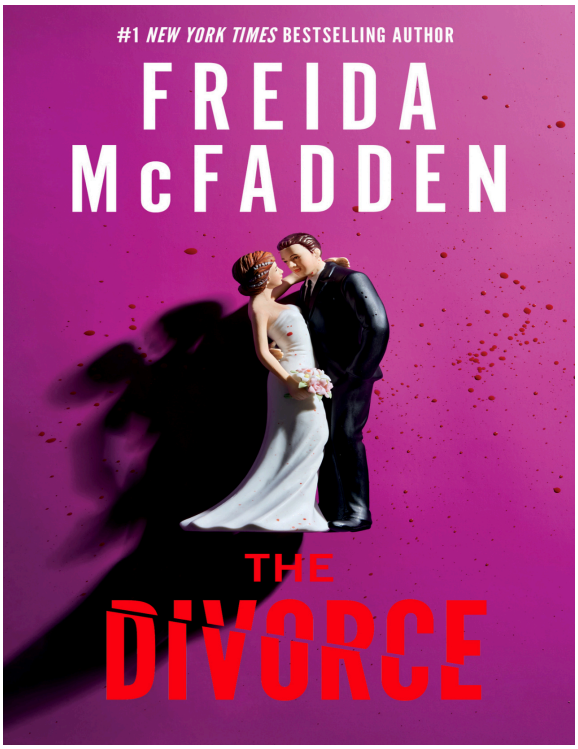


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Chapter 38
Chapter 39

Part II
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46

Part III
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55
Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58
Chapter 59
Chapter 60
Chapter 61
Chapter 62

Part IV
Chapter 63
Chapter 64
Chapter 65
Chapter 66
Chapter 67
Chapter 68
Chapter 69
Chapter 70
Chapter 71

Epilogue

Acknowledgments
Afterword
Dear Debbie
Also by Freida McFadden
About the Author

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 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 at the top of my website:

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

WHEN THE POLICE ARRIVE, HOW WILL I EXPLAIN THE DEAD BODIES IN THE house?

Only one dead body would be easier to explain. People die after all—circle of life, etc., etc. But more than one becomes trickier. Not that I have a lot of experience with it, but it's just common sense. One person can die by accident. Multiple deaths…well, the police start to think about things like *murder*.

Furthermore, it will be very difficult to explain other things to the police. Like what happened to those dead bodies *before* they died. I expect a lot of raised eyebrows. Possibly handcuffs.

Speaking of which, those sirens are getting awfully loud. They'll be here any second.

A gust of wind blows the stench of scorched flesh into my nostrils. Every molecule in my body is screaming at me to make a run for it while I still can. I've got a tiny window of time before the police arrive. I could hop in my car and take off. The nosy neighbor who called 911 in the first place might be able to point them in the right general direction but nothing more. I could go somewhere that they will never, ever find me. I could turn into a ghost.

But it will be hard to disappear completely. Because wherever I go, I won't be alone. After all, it's not like I did any of this for myself. I did it all for *him*.

The sirens are growing louder by the second. I have less than a minute before they arrive. If there was ever a window to disappear, I have missed

it. Very soon, everyone will find out the unthinkable thing that happened in this house. And when they do, there will be questions to answer.

The police car arrives first, screeching to a halt crookedly along the curb. As the officer climbs out of the driver’s seat, I raise my hands high in the air where he can see them.

My life is about to change forever.

PART I

1

NAOMI

MY FIRST CLUE THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG IS THAT MY GARAGE DOOR won't open.

We have one of those "intelligent" garage doors that senses my Lexus when I pull into the driveway, rolling up the door at the exact moment to prevent collision with my front fender. The garage door is a feature my husband proudly showed me when we moved into this house, joking that it was smarter than I am, and in all the years I've lived here, it's never proven him wrong.

Until today.

I throw my Lexus into park and stare at the garage door as if it's a puzzle I have to solve. There's a way to open it manually—I'm sure of it. I have a distinct memory of Jeremy telling me that if it didn't open automatically, all I would have to do is—

"Mommy?" Teddy's babyish voice pipes up from the back seat. "Is the door broken?"

I turn to look at my son, still wearing his white uniform from the karate class I just picked him up from. He is strapped into a car seat in the back, even though at five years old, he's getting a little big to be sitting in one. He looks almost comically big for it, but I read that in the case of a rollover accident, there is nothing safer. And our pediatrician recommended the car seat until age six, so I ignore the eye rolls from some of the other women at kindergarten pickup.

“I don’t think so,” I say.

“Then why won’t it open?”

Excellent question.

I glance over at the house, where the lights are on inside, signaling that Jeremy is home from work. That’s almost as surprising as the garage door not opening, since he rarely makes it home before the very moment we’re sitting down to dinner and often much later. He’s at least an hour early tonight.

My husband manages a hedge fund in the city, and he works harder than anyone I know, but I respect the fact that even if he has to sometimes miss our family dinner, he is home every single night to put Teddy to bed. Aside from the occasional business trip, of course.

“Daddy will help us figure it out,” I tell Teddy.

Teddy nods in agreement. As far as he is concerned, there is *nothing* his father can’t do. If someone needed to fly around the earth backward to turn back time, Teddy would volunteer Jeremy for the task.

I climb out of the car, tugging at the yoga pants that always seem to ride up into my butt crack. Then I contort my body into the back seat to release Teddy from his harness, and he rewards me with a gap-toothed grin. He recently lost his first baby tooth, followed by a second soon after, and then two more. He was over-the-moon excited after looking enviously at all the other kids in his class who had already lost teeth, but I mourned the loss of that first one as yet another sign of my precious little boy growing up.

Teddy grabs his SpongeBob backpack, which I’m pretty sure weighs as much as he does, if not slightly more. We head over to the front door of our house, Teddy tilted backward as he attempts to hold up the weight of his backpack. When I put my hand on the doorknob, it doesn’t turn, and I swear under my breath.

“You said a bad word, Mommy!” Teddy declares, simultaneously aghast and titillated.

“Sorry,” I say quickly. “I didn’t mean to.”

“What’s wrong?” he demands to know.

“The door is locked.”

“Why?”

I fumble around in my purse, searching for my keys. Considering I always come in through the garage, where the door is never locked, I rarely use them. But I’m pretty sure they’re in here somewhere. “I don’t know.”

“What are you doing now?”

I look up from my purse and flash Teddy what I hope is a patient smile. Sometimes I think my son expects a running narration of everything that I do, and for the most part, I try to provide it. Teddy’s kindergarten teacher told me that he had the best vocabulary in the class, and I think it’s because I’m always talking to him. “I’m finding my house keys.”

“Are they in your purse?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!”

Oh my God, where *are* they? I shove aside a mini water bottle and what feels like the giant rock that Teddy picked up at the park last week and asked me to save because he thought it was “cool.” And then, thank God, my fingers close around my key chain. I pull it out triumphantly. “Ta-da!”

Obligingly, Teddy claps.

Whatever is wrong with the garage door, we can save it for later. As always, the parking was out of control at the karate school, which is in a strip mall shared by about a dozen other shops. I drove around the lot for several minutes before locating a spot, just in time for the clouds that had been hovering all afternoon to break open. Over an hour later, my hair is still damp, and my shoes squelch with each step. I want nothing more than a quiet evening with my family.

I fit my key into the lock, but the lock doesn’t turn. That’s…strange. When I am certain that this key is not functional, I pull it out. I examine the key ring, which contains only two keys. One is the key for the house, and the other is the key for my old medical practice, which I gave up when I decided to be a stay-at-home mom for Teddy. No regrets, but I saved my spare key for nostalgic reasons. In any case, that is definitely not the key to my house. Although I try it, just in case.

Nope. I’ve got two keys, and neither one of them opens the door to the house.

That’s when I notice something else. The lock on the door is shinier than I remember it. It looks, in fact, brand-new. But to my knowledge, we haven’t changed this lock in years. Not since I’ve been living here.

That’s my second clue that something is very wrong.

“What’s wrong with the key, Mommy?” Teddy asks.

“I don’t know.”

“When you put the key in the lock, you are s’posed to turn it,” he tells me unhelpfully.

“Yes, I know, Teddy.”

“Did you turn it?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe turn it again?”

My temple is starting to throb, and I am tired of trying to sort through the mystery of why my key no longer works in the lock. Instead, I ring the doorbell. When nobody comes immediately, I bang on the door with my fist. Then I bang harder.

“Why are you kicking the door, Mommy?” Teddy asks.

“Just making sure Daddy hears us.”

Thankfully, a few seconds later, footsteps grow louder behind the door. The lock turns, and my husband is standing before me, wearing his dress shirt unbuttoned at the collar with no tie. Jeremy turned forty about six months ago, and he looks the best he ever has. He takes care of himself—he’s a bit of an exercise guru who wakes up an hour early to go to the gym Tuesdays and Thursdays, and then on the other weekdays, he runs at the park. The sandy brown hair on his head shows no sign of thinning with only a few strands of gray at the temples, his dark brown eyes are just as intense as they were the day I met him, and his diligent flossing must’ve paid off, because his teeth are white and perfect. There are creases around his eyes when he smiles, which I find incredibly sexy.

Most of my female friends seem to be barely tolerating their husbands. One of them said she ended up having to make an appointment with a specialist because she’d used headaches as an excuse so many times to get out of sex with her husband. But I don’t have that problem. Even after years of marriage, I still get that thrill every time I lay eyes on Jeremy. Our chemistry is as strong as it ever was.

“Daddy!” Teddy hollers as he propels himself at Jeremy, the same way he does every day.

Teddy *worships* his father. Over the Christmas holidays, we took a family trip to Disneyland, and I would say that Teddy’s enthusiasm for meeting Mickey Mouse paled compared to his enthusiasm for when his father comes home every night. And Teddy *loves* that mouse.

Jeremy rewards our son with a brilliant smile and heaves him into his arms like he weighs practically nothing, even though I have tweaked my