# #1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR FREIDA MCFADDEN

### The Locked Door

a novel by Freida McFadden The Locked Door

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#### Prologue

Twenty-six years ago today, a man named Aaron Nierling was arrested in his home in Oregon.

Most people knew Nierling as an upstanding citizen. He held a steady job and was a dedicated husband and father—a family man. He had never even received a parking ticket in his lifetime. He had certainly never been in trouble with the law.

However, after an anonymous tip, the police discovered the remains of twenty-five-year-old Mandy Johansson behind the locked door of Aaron Nierling's basement workshop.

Preserved bones from seventeen other victims who had been reported missing over the last decade were also found in a trunk in the basement. Over the course of the police investigation, Nierling was implicated in at least ten other murders going back over twenty years, but no forensic evidence was found to confirm this.

Nierling plea-bargained to escape the death penalty and is currently serving eighteen consecutive life sentences in a maximum-security penitentiary. His wife was also charged with accessory to murder, but she killed herself in prison, prior to standing trial.

News articles proclaimed Aaron Nierling to be a genius, who successfully evaded the police and the FBI for over two decades before his eventual capture. He is exceptionally charismatic and charming—at least, when he wants to be. He is a narcissist and a psychopath, who likely killed at least thirty women without a trace of remorse. He is insane. He is a monster.

He is also my father.

#### Chapter 1

Someone is watching me.

I can feel it. It doesn't logically make sense that a person should be able to feel somebody's gaze on the back of her head, but somehow I can right now. It's a prickling sensation that starts in my scalp and crawls its way down to the base of my neck, then drips down my spine.

I came to this bar alone. I like to be alone—I always have. Whenever there's been a choice, I have always picked my own company. Even when I go to a restaurant, even when I'm surrounded by the low buzz of other people talking amongst themselves, I prefer to sit by myself.

In front of me is my favorite drink—an Old Fashioned. On the nights I don't feel like going straight home, I always come to Christopher's. It's dark and anonymous, with cigarette smoke ground into the bar countertops. It's also usually fairly empty, and the bartenders aren't too hard on the eyes. Sometimes I take a booth but tonight I sit at the bar, my eyes cast down at my drink, watching the single ice cube slowly disintegrate as that tingling in the back of my head intensifies.

I can vaguely hear the television blaring in the background. Most of the time, there's a sports game playing on the screen. But tonight, a game show is on. The host's face fills the screen as he reads a question off the card in front of him.

What friend of Charles de Gaulle was premier of France for much of the 1960s?

I whirl around, trying to catch whoever has been staring at me in the act. No such luck. There are people behind me, but nobody is looking at me. At least, nobody's looking at me *at this moment*.

It's probably something innocent. Maybe a man who is thinking about buying me a drink. Maybe somebody who recognizes me from work.

It doesn't mean it's somebody who knows who I really am. It never is. I'm probably just paranoid tonight because it's the twenty-sixth anniversary of the day my whole life changed.

The day they found out what was in our basement.

"You okay, Doc?"

The bartender is leaning toward me, his muscular forearms balanced on the slightly sticky counter. He's a new bartender—I've seen him only a handful of times. He's slightly older than the last guy, maybe mid-thirties like me.

I tug at the collar of my green scrubs. He started calling me "doc" because of the scrubs. It is, in fact, an accurate guess—I'm a general surgeon. Because I'm a woman, most people see the scrubs and think I'm a nurse, but he went with doctor.

My father is probably proud if he knows about it. Whatever feelings or emotions he is capable of, pride is certainly one of them—that was clear from his trial. He always wanted to be a surgeon himself, but he didn't have the grades. Maybe if he had become a surgeon, it would've kept him from doing the things he ended up doing.

"I'm fine." I run a finger along the rim of my glass. "Just fine."

He lifts an eyebrow. "How's the drink? How'd I do?"

"Good."

That's an understatement. He made it perfectly. I watched him place the sugar cube at the bottom of the glass—he didn't just dump a packet of sugar into the drink like some other bartenders I've seen. He put in exactly the right amount of bitters. And I didn't have to tell him not to use soda water.

"I have to tell you," he says, "I didn't expect you to order an Old Fashioned. You don't seem like the type."

"Mmm." I try to keep any interest out of my voice, so he'll go away and leave me alone. I should never have sat at the bar. But to be fair, the bartenders here are rarely this chatty.

He smiles disarmingly. "I thought you'd order a Cosmopolitan or lemonade spritzer or something like that."

I bite my cheek to keep from responding. I love drinking Old Fashioneds. That's been my drink since I was twenty-one, and maybe even a little before, if I'm being honest. They're dark and boozy, a little sweet and a little bitter. As I take a sip from my drink, my annoyance with the chatty bartender evaporates.

"Anyway." The bartender gives me one last long look. "You give me a yell if you want anything else."

I watch him walk away. For a split second, I allow myself to appreciate the lean muscles that stand out under his T-shirt. He's attractive in a nonthreatening way, with light brown hair and mild brown eyes. The stubble on his face is not quite enough to be called a beard. He's very nondescript—the sort of guy you couldn't pick out of a lineup. Sort of like my father was.

I start to tick off on my fingers the number of months since I've had a man over at my house. Then I start counting off the years. Actually, we may be getting into the decades territory. I've lost track, which is disturbing in itself.

But I'm not interested in a rendezvous with the hot bartender or anyone else. A long time ago, I decided relationships wouldn't be a part of my life anymore. There was a time when it made me sad, but now I've accepted that it's better that way.

I lift my drink again and swish the liquid around. I still have that crawling sensation in the back of my neck like somebody is watching me. But maybe it's not real. Maybe it's all in my head.

Twenty-six years. I can't believe it's been that long.

The game show host on the screen interrupts my thoughts, ripping my eyes away from my drink.

What serial killer was commonly known as the Handyman?

The bartender glances at the screen and says in an offhand way, "Aaron Nierling."

My father is a game show answer tonight. It could be because of the anniversary of his arrest, but it's more likely a coincidence. No matter how many years go by, what he did will never be forgotten. I wonder if he's watching. He used to like game shows. Is he allowed to watch TV in there? It's not clear what they allow him to do in prison. I haven't spoken to him since the police took him away.

Even though he writes me a letter every week.

I push thoughts of my father out of my head as I sip on my drink, allowing that nice warm feeling to wash over me. The bartender is wiping down the counter on the other side of the bar, his muscles flexing under his T-shirt. He pauses briefly to look over at me—and he winks.

Hmm. Maybe my self-imposed abstinence isn't such a great idea. Would it kill me to enjoy myself one night? To wear something besides scrubs? Or let my black hair hang loose instead of pinning it into a tight bun that makes my hair follicles scream with agony.

"Dr. Davis? Is that you?"

At the sound of the voice from behind me, the good warm feeling from the whiskey instantly vanishes. I was right. Somebody *was* looking at me. I wish I could have been wrong just this one time. All I wanted was a little quiet tonight.

For a solid two seconds, I consider not turning around. Pretending I'm not really Dr. Nora Davis. That I'm some *other* lady in green scrubs who just happens to look like Dr. Davis.

But at least he didn't call me Nora Nierling. Nobody has called me that in a very, very long time. And I intend to keep it that way.

The man standing behind me is in his fifties, and short and stocky. This man is most definitely a patient. I can't recall his name, but I remember everything else about him. He came to the hospital with a fever and abdominal pain. He was diagnosed with cholecystitis—an infected gallbladder. We attempted to remove it laparoscopically with cameras, but halfway through, I had to convert it to an open surgery. That's how I know if he were to lift his shirt over his protruding gut, there would be a diagonal scar running along his right upper abdomen. Well-healed by now, I'm sure.

"Dr. Davis!" The man beams at me, showing off a row of yellow, slightly rotted teeth. "I was looking over here and I wasn't sure but... It *is* you. Oh man, I wouldn't have expected to find you in a place like this."

*What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?* At least he hasn't commented on my Old Fashioned.

"Yes, well," I murmur.

I wish he would tell me his name. I feel at a distinct disadvantage. I have an excellent memory for many things—I could sketch out every blood vessel supplying the gut with my eyes closed—but people's names are not one of them. I reach into the depths of my brain, but I'm coming up blank.

"Hey, buddy!" the man calls out to the bartender. "Dr. Davis's drink is on me! This lady here saved my life!"

"That's okay," I murmur. But it's too late. This nameless patient is already making himself comfortable in the barstool next to mine, even though I feel like the lack of makeup and the scrubs that are just one size away from being a potato sack don't invite company. "She gave me this!" he announces, as he pulls up the hem of his shirt. His abdomen is covered in matted dark hair, but you can still see the faint scar from where I cut into him. Just like I remember. "Good job, right?"

I smile thinly.

"You're a real hero, Dr. Davis," he says. "I mean, I was so sick—"

And then he starts proudly recounting the story for anyone in earshot. About how I saved his life. I would say that fact is debatable. Yes, I'm the one who removed his infected gallbladder. But one could argue that he might've done just as well with IV antibiotics and a drain placed by interventional radiology. I didn't necessarily save his life.

But this man is not to be dissuaded. And I did perform the surgery successfully, and he recovered completely and looks quite healthy, save for his dentition.

"Quite impressive," the bartender remarks as the mystery patient finishes the extended account of my exploits. An amused smile is playing on his lips. "You're quite the hero, Doc."

"Yes, well." I down the last dregs of my Old Fashioned. "It's my job."

I rise unsteadily on my barstool. If someone were watching me, they might wonder if I was too drunk to drive. But the reason I'm shaky has nothing to do with alcohol.

Twenty-six years today. Sometimes it feels like it was yesterday.

"I'm going to head out." I smile politely at my former patient. "Thank you for the drink."

"Oh." The man's face falls, like he hoped I would stay here another hour to talk about his infected gallbladder. "You're really leaving?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But..." He looks over at my empty glass and drums his stubby fingers on the counter. "I thought I could buy you another drink. Maybe some dinner. You know, as a thank you."

And now another little tidbit about this man comes back to me. When he thanked me at his follow-up visit, he rested his hand on my knee. Gave it a squeeze before I shifted away. *You did a great job, Dr. Davis.* Of course, I still can't remember his damn name.

"Unnecessary," I say. "Your insurance company already paid me."

He scratches at his neck, at a little red patch that's sore from shaving. He attempts to resurrect his smile. "Come on, Dr. Davis... *Nora*. A pretty woman like you shouldn't be at a bar all alone."

The polite smile has left my lips. "I'm fine, thank you very much."

"Come on." He winks at me. I notice now that one of his rotting incisors is dark brown, nearly black. "It'll be fun. You deserve a nice evening."

"Yes, I do." I sling my purse over my shoulder. "And that's why I'm going home."

"I think you should reconsider." He tries to reach for my arm, but I shrug him away. "I can show you a great time, Nora."

"I seriously doubt that."

All of the affection vanishes from his face. His eyes narrow at me. "Oh, I get it. You're too good to spend five minutes having a conversation at a bar with one of your patients."

My fingers tighten around the strap of my purse. Well, this escalated quickly. I'll have to tell Harper to make sure this man is fired from the practice. Oh wait, I can't. I still don't know his name.

"Excuse me." The bartender's stern voice intercepts our conversation. "Doc, is this man giving you a hard time?"

*Henry Callahan*. That's his name—it comes back to me like a kick in the teeth. I let out a sigh of relief.

Callahan looks over at the bartender, noting his height as well as the muscles in his forearms and biceps. He frowns. "No, I'm just leaving."

"Good."

Callahan manages to jostle my shoulder as he stumbles out the door. I wonder how many drinks he had before he approached me. Probably one too many—who knows if he'll even remember this in the morning.

Henry Callahan. I'll tell Harper first thing tomorrow morning. He's not welcome back at my practice.

I glance back at my empty glass. Looks like ol' Henry never bought me that drink after all. I reach into my purse to pay for it myself, but the bartender shakes his head. "On the house," he says.

I stick out my chin. "I'd like to pay."

"Well, I'd like to buy a drink for a woman who saved a guy's life."

The bartender's mild brown eyes stay trained on mine. The expression on his face is strangely familiar. Have I seen this man before? I stare back at him, searching his generically handsome features, trying to place him. He couldn't have been a patient. He's much younger than most of the people I see, and I remember everybody I put under the knife like Henry Callahan—even if I can't recall their names right away.

*Do we know each other?* The question is on the tip of my tongue, but I don't ask it. I'm probably wrong. It's been a strange night, to say the least. And I want nothing more than to go home.

"Okay," I finally say. "Thank you for the drink."

He cocks his head to the side. "You going to be all right? You want me to walk you to your car?"

"I'll be fine," I say.

I glance out into the bar's parking lot. My car is parked right under a street lamp, only a stone's throw away. I watch Henry Callahan getting into his own car—a small blue Dodge with a large dent in the back fender. My shoulders relax as I watch him drive away.

The creeping sensation in the back of my neck is gone, but it's replaced with a slightly sick feeling. I do my best to push it away. I'm not worried about Henry Callahan. After the things I've seen in my life, there isn't much that can shake me.

But I still hang around the bar for another few minutes, to make sure he's gone.