

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

FREIDA MCFADDEN

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEATH ROW

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**FREIDA
McFADDEN**

**DEATH
ROW**

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Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781662532269 (digital)

Cover design by Caroline Teagle Johnson
Cover image: © Rafa Jodar / Getty



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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.”