do my business.

I hear a scratching noise from the corner of the room. I can barely see because the lights have been off in the prison since ten o'clock sharp, but the sun has started to rise in the sky, and there's just enough light coming through the tiny window to make out some of the details of my room. I squint into the corner, trying to make out the source of the noise.

Sure enough, it's a rat.

It's a big one too. Much bigger than the rats I used to see on the outside. It's so big that it almost looks like a mutant rat from some sci-fi TV show,

who might also do karate. And the rats here are so *bold*. They have no fear whatsoever. The rat knows I can't hurt him. The most dangerous object I've been given in the cell is a spork.

Do rats bite humans? There was a time when I would've googled this information, but I can't do that anymore. I don't have access to the internet. So I just have to lie here in bed and wonder if the giant rat is going to bite me.

Today is the day that I meet with Bowman about my appeal. Technically, I get unlimited appeals on death row, but if this last one fails . . . well, then what? I've been banging my head against the wall for years, and I'm tired of it.

The part I don't understand, though, is why. Why would they think I killed my husband? It's not like I had a criminal record. It's not like we were having marriage troubles. And on top of that, at the moment Noel was killed, I was having dinner with my friend Kinsey. She vouched for me, as did the waitstaff at the restaurant.

But the prosecutor argued otherwise. *It doesn't matter if she had an alibi. She set the whole thing up. If not for this woman, Noel Kemper would still be alive.*

The scampering of the rat grows louder. He's coming closer to my bed.

Maybe I shouldn't be so frightened of a rat. Don't kids keep rats for pets? I'm so lonely in this cell—maybe I could turn the rat into a companion. Noel and I always talked about having children, but that never ended up happening, and now it never will. But I can have a pet rat. I can even name him.

What's a good name for a rat? How about . . . Pat? Pat the Rat.

The scurrying of the rat grows louder. I lose track of him for a moment, because it's still so dark in the room. Did he go back out the hole that he came in through?

And then I see it. Two glowing red eyes staring at me from the other end of my bed.

Pat the Rat is on my bed.

Despite the fact that I was planning to turn this rat into my pet and/or surrogate child, I start screaming. There's something about finding a rat in your bed that is particularly disturbing.

"Kemper!"

The harsh voice of the guard from the other side of the door is enough to quiet my screams. It's not Rhea. I can't tell who it is, but I would recognize Rhea's voice.

"Kemper!" the guard barks again. "What's going on in there? Are you injured?"

"No, I just . . ."

I look around the dimly lit cell. My screams have frightened off Pat the Rat. He's vanished back to wherever he came from. Or at the very least, he's not on my bed anymore.

I could tell the CO about the rat, but what are they going to do? Get an exterminator? Very unlikely. Besides, I don't want them to hurt the rat.

"I had a bad dream," I finally say.

The guard grunts. I don't expect any sympathetic words, and I'm not disappointed. "Go back to sleep or shut up."

I don't see how I could possibly sleep after my encounter with the rat, but I guess I'm more tired than I thought. Because when I lie back down on my bed, my eyes slowly drift shut.

CHAPTER 4

BEFORE

You screwed up, Noel.”

Noel has just emerged from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. His hair is still damp from the shower, and he lets the towel drop to the floor before rifling around in the top drawer of our dresser for underwear. From where I am lying on our queen-size bed, I avert my eyes, trying not to allow Noel’s body to distract me from my irritation with him.

“Oh yeah?” he says. “How did I screw up?”

“Did you call to reserve the Vineyard for June first?”

Noel steps into a pair of boxer shorts, nearly losing his balance in the process. “Not yet. But I will. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“We don’t have plenty of time.” I let out a tortured sigh. “Noel, I told you that wedding venues book out a year in advance. I told you that you needed to book it right away. And now it’s too late.”

When his head peeks back out of the shirt he’s thrown on over his head, his lips are turned down. “Are you serious? Someone booked it?”

“I’m serious. We lost it to . . .” I pick up the crumpled paper on the nightstand. “Marie Machudo and Albert Swecker.”

“Shit.” He sinks down onto our bed, his head hanging. “I’m so sorry, Talia. I know you had your heart set on getting married there.”

He looks so guilty that *I* start to feel guilty. Yes, I did want to get married at the Vineyard. But the thing I’m really looking forward to is marrying Noel Kemper. Over the last two years, we have been inseparable. When he got down on one knee and told me that he couldn’t imagine life without me, I felt the same way. It doesn’t matter where we get married, only that we’re getting married.

That said . . .

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I have a feeling that the Vineyard is going to get an unexpected cancellation for June first . . .”

I hold up my phone, where the website with the Vineyard’s phone number is on the screen. I am not above playing dirty to get my dream wedding location.

Noel’s mouth drops out. “Hang on . . .”

“What?”

“Are you . . .” He squints at me. “Are you saying that you’re going to call the Vineyard and pretend to be Marie Machudo to cancel their reservation?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, it’s *your* fault,” I say defensively. “*You* screwed up and didn’t make the reservation.”

“So you’re going to *lie* to fix it?”

“Maybe I am.” I lift my chin, meeting his eyes. “Is that really so wrong?”

“Lying is objectively wrong, yeah.”

“Well, I don’t care then.”

I turn my attention back to my phone. I start to press the button that will make the call to the Vineyard, but before I can, Noel reaches over and snatches the phone right out of my hand.

“Hey!” I cry. “Give that back.”

“Nuh uh.” He stands up, holding it out of reach. He is, frustratingly, about eight inches taller than I am. “I’m not going to let you do this.”

“Why not?”

“Because”—he looks me straight in the eyes—“you are an absolutely horrendous actor. You will blow our cover in like five seconds.”

“I won’t . . .”

“You will,” he insists. “Let me call. I’ll be Albert. I’m a much better liar than you are.”

That impish smile is playing on his lips, which annoyed me the first time I saw it, but later it became one of the things that made me fall in love

with him. I could look at that smile all day long. Except . . .

I suddenly get an uneasy feeling in my chest as my world goes on tilt. Something about this interaction feels “off,” although it’s hard to explain how. It’s almost like . . . it’s not really happening. Like I’m replaying a reel in my brain, and if I reached out to touch Noel, he’d disappear into thin air.

But that’s ridiculous. Noel is real, *obviously*.

I’m just upset about losing my dream venue. But that’s about to be remedied. Noel will call, and he will pretend to be Albert Swecker, and he will secure our reservation at the Vineyard for our wedding.

He is, as he pointed out, a very good liar.

“Thank you,” I say. “I appreciate that.”

He grins wider as he drops the phone and pulls me closer to him. His lips are close enough that I can feel the heat of his breath. He leans in to kiss me, but before his lips can touch mine, I wake up in a prison cell.

CHAPTER 5

PRESENT DAY

It's time for my visit with Clarence Bowman.

There's a routine for visitors, and it's not pleasant. Good thing I don't have many visitors. Even my best friend, Kinsey, has come only a handful of times. My parents might have visited, but they are both long gone. When I was a teenager, my father died of a heart attack in the bed of another woman, an unfortunate occurrence that pretty much scarred me for life. My mother went later, after such a prolonged and agonizing battle with cancer that the first thing I did after she was buried was sign an advanced directive to ensure that I wouldn't end up the way she did. But it looks like my death will be quicker than expected. Well, it will if Bowman doesn't have good news today.

If Noel were alive, he would have come to visit me every chance he got—the irony, of course, being that if he were alive, I wouldn't be here in the first place.

I can't leave my cell without being shackled, so that is a process I go through before meeting with Bowman. In preparation for Rhea entering my cell, I have to stand against the wall with my hands planted on the chipping paint. Then she comes in and shackles both my wrists and ankles. After that's done, I tense up, waiting for the pat-down.

"Don't worry," Rhea says in a voice that is not unkind. "I'll be done quickly."

Sometimes the pat-downs are agonizing, especially when a male guard is doing it. But as promised, Rhea is quick about it.

When Rhea is sufficiently satisfied that I am not packing heat in my tan prison jumpsuit, she escorts me to the area where Bowman is waiting for me with news on my appeal. As we walk, I once again hear that distant beeping

sound from somewhere within the prison walls, and the sound gets louder until it suddenly dies down again. The silence is even worse, though, and with nothing to distract me from my thoughts, my stomach flip-flops. Is it possible that there's good news waiting for me?

"How did Bowman look?" I ask Rhea.

She's thoughtful for a moment. "He looked the same as always. Wearing a nice suit. Losing his hair a bit."

"Was he smiling?"

She doesn't hesitate this time. "No."

Well, great.

Rhea leads me into the visiting area, which consists of a series of booths with glass partitions to separate me from anyone coming to visit. On either side of the glass is a stool and a bright-red phone so that I can communicate with my visitor without having to breathe the same air.

Thank God the prison has these shackles and glass to protect the rest of the world from me.

Clarence Bowman is seated in the booth nearest to the door. As Rhea warned me, he is wearing a nice suit. And his hairline is indeed receding.

And also, he is most definitely not smiling.

I sit down across from Bowman, and even when he's looking right at me, his lips don't twitch. I'm not sure I want to hear what he has to say anymore, but I may as well get this over with. My right hand trembles slightly as I reach for the phone on my side of the glass, and he does the same on his side.

"Hi," I say.

"Hello, Talia."

"So?" My voice wavers on the syllable. "What's the verdict?"

"The appeal was denied." He pauses. "I'm so sorry."

How could this be? Even though I've been expecting it, the news is like a punch in the gut. With less than two weeks left until my execution, my appeal has failed.