

A dark, blue-toned photograph of a small wooden house at night. The house has a tiled roof and a single window that is brightly lit from within, casting a warm glow. The surrounding area is dark, with trees and foliage visible in the background. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

ONE

BY

ONE

FREIDA McFADDEN

One by One

a novel by

FREIDA MCFADDEN

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To Libby and Melanie (as always)

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PROLOGUE

ANONYMOUS

There will be six of us.

Six adults. Stuffed into a six-person minivan like sardines, with all the luggage we felt we couldn't possibly live without during our vacation at a swanky luxury inn. Our reservation is for six days. Six days of hiking and hottubs. Six days away from civilization.

My mother was a religious woman. That's how I know that on the sixth day, both man and serpent were created. You know—the snake that eventually convinced Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit and got them kicked out of the Garden of Eden forever? That's why the number six represents both man and the evil that weakens him.

In Revelation, 666 is the number of the devil.

The sixth Commandment is thou shalt not kill.

Six is not a nice number.

I'm not religious. I don't go to church. I don't believe in a higher power. Six is just like any other number to me. But I know that every single one of these six people has a secret they don't want anyone to know.

I can tell you my secret right now:

At the end of this week, only one of us will make it home alive.

CHAPTER 1

CLAIRE

I don't know when I started to hate my husband.

I didn't always. When we tied the knot over ten years ago, we held hands and I swore I would love him forever. Until death did us part. And I *meant* it. I meant it with every fiber of my being. I genuinely believed I would be married to Noah Matchett for the rest of my life. I fantasized about the two of us growing old together—holding hands while sitting in matching rocking chairs in a retirement home. And when the minister declared us husband and wife, I patted myself on the back for choosing the right guy.

I'm not sure what happened between then and now. But I can't stand the guy anymore.

"Where's my UChicago shirt, Claire?"

Noah is hunched over the top drawer of his dresser, his eyebrows bunched together as his hazel eyes stare down into the contents of the drawer. He clears his throat, which is what he always does when he's concentrating hard on something. I used to find it cute and endearing. Now I find it irritating. Nails on a chalkboard irritating.

"I don't know." I grab a couple of shirts out of my own dresser drawer and shove them into the brown luggage gaping open on our bed. "It's not in the drawer?"

He looks up from the drawer and purses his lips. "If it were in the drawer, why would I be asking you about it?"

Hmm. Maybe this is why I hate my husband. Because he's become a huge jerk.

"I don't know where your shirt is." I start sifting through my bras. How many bras do you bring for a weeklong trip? I'm never certain. "It's *your* shirt."

"Yeah, but *you* did the laundry."

"So?" I stuff four bras into my luggage—that should be enough. "Do you think while I'm doing laundry, I'm thinking to myself, 'Oh, here's

Noah's UChicago shirt—better put that somewhere special, instead of the drawer where I put every other shirt of his I've ever washed in the history of doing laundry'?"

He rolls his eyes at me and sifts through the drawer one more time. "Well, it's not in here."

"I don't know what to tell you, Noah."

He rubs at the dark stubble on his chin that has a hint of gray. He hasn't shaved in three days, because he's been working from home. He doesn't care what he looks like unless he has to go to work. "Maybe you put it in Aidan's dresser by mistake?"

That's unlikely, since our nine-year-old son now does his own laundry. Somehow, my fourth grader can wash his own clothes, but my adult husband is not capable of it. From the moment we got married, laundry automatically became my responsibility. There was no discussion. The wife does the laundry. End of story.

"You're welcome to check Aidan's dresser," I say.

Noah shoots me an exasperated look, then he stomps off in the direction of our son's room, his large feet creaking against the floorboards. He's not going to find the shirt there. I would bet a million bucks the shirt is right in that top drawer where he's been looking all along.

In only a few short hours, we are embarking on a weeklong trip to a cozy inn located in the northern part of Colorado. It will be about a four-hour drive to get there, followed by a week of breakfast buffets, a Jacuzzi, nature walks, and a lake with trout that are basically jumping out of the water. It's the perfect combination of getting away from urban (or in our case, suburban) life and still enjoying hot and cold running water and Cable TV. I can't wait.

Well, except for the four hours in a car with my husband. Who probably won't stop talking about his stupid UChicago shirt.

I drop a handful of socks into my luggage and walk over to Noah's dresser. I've got two full dressers and a closet filled with clothes, whereas Noah just has the one dresser and a few dress shirts in the closet. When we were first together, he used to tease me about how much clothing I had compared with him. He still teases me about it, but now the jabs are considerably less playful.

If you buy one more shirt, we're going to have to buy a separate house just for your clothing, Claire.

It's not so much. My friend Lindsay literally has an *entire room* just for her clothing. But she's not married. So she gets to do whatever she wants without another person criticizing her every move.

I sift through the drawer, pushing through the range of gray and black T-shirts. Noah has never been a fan of bright colors. He tends to stick with the grayscale. One time he bought a green shirt. That was his midlife crisis.

After only a few seconds, I see the flash of maroon shoved into one corner of the drawer. I pull out the shirt and see the word UChicago etched across the front in faded lettering. Noah has had this T-shirt as long as I've known him. It's his favorite shirt.

For a moment, I'm seized with the urge to stuff this shirt into the bottom of the garbage bin without telling him. He'll go crazy looking for it. And really, this shirt needs to be retired. There's a hole forming at the collar and the hem is all frayed.

Then again, I've got enough secrets from my husband right now. And I don't want to miss out on the pure satisfaction of informing him that the shirt was in the drawer all along.

"Mommy?"

My seven-year-old daughter, Emma, is standing at the doorway to our bedroom, watching me contemplate what to do with her father's favorite T-shirt. Even though we've already had breakfast, she's still wearing her *Frozen* pajamas, which are royal blue with little snowflakes all over them. I guiltily shove the T-shirt back into the drawer and turn to smile at Emma. She doesn't smile back.

While her big brother is excited about the idea of staying with Aunt Penny for a week, Emma is decidedly freaked out. For the last week, Emma has crawled into our queen-sized bed every single night to sleep. Fortunately, Noah and I sleep with a gap the size of the Atlantic Ocean between us.

"What's wrong, honey?" I ask.

Emma's lower lip trembles. She runs over to me and wraps her skinny arms around my hips. "Don't go, Mommy. *Please.*"

"Emma..."

I attempt to pry her off me, but she's stuck like glue. It's sweet. As much as I dislike my husband, I love my children. I've always loved children. It's part of the reason I became a teacher. Nothing makes me happier than seeing the smiles light up those little faces.

I reach down and wipe Emma's damp light brown curls from her face. Her hair looks like mine, but it's still baby soft. I lean in and bury my face in it—it smells like her watermelon shampoo. "It's just a week, sweetheart," I say.

She looks up at me with her little tear-streaked cheeks. "But what if something happens to you?"

I don't know how my seven-year-old daughter got so neurotic. She worries about everything, including things no child has any business worrying about. Like when there was talk of a teacher strike last year, she was worried I wouldn't have a job and we wouldn't be able to afford food. What seven-year-old worries about that?

"Why are you so worried, Emma?"

She chews on her little pink lip. "Well, you're going to be in the woods."

I don't blame her for worrying if that's what she thinks. Neither of her parents is what you would call "the outdoorsy type" by any stretch of the imagination. "Don't worry," I say. "We're staying in a nice hotel. It will be really safe."

Her light brown eyebrows bunch together. "But I had a dream that..."

"That what?"

Emma scrunches up her face. "That a monster in the forest ate you up!"

It's laughable, of course. We'll be sticking to the hotel and its amenities most of the week, and if we do venture out, we will keep to circumscribed locations like hiking trails for lame-o city slicker tourists. And even if we weren't, I'm sure whatever Emma is imagining is some sort of blue Cookie Monster-like creature appearing out of the wilderness and stuffing us all into his mouth in one fell swoop.

Yet Emma does sometimes have a strange intuition about things. One night she came into our bedroom at two in the morning, crying about a dream that Grandpa Joe had died. Two days later, my seemingly healthy

father succumbed to a massive heart attack. Noah chalked it all up to coincidence, but I never forgot.

As much as I hate to admit it, Emma's premonition is making me uneasy. Maybe this trip is a mistake.

I look down at the two sets of luggage on our bed. Noah's with the clothes stuffed haphazardly inside, and mine with everything folded neatly. What if I told him I didn't want to go? Would he freak out? Or would he be relieved that he doesn't have to spend the next week with someone he hates?

But then I hear Noah's laughter coming from outside the door. Apparently, he heard the whole exchange. "Emma!" He stands in the doorway with his arms folded across his chest. "You're not really worried about that, are you?"

Emma's lower lip trembles.

"You know there's no such thing as monsters!" He cocks his head to the side. "Well, except for... tickle monsters!"

Despite her worries, Emma's brown eyes widen excitedly. After a solid minute of tickling, she appears to have forgotten all about her scary dream. It must be nice to be a child, who can live in the moment and forget everything with the help of a little tickling.

Noah is good with the kids. I can't say he isn't. They adore him, and he loves them as much as I do. And that's why we're still together, even though we despise each other. Even though we've never said the words out loud, we both know we're staying together for the kids. For now.

"Okay," Noah says to Emma. "Your Aunt Penny is going to be here any minute. Is your suitcase all packed?"

We bought Emma a *Frozen* rolling luggage just for this trip. She was so excited about it when she got it. "Almost."

"Well, you better finish getting packed." He arches one eyebrow. "Or else... the tickle monster might come back..."

He makes his fingers into claws, and Emma squeals and flees the room. He watches her go, a crooked smile on his face. For a moment, I recall how much I used to love him. How much fun we used to have together. The way my whole body would tingle in anticipation when I knew he was taking me out to dinner. He used to make me laugh the same way he made Emma laugh.

I wonder if we could fix things. Maybe if I say something kind right now instead of my usual snarky comment, he would smile and laugh. And maybe we could use this trip as a chance to heal our relationship. Maybe it isn't too late for us.

But then Noah turns to look at me and the smile slides off his face.

"You lost my shirt," he says.

"It was right in your drawer all along, Einstein."

We are not going to be fixing things today. Or ever.

CHAPTER 2

CLAIRE

My sister Penny arrives in our driveway at promptly half-past nine to get the kids. My easy-going firstborn Aiden accepts a kiss on the cheek, then obediently climbs into her SUV and buckles himself in. He only recently graduated from having a booster seat, and he takes the responsibility very seriously.

Emma is a different story. She attaches herself firmly to my hip, any comfort she had derived from the tickle attack now long faded.

Penny comes around the side of the CRV, her blond ponytail swinging as she wipes her hands on her yoga pants. “What’s the problem, Em? You don’t want to spend a super fun week with Aunt Penny?”

Emma will have a great time with Penny. Penny has three kids of her own, and they are always elbow-deep in some exciting (and messy) baking project. Or art involving macaroni. And she’s got a freaking slip ‘n slide in her backyard. But right now, my daughter couldn’t care less. She responds by burrowing her head deeper into my belly.

“She had a dream that a monster ate us,” I explain.

“Oh, scary!” Penny nods sympathetically. “But I don’t think there are any monsters where your mom and dad are going, Em. They’re going to North Colorado, and all the monsters are in the south. So they should be fine.”

Another kid might have been persuaded, but Emma is the daughter of a physicist. She has an impeccable sense of logic. So she just shoots Penny a withering look and returns her face to my hip.

For the second time this morning, I wonder if this trip is a mistake. I’m already fighting with Noah, and now we’re going to spend *four hours* together in the car. Sometimes having our friends in the car with us dampens our fights, but often they are just an embarrassing public audience to how much Noah and I have grown to hate each other.

Maybe I should stay home. It’s not too late to back out. Noah can go without me.

Then again, there's another reason why I want to go on this trip. And anyway, the reservation is nonrefundable.

Working together, Penny and I manage to pry Emma off my hip, mostly with the promise of lots and lots of ice cream. We throw the kids' luggage into her trunk, then they're ready to go. I get a jab of sadness in my chest, knowing I'll be away from my babies for a whole week. Even though we take a trip every year, it's always painful.

"I'll take good care of them," Penny promises.

"Thanks." I know she will. She's like a super mom. Between my constant arguments with Noah and my busy job as a special ed teacher, sometimes I feel like I'm falling short in the motherhood department. But I would never give up my job—I love it too much.

"By the way." She lowers her voice a notch. "Did you tell Noah about...?"

I glance at the house. Noah is still packing upstairs in our bedroom. "No. Not yet."

Her eyes widen. "Claire, you have to tell him! When are you going to say something?"

"Soon, okay?" I don't want to explain about our stupid fight over his T-shirt. "I'll tell him before we get there."

She flashes me her classic I'm-the-big-sister-who-knows-better-than-you look. I hate that look. Especially because she's right. Noah and I need to have a talk ASAP. I can't blindside him on this.

"I'll tell him as soon as we get into the car," I say. "Before we get Lindsay."

Yes, that should make for an interesting ride.

I hug Penny goodbye and fold myself in half to lean into the backseat to kiss the kids one last time. Emma clings to me extra hard. Why can't I push away this sick feeling? We've gone on a trip like this every single year we've been married. This is the first time I've had such a bad feeling about it.

It's all Emma's stupid dream. I know it's ridiculous, but it's weighing on me.

I need to put it out of my head. Before I let it ruin the week.

CHAPTER 3

CLAIRE

We're taking my silver minivan on the trip, because it will hold all six of us. Noah thought I was being ridiculous when I bought the minivan, but I'm constantly driving carpool, so it's come in handy a lot. There are three rows of seats, so the kids don't have to be squashed on top of each other. I love it. As usual, Noah was absolutely wrong.

I remove Emma's booster seat so all the adults will have a place to sit. Last night, I cleaned out the car, which was embarrassingly dirty. How did so many french fries get in the backseat? And why was everything so *sticky* back there? I did the best I could to clean it up, but there are probably still a few sticky patches left.

We each have one piece of luggage, but my bag is twice the size of Noah's and stuffed to the breaking point. He tosses my luggage into the back so roughly that I'm glad I didn't pack anything fragile. He's decided to take out his aggression towards me on my luggage. On the plus side, at least he shaved for the trip.

"What the hell do you need so much stuff for?" he grumbles. "We're only going for a week."

Admittedly, I didn't pack light. But it's the end of June, which means it could just as easily be chilly as it could be sweltering. I have to be prepared. "You brought plenty too," I point out.

Noah gently places his brand new tackle box into the back. "I'm going fishing. I have to have supplies."

Right. He's been excited about going fishing for months. "I still don't get why you're so excited about sitting on a lake for hours. It sounds excruciating."

He shrugs. "I just... I need to clear my head."

Fine, whatever. As long as he doesn't ask me to go with him. If the two of us go out on a boat into the middle of the lake, I have a bad feeling only one of us will come back alive.

Noah takes the spare car keys from the pocket of his jeans and slides into the driver's seat. It's a strange move, considering this is *my* car. I rap on the driver's side window. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What? Aren't we going?"

"Yeah, but it's my car. Why are *you* driving?"

He rolls his eyes at me. "Come on, Claire. You've had this car for three years, and there are already like ten dents in it."

That's not entirely inaccurate. Still. "Not all of those dents are my fault."

"Whatever you say."

I grit my teeth, wondering if this is worth fighting about. It's not like I love to drive and I'm so eager to be behind the wheel for four hours. But why does he assume he's always going to be the one driving during these long trips? Worse, he's going to complain later about how I made him do all the driving, and now he's tired and crabby.

If we didn't have two children together, I would call it quits right now. Right this minute.

For a moment, I allow myself to fantasize. *Noah, it's over.* It would feel so good to say those words.

Instead, I climb into the passenger's seat beside him. I smooth out the light pink shorts I bought last week that show off what I think are still some pretty nice legs for my age. Not that Noah would notice. He used to dress nicely when we went out together, but now he sticks to jeans and a T-shirt. Although I admit, they don't look bad on his solid frame.

He pushes his glasses up his nose and swivels his head to look at me. "Aren't you going to use the bathroom?"

"No."

He frowns. "Look, you should go now. I'm not stopping in thirty minutes at a gas station so you can go."

"Fine. I won't have to go."

"Really? Because I feel like whenever you don't go right before we leave, I end up having to stop right away."

I glare at him. Are we really having this conversation? I'm not five years old. "Noah, if I needed to use the bathroom, I would go. I don't have to go."

He stares at me for a moment, then turns his key in the gas. “Whatever you say, Claire.”

I drop back in my seat, fuming, as he carefully backs out of the driveway and starts driving in the direction of Lindsay’s house. After a minute of silence, he hits the button to start the radio, and Adam Levine’s voice croons the lyrics to a song I’ve heard hundreds of times before.

Noah stares out at the road through his glasses. Back when we first started dating, he only wore glasses in class and when he was driving. He never wore them on our dates. Over the last fifteen years, he’s gotten to the point where he wears them all the time. He says his vision has gotten worse, but I’m not so sure. He wears them all the time for the same reason he doesn’t bother to shave anymore if he doesn’t have to be at work. I’m lucky he gets dressed or showers anymore.

“I got us separate rooms,” I blurt out.

Noah slides his foot onto the brake at a red light. He turns to stare at me, his hazel eyes wide. “*What?*”

“At the inn.” I look away from him, out the windshield. “I booked us two separate bedrooms.”

“You did?” Even though we have been fighting nonstop all morning (hell, all *year*), he sounds hurt. “But... why?”

“Well...” I play with a loose thread on my shirt. “I just thought... I mean, you snore, Noah. And you’re always saying how I move around too much in my sleep. So I thought maybe, you know, we could both get a better night’s sleep if we’re apart.” I hastily add, “Just for the week.”

I hazard a look at Noah. His eyes are pinned on the crosswalk, and a muscle twitches in his jaw.

“I mean,” I babble on, “there are a lot of couples that take separate vacations *entirely*. There’s nothing wrong with it. You know, a little time apart. You’re going to be spending most of your time fishing anyway, and you’ll have to get up real early...”

The light turns green and Noah hits the gas so hard that my head snaps back. “Right. I get it.”

“So... you’re okay with it?”

That muscle is still twitching in his jaw. “Of course. Separate bedrooms. Perfect. Maybe we won’t have to see each other at all during this trip.”

“Noah...”

But before I can say another word, Noah reaches over and turns up the volume of the radio loud enough to drown out any attempt at conversation. I guess we're done discussing this.

He's not thrilled. Frankly, I thought there was a chance he might be relieved we wouldn't be stuck in a tiny room together for a whole week. Apparently not.

Still, I'm not going to take it back. I've been looking forward to these separate rooms all month. I probably should've told him sooner, but I didn't want to have to deal with him sulking about it for weeks. I'm sure once we're there, he'll see the wisdom in my decision. And maybe next year, we *will* end up taking separate vacations. Lindsay and I could take that trip to Hawaii we've been talking about for ages.

Or maybe next year we won't be together anymore at all. You never know.