



WANT  
TO  
KNOW  
A  
SECRET?

#1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
FREIDA McFADDEN

Want to Know a Secret?

a novel by  
FREIDA MCFADDEN

Want to Know a Secret?

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To Libby and Melanie (as always)

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# Chapter 1

## APRIL

To: April Masterson

From: Unknown number

**Want to know a secret?**

**Your son isn't where you think he is.**

“As you can see, I’ve now got a tray of delicious, ooey-goey fudge brownies, fresh from the oven!”

I use my oven mitts to hold up my tray of brownies to the expensive digital camera mounted on the tripod in my kitchen. I tilt the tray slightly, so viewers will be able to see the brownies. They look delicious, if I do say so myself.

“Now for a taste.” I pick up the carving knife on the kitchen table. I cut myself a nice big square of chocolatey goodness and take a careful bite. When I first started doing this, I recorded myself eating treats multiple times, trying to figure out the right formula for not looking like a slob while I stuffed confections in my mouth. “*Mmm*. So good!”

Truth be told, I over-baked them by about five minutes. They taste a bit dry. But nobody watching will know it. That’s the great thing about video.

I lay down the rest of the brownie. I only ever take one bite and that’s it. Nobody wants to watch me gorge myself on their computer screen. “And there you have it, folks! My secret recipe for the most delicious brownies you’ll ever eat.” As long as you don’t overbake them. “If you enjoyed watching *April’s Sweet Secrets*, please subscribe to my YouTube channel.”



And now I wave at the camera, my eyes connecting with the lens. “Good night, Mom!”

That’s how I end every episode.

My show is called *April’s Sweet Secrets*. My secrets are my hook. In every episode, I tell viewers a few “secret tips” to get their sweet treats to taste better than anyone else’s. Want to know the secret to delicious brownies? The secret is melting good quality dark chocolate in with the cocoa powder.

I shut down the camera and detach the microphone. It’s only after the recording has stopped that my shoulders relax. Even though I’m not recording live, I feel tense when I’m on the screen in front of my thousands of subscribers. Even after five years of doing this.

And now there’s the question of what to do with all the brownies. A huge tray of them, sitting there, taunting me. They may be slightly over-baked, but they’re still delicious and I would love to stuff myself with two or three of them (or five). Unfortunately, I can’t afford to eat even one. That’s the ironic part—my career is teaching people to put together the most delicious treats, but I’m not allowed to touch them aside from that one bite on screen. I have to look good for the camera.

I’ll put aside a few for my seven-year-old son Bobby—he’s playing out in the backyard and he’ll come back inside soon, hungry for snacks. He deserves a treat for not having interrupted me even once during the filming. It’s something of a world’s record!

And I’ll bring the rest of the tray to Carrie Schaeffer later today. She’s going through that horrible divorce, and I know she’ll appreciate them.

I head out to the living room where I stashed my cell phone during the recording. My phone is a distraction that I can’t have anywhere near me when I’m making these videos. Nobody wants to watch a video of somebody sneaking looks at text messages on their phone—it’s so unprofessional. And sure enough, I’ve got several waiting for me.

The first text is from Julie, who lives two houses down from us and is my absolute best friend. She’s a little intense, but that’s only because she

used to be an attorney in her previous life. You know, Before Kids. (BK.)

**Are you coming to the PTA meeting on Tuesday?**

She has asked me that question no less than five-thousand times. And the answer is always the same. Yes. Yes, I'm coming. I have come to every single PTA meeting in the entire time we have known each other. But I know if I don't answer this one time, she'll get snippy. So I quickly reply:

**Yes, I'll be there!**

**Can you come twenty minutes early to help me set up the tables and chairs?**

I groan. I knew I was going to get roped into that. But it's very hard to say no to Julie. And she means well. She's amazing as president of the PTA.

**Sure! No problem!**

I notice another unread text message, this one from an unknown number. Undoubtedly, it's a spam text message. Or maybe it's from a fan who somehow got my cell phone number. Every once in a while, my number seems to get out there, despite my best efforts to keep it secret. I've had to change it twice. I click on the message to view it:

**Want to know a secret? Your son isn't where you think he is.**

I stare at the message on the screen. *What?*

A cold, sick feeling comes over me. Bobby is in the backyard. We have a fenced-in backyard, and he and I have an agreement that when I'm filming one of my videos, he's got to either stay out there or in his room. But about

half the time, he finds a reason to interrupt me. I had been feeling proud of him that he didn't interrupt me this time.

This has got to be a prank. But even so, I'll go check on him.

My legs feel a little wobbly as I step onto the back porch and scan the grass, which is in dire need of trimming. I look around the yard, my eyes darting between the two trees and the little swing set that Bobby has nearly outgrown. I don't see him. Maybe he's hiding behind a tree or something. That kid loves to hide.

"Bobby!" I call out.

My only answer is a slight rustling of leaves.

"April?"

I whirl around, my heart pounding. My husband Elliot is standing behind me, dressed in an Armani suit. It's Sunday, but of course, he's on his way to work. I wouldn't expect anything different from my workaholic husband. It used to drive me crazy, but I've learned to accept it.

"I'm on my way out," he says. "Just wanted to let you know."

"Wait." There's a slightly hysterical edge to my voice. "I don't see Bobby in the backyard."

Elliot straightens out his tie. It's his red power tie. He must have something important going on today. I remember the first time I saw him in that tie nine years ago, I swooned. I actually *swooned*. I had never met anyone like Elliot Masterson before. He was one of the most handsome and charismatic men I'd ever met. There was something in the back of my head, even then, telling me this man would be my husband and the father of my child someday.

But right now, I can't appreciate how good he looks in his suit and tie. All I can think about is who sent me this text message and where my son is.

"Are you sure he's not out there?" he asks.

"Yes!" I fish around in my pocket for my phone. "And look at this text message someone sent me!"

Elliot takes my phone and reads the text as he rubs at his scalp. It's very smooth—he must have shaved this morning. That's right—my husband

shaves his head. He started doing it about four years ago, and I screamed and pulled out my can of mace when he came into the living room with his newly shorn head for the first time. I thought he was going to burgle me—he looked like a completely different person, and I hated it. But after a few weeks, I came around. The shaved head is sexy and virile, and admittedly better than his badly receding hairline.

“It’s probably just a prank,” he says, although there’s a slight tremor in his voice.

“Why would somebody play a prank like that on me?”

“I don’t know! You’re a public figure. People know you. Maybe somebody’s cookies didn’t come out right and they’re angry at you.”

He’s right that I have become a public figure lately. Everybody in our Long Island town seems to know who I am, thanks to my YouTube show. And truth be told, I have received a few creepy text messages over the years from viewers who tracked down my number. But nothing ever came of it.

“Maybe he’s upstairs?” Elliot suggests.

It’s possible. But I’ve been in the kitchen for the last hour, and he would have had to go past me to get back in the house. I would have seen that. So he must still be outside.

“He could be hiding...” I say. Bobby is at an age where he thinks it’s hilarious to hide somewhere, and jump out and startle me at an inopportune moment. *Haha, I scareded you!* If he wasn’t so darn cute, I would be furious.

Right now, it would not be cute.

“I’ll go check upstairs,” Elliot says.

“I’ll check the side of the house.”

I go out into the backyard, tugging at the bright red blouse that suddenly feels too hot. On camera, I always wear bright, solid colors. Usually, I change shortly after I finish making my video, but there’s no time for that now. I feel my ballet flats squishing against the damp grass. “Bobby!” I call again.

No answer. But that doesn’t mean anything. If he’s hiding, of course he’s not going to give away his location.

I stop for a moment and listen. Even though he's good at hiding, he is still only seven. At this point, he's probably giggling to himself. So I listen for giggling. Or crunching of leaves. But I don't hear any.

I get another sting of panic in my chest.

I venture further out into the backyard. I look along the side of the house, where we keep our garbage cans. It's a perfect hiding place for a little boy—I'm hoping to find him crouched behind one of the bins. At this point, he's giving me enough of a scare that I will definitely have to scold him: *Mommy was really scared! Next time, don't hide like that!*

I look behind the bins. Nothing.

Then my eyes fall on the gate to the backyard. It's the only way to get in or out of the backyard without going through the house.

The gate door is wide open.

With a shaking hand, I pull my phone out of my pocket. I bring up the text message one more time:

**Your son isn't where you think he is.**

My hands are shaking so much, it's an effort to respond: **Who are you? Where is he?**

I stand there, watching the screen. Waiting.

But there's no reply.

## Chapter 2

I rush back into the house, just in time to run into Elliot, who is coming down the stairs. “Was he up there?” I ask.

For a moment, I have a sliver of hope, but then he shakes his head.

“Did you check all the rooms?” I press him.

He nods. “Yes. I didn’t see him.”

That stab of panic is starting to escalate. My legs have turned to jello. “He’s not in the backyard. And the gate is open...”

My heart is doing jumping jacks in my chest, but Elliot still doesn’t seem overly concerned. How does he do that? Is he really not worried or is he just so much better at faking it? He is a lawyer, after all. He’s good at faking it.

“Don’t freak out, April,” he says. “You know Bobby. He probably went over to play with Leo.”

Leo is Bobby’s best friend, and conveniently Julie’s son.

“Without asking me?” My voice sounds high and squeaky. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“Hmm. It sounds *exactly* like something he would do.”

That’s not true.

At least, I don’t think it’s true. Admittedly, Bobby has been testing some of the boundaries of what we will allow him to do lately. Maybe Elliot is right. Maybe he’s playing at Leo’s house right now. Although if he were with Julie, wouldn’t she have mentioned it when she texted me about the PTA meeting?

“But what about that text message I got?” I say. I was willing to shrug it off as a prank before, but now that I can’t locate Bobby, I realize it may be much more than that.

He just shakes his head. “I... I don’t know...”

“I’m calling Julie,” I announce. Before he can say anything, I reach for my phone and call Julie’s number on speed dial. It rings five times, then goes

to voicemail. “She’s not picking up.”

“She never picks up.”

My heart is racing as I push past my husband. “I’m going over there.”

Elliot is watching me, his eyebrows bunched together. “I’m sure he’s fine. I bet anything he’s at Leo’s house.”

“Yeah,” I mumble.

“I mean,” he goes on, “kids don’t just get taken from the backyard. That’s the kind of thing that happens in fiction. In real life, that never happens. It’s really rare.”

I stop in my tracks to glare at him. “I just got a text message asking me where he is, and now I can’t find him. You really think I’m overreacting?”

Elliot opens his mouth, but no words come out.

Bobby has taped one of his drawings to our front door. It looks like a turtle, which is his favorite kind of animal (this month). He’s written his name in the lower right-hand corner, and in the upper right-hand corner, he’s scribbled, “For Mom.” Whenever he draws anything, he always writes that in the corner. Every drawing is for me.

A few hours ago, if I saw this I would have yelled at him for using tape on the wall. I’ve told him a hundred times that it takes the paint off the walls. Now when I see him, I’m going to hand him a roll of scotch tape and tell him to go crazy. He could cover every inch of the wall if he wants.

I yank open the front door, and Elliot follows me. “Do you want me to check Oliver’s house?”

Oliver is Bobby’s other friend on the block. He’s all the way down at the corner. It seems unlikely Bobby would have gone over there. But you never know. “Fine.”

I can’t decide whether I should be happy that Elliot is taking this seriously and helping me to find our son, or if I should be terrified that he doesn’t seem quite so certain anymore that we’re going to find him any second now. But we decide to check both houses and meet back if we don’t find him.

I don’t want to think about what will happen if we don’t find him.

I practically sprint over to Julie's house. She lives on the other side of the light blue house with our new neighbors. It's a sixty-second walk. Of course, now the journey seems endless as I walk/jog in my flimsy ballet flats that I usually just wear around the house. Every pebble and crack in the pavement jabs my feet, but I barely notice it.

I keep telling myself Bobby is at Leo's house. And then I'm going to kill him for going there without telling me. But before that, I'm going to hug him and kiss him all over his sweet little freckled face.

*Want to know a secret? Your son isn't where you think he is.*

Who would send me a text like that? Did somebody snatch my son out of my backyard? What if I never see Bobby again? What if when I shoved him into the backyard to keep him out of the way, that was the last time I'd ever see him.

Oh God.

I am out of breath by the time I get to Julie's house, which is the biggest one on the block. And the newest. Elliot is a corporate lawyer, but Julie's husband Keith does personal injury law, and he really cleans up. Elliot does well at his job and I make good money through *April's Sweet Secrets*, but the Bresslers are the kind of rich where they throw hundred dollar bills into the fireplace for kindling.

But right now, I couldn't care less. I sprint up the steps to her front door and ring the doorbell. Twice.

No answer.

I pound on the door a few times. But nobody is home. All the lights are out and I can see through the open shutters that the living room is empty. Bobby isn't playing with Leo. The Bresslers aren't even home.

I take my phone out. The text message is still on the screen, taunting me. They haven't responded to me. I shoot off another text message:

**Where is he??? Tell me now!!!!!!**

No reply.



In the past, I've done a reverse lookup for phone numbers. You can get the information for free from the online White Pages. Maybe I can find out who sent me the text message.

My hands are shaking as I bring up the White Pages on my phone. It takes me three tries to successfully copy the phone number of the person who texted me into the search engine. I stand there, my legs trembling, as my phone hourglasses. Finally, the screen flashes with the result:

**Unknown registrant. No name is associated with this number.**

Whoever sent me that message did it from a blocked number.

I feel like I'm going to pass out. I know I need to call the police. But the idea of it fills me with sick dread, because a call to the police would be admitting he's really gone. The police will have to start searching for him. I can only imagine their questions.

*When did you last see your son, Mrs. Masterson?*

*I was cooking in the kitchen and he went out to play in the backyard. And then I got this text message...*

*So you weren't watching him?*

I feel a stab of guilt. I should have been watching him. I never should have taken my eyes off of him. But he was in our own backyard, for God's sake! With the gate locked! And he's not a toddler—he's seven years old. That should be old enough to play in his own backyard. Right?

I told him about Stranger Danger, of course. Never talk to strangers. Never go off with strangers. But I know Bobby. If a stranger offered him candy, he'd skip off with them in a heartbeat despite all the warnings. He's helpless to resist candy.

The police will have to organize some sort of search party. They'll check all the houses in a certain mile radius, then they'll have to extend to the parks and that wooded area at the edge of town. And the lake. Oh God, the lake...

I choke back a sob.

I've got to get back to the house. If Elliot hasn't found him, we'll have to call the police. And in the meantime, we should probably check with the neighbors. See if they saw a strange van, or a bearded stranger lurking around my house. And maybe they can trace who sent me that horrible text message.

As I jog back to our house, I happen to see the lights on inside the house of our new neighbors. Their white SUV—practically identical to mine, except an older model—is parked in their driveway. Just a week ago, a new family moved into the house after poor old Mrs. Kirkland passed on. I haven't even had a chance to stop in and say hello yet.

I hesitate near their driveway, staring at the mailbox with the name Cooper etched on the side. These people are right next-door to us. Maybe they saw something. This is not the introduction I wanted to have to our new neighbors—telling them I've lost my son—but I'm desperate. Every moment counts at a time like this.

I race up the steps to the blue house and rap my fist against the door. My hand is shaking badly. My whole body feels like it's buzzing. Who would do this to me? Why is somebody targeting me? This can't possibly be about a tray of burned cookies.

After a minute or so, the door swings open. A woman in her early thirties with olive skin and dark brown hair loosely pulled back into a bun stands before me. She has a plain face, but when she smiles, dimples pucker on either cheek, which gives her a sweet, friendly appearance. There's something strangely familiar about her, but I can't seem to place her.

"Hello," she says. "May I help you?"

"Hello." My voice cracks. "Um, my name is April. I live next door..."

"Hi, April." Her brow furrows in concern. "I'm Maria. Is everything okay?"

"No. It's not." My voice is shaking again, threatening to break. "My son, Bobby..."

I hear some shouting behind her, and before I can get out the rest of the sentence, my jaw drops open.

It's *Bobby*. Sitting in this woman's living room, playing with Legos with another little boy.

"Hi, Mom," he says, like I haven't nearly dropped dead of a stroke while looking for him. The rush of relief I feel almost knocks me off my feet.

"Bobby!" I scream.

I run over to him and drop to my knees on the floor. I don't know whether to shake him or hug him. I do a little bit of both.

"I had no idea where you were!" I cry as I press his skinny body to my chest. "I was so scared! You scared me so much!"

And now Bobby is crying. We're both crying and hugging each other. It's a bit of an embarrassing display in front of the new neighbor, but I don't care. What the hell was he doing here anyway?

"Oh my God, I am so sorry!" the woman, Maria, is saying to me. "He showed up on our front lawn and said you told him he could come over to play with Owen. I had no idea you didn't realize he was here!"

I look up at my new neighbor, studying her expression. Her brown eyes are wide and she looks embarrassed, apologetic, and almost tearful. She certainly doesn't look like a psychopath who just sent me a threatening text message and stole my son out of my backyard for a playdate. I don't think there's any chance of that.

I *do* believe Bobby might get it into his head to wander out of our backyard. Anyway, he and I are going to have a *very* long talk tonight. After I spend the rest of the day covering him in hugs and kisses.

I shoot off a quick text to Elliot: **Found him. He was at the neighbor's house.**

Elliot's response comes a second later: **Told you. Going to work now.**

How could Elliot not even want to see Bobby after he thought he was missing? I don't understand men at all.

"You must have been worried sick," Maria says. *She* gets it, at least. "I can only imagine!"

I struggle back to my feet, wiping tears from my eyes. “At least he was safe the whole time.”

“Absolutely!” Maria offers me a smile, which makes me want to hug her. This woman found my baby. God knows where he would have ended up if he didn’t come here. “And he had such a good time with Owen. Poor Owen doesn’t have any friends in the neighborhood yet. I would be happy to have Bobby over again, with your permission, of course.”

I’m not sure about that. After this, I may have to duct tape Bobby to my right leg. It might be challenging to do my show, but viewers would understand. *April’s Sweet Secrets—now with a screaming second-grader in every episode!*

“That would be nice,” I finally say. And I mean it. “By the way, I’m so sorry we haven’t managed to connect yet. I was meaning to stop by in the next day or two.”

Maria waves a hand. “No worries! It’s so busy with school starting soon...”

“Yes, us too! It’s been crazy, hasn’t it?”

“Well,” Maria says, “now that you’re here, would you like to have some coffee while the boys play? Get off your feet?”

I shift in my flats. My right foot is throbbing. “That would be nice. Thanks.”

I feel a rush of relief that Bobby is safe and sound in this woman’s living room. He was never in any danger after all. Except I can’t ignore the fact that somebody did send me a text message about him.

Of course, maybe the text wasn’t as ominous as it sounded. Maybe whoever sent it saw Bobby leaving the backyard and wanted to warn me he was gone. Maybe the person was a good Samaritan.

But if that was the case, why did the text come from a blocked number?

I’m making too much of this. Bobby was never missing. He’s fine. And lots of people in our town have blocked numbers. I’m not going to panic over a text message. It’s not like I haven’t gotten my share of disturbing