

Secrets and Promises

By Barbara Handshy Anderson

Catherine entered Peter's office just before the close of business. She was hoping to catch him in time to have a word with him.

"Doctor Alcott, there's a Catherine Chandler here to see you," the receptionist said over the intercom.

"Show her in, Irene," was his quick reply.

He was looking over a patient's medical records as she entered. "Have a seat, Cathy. I'll be with you in a minute. I just need to jot down a few things before I forget."

When he finally looked up at her expectantly, she wasn't sure how to begin.

"What is it, Cathy?" he asked. "Is everything all right?"

"Peter," she began awkwardly. "I have some questions ... about my mother ... I was hoping you could answer them."

Peter was surprised by her reply. It had been years since she had spoken to him of her mother. He closed the file in front of him and put down his pen. He came around the desk and sat on the edge, giving her his full attention. "Yes, Cathy, what is it?"

She hesitated, wondering just what to say. Finally she spoke. "You and my mother ... were you ever ... *more* ... than just friends?"

Peter eyes widened. He squirmed uncomfortably and reached to loosen his neck tie a little. Clearing his throat, he cautiously asked, "What makes you think that?" He wasn't ready to admit anything until he was sure he couldn't get out of it.

He's hedging, Cathy thought. I'm a lawyer. Does he really think I won't notice? She was disappointed that he wasn't forthcoming with the truth, but she had come too far to turn back now.



“I’ve been at the brownstone sorting out Daddy’s things. I’m trying to get the house ready to sell. I found these in his safe,” she said, as she emptied an envelope of documents, letters, and faded photographs in front of him.

He stared down at them, almost afraid to touch them, as if by touching them he was betraying the promise he’d made to Caroline so many years ago.

Their childlike voices still rang in his memory.

“If I keep your secrets, will you keep mine?” he had asked her.

“That sounds like a square deal,” she said. They shook on it, and their lifelong friendship had been sealed.

He could still see the milk mustache on her face as she said it.

“Sweet Caroline,” he said softly, as he reached to stroke the image of Caroline’s face in one of the photographs. He answered Catherine slowly. “I promised her, Cathy, long before you were ever born, that I would keep her secrets if she kept mine. I’ve never broken that promise.”

“Sweet Caroline,” she repeated. “That’s what Daddy used to call her. That’s what you call her in some of those letters.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “That’s what everyone who loved her used to call her.”

“What secrets did you keep, Peter? These pictures ... these letters, they make it seem like ... I don’t know ... I can’t make sense of them. Picking up one of them, she read,

“Dear Sweet Caroline,

I’ve thought about everything you asked of me this afternoon. I agree, Cathy’s happiness is the most important thing now. I give you my solemn promise, I will do everything I can to make sure her life is never affected by the shadows of your past.

Yours Always, Peter.”

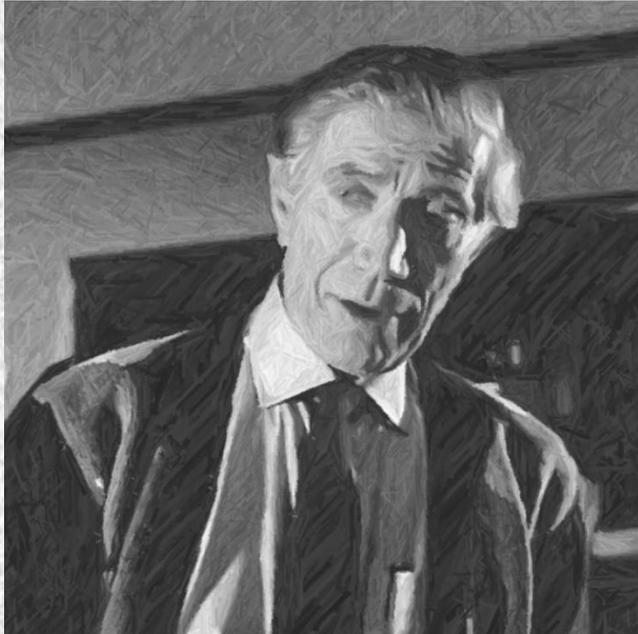
Catherine lowered the note into her lap. “Is there some kind of scandal that she didn’t want me to know about?” She was frightened by everything she was imagining it could be. She decided to confront him with the worst of her fears.

“Did you have an affair with my mother, Peter?” she finally blurted out.

“NO! Cathy, GOOD HEAVENS! NO! It’s nothing like that! We were *cousins*. I *loved* Caroline ... *like a sister*. She was ALWAYS more like a sister to me than a cousin. She was so little, so ... helpless. She needed me to watch out for her. I tried to, honestly, I did. I taught her to read. I taught her to ride a bicycle. I protected her the best way I

could from--” He suddenly stopped speaking, afraid that he had already said too much. He had been true to his promise to Caroline for so long. Now he was torn between the promises he had made years ago, and the pleading in Catherine’s eyes for answers to her questions now.

“From what, Peter? *From who?* Peter ... *PLEASE?*” she begged.



Peter sighed. *Maybe it’s time to stop keeping secrets*, he thought. “From our grandmother ... for one,” he said reluctantly. “But there were other things ...” He shook his head sadly, and spoke haltingly. “There were some things that I *couldn’t* protect her from, no matter how much I loved her ... no matter how much I tried. I was several years older than she was ... but I was still a child myself.”

Peter fell silent as the tragic events of Caroline’s life played out in his memory. He wondered how much of it was really necessary for him to divulge. *What good would it do*, he wondered, *to dredge up all that ancient history? All that pain?*

Catherine tried to wait patiently as he gathered his thoughts. She was afraid that if she pushed him he would refuse to tell her anything. She was surprised to hear him stifle a sob. She watched as he pulled a large monogrammed handkerchief out of his pocket and blew hard. His voice was filled with emotion as he began to speak.

“In the end, I discovered that ...” He sighed heavily, resigning himself to the truth. “I was powerless to protect her ... from *anything* ... no matter how much I loved her. She *still* died ... I’ve always felt like I failed her terribly. But Caroline would never have any of it. She insisted to very end that I *had* saved her.”

He raked his hand through his neatly Brylcreemed hair.

Catherine didn’t fully understand what he was trying to say to her. “What did she mean, Peter? *How* did you save her?”

“She said I saved her the day I introduced her to my friend, Charles Chandler.” He reached into the pile of photographs and pulled out one of himself dancing with Caroline. She was young and beautiful, wearing a stunning designer gown and long white gloves. “This was the night ... the night they first met. Charles couldn’t take his eyes off her.” He smiled at the memory of how much they had loved each other. “He

made her so happy. She deserved it too, more than anyone I've ever known ... especially after her miserable childhood."

He went quiet again. It had been years since he'd thought about all of the tragedy that had surrounded his only cousin from the day she was born. He'd never truly made peace with it. Remembering it now, he realized that the memories were just as raw and painful as they had ever been.

The old cliché' is wrong, he thought. Time hasn't healed any of those old wounds.



They were both lost in their own thoughts for a few minutes. Catherine had never really pictured her mother as a child. She had never viewed her as anything other than her mother. Although, from time to time her father had mentioned that Caroline had not had much happiness in her own childhood, Catherine could only remember her mother as smiling and happy. The contradiction confused her.

"Peter, why didn't I know any of this?"

"I don't understand why it needed to be a secret."

Peter attempted to explain. "Caroline lost her mother when she was still a child herself. Then our grandmother disowned her."

"Disowned her? Why in the world would she do *that*?" Catherine couldn't imagine anyone disowning their own grandchild, especially someone as wonderful as her mother.

Peter went on. "Caroline was always very stubborn and determined, Cathy, even as a child. She **had** to be strong ... to survive it all. Except for you, I've never known anyone as strong as she was. Our Grandmother Alcott couldn't abide that. She tried to manipulate and control Caroline, the way she had manipulated Caroline's mother, my Aunt Rose. But your mother always went her own way. It made Grandmother Alcott angry."

"Your Aunt Rose? She was Rose Winston then, *my* maternal grandmother? ... That's where my middle name comes from?" she asked, trying to put the pieces together in her mind.

Peter nodded. "Yes ... Rose Alcott was her maiden name. She was my father's sister. She was beautiful, very much like your mother and you, but that's a different tragedy altogether." He sighed as if just thinking about it all was too exhausting.

“Caroline and Grandmother Alcott never got along with each other,” he continued. “After Caroline graduated from Radcliffe and came back to New York, Grandmother wanted her to marry a particular wealthy young man. She thought it was a perfect match. She didn’t care what Caroline thought about it. When Caroline refused ... she and Grandmother had quite a quarrel. Grandmother declared that she was no longer a member of the family. Then, when Caroline and Charles were married without her consent, Grandmother was livid. She vowed that she had ‘washed her hands’ of Caroline. She turned up again though, when Caroline became ill. She threatened to get her lawyers involved and take custody of you. Well ... suffice it to say, there was an ugly scene. It didn’t end well ... not for Grandmother, anyway. After that, Caroline made Charles and me promise that you were never to know that she was an Alcott, or that we were related in any way.”

“But, Peter ... *WHY?* Was she angry with you?”

Peter’s expression was sad at the onslaught of unpleasant memories. He shook his head. “No, Cathy, she wasn’t angry with me. Caroline loved me as much as I loved her. It was because she didn’t want your life to be blighted by her past. She didn’t want any of the tragedy that had been so much a part of her childhood to cast a shadow over yours. She said she wanted you to have a happy life, even if so much of hers had not been. She insisted that it was your birthright, and that she would rather die than let anyone take it from you.

“We discussed at length what we would do if Grandmother ever made good on her threats.” Peter hesitated to go on. Eventually he decided to tell her the rest. “We even discussed ... the option of your parents and you going into hiding ... in the *Tunnels*, if it became necessary.”

He saw Catherine visibly jump at the sound of his words.

She was silent for a moment as she processed what he had just said. She had to be sure that she had heard him correctly. “What are you saying, Peter?” she slowly responded. “That my parents *knew* ... about the *Tunnels*?”

Peter returned her searching look without speaking

“How *much* did they know?”

He shook his head in response. “Not a lot. They knew that there was an extensive network of tunnels beneath our homes. It’s common knowledge, especially among the older New York families, that secret tunnels crisscross under the old parts of the city.”

“Did they know more than that?” She asked insistently, Did they know Father? *Did they know about Vincent?*”

“No, they didn’t know about Vincent, but Charles knew Jacob before he ever met your mother. We were all friends in college.”



Catherine leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. “This is all too much to take in. Peter, *please*, tell me.”

Peter didn’t see the point of trying to keep any of it from her now. “Jacob and I ... we were friends in medical school. We shared an apartment. I’d known Charles’ brother ... we served together during the War.”

“You knew Uncle Matthew?”

Peter nodded. “We were close friends.”

“Daddy used to tell me about him. How he was killed in France.”

He nodded again and a shadow passed over his face as he remembered the tragic death of his friend. *Too many painful memories*, he thought. *Too much heartache to remember.*

“When Charles came to New York to attend Columbia Law School, I took him under my wing. After all, he *was* Matthew’s kid brother. I felt I owed it to Matthew. He moved into our apartment with us. We all became great friends. Charles was a clerk for Alan Taft when he represented Jacob during the McCarthy witch hunts. He knew all about what happened to Jacob, and where he ended up.”

“Are you saying that ... my parents were ... *helpers*?”

He shook his head. “No, not helpers ... exactly. They were more like ... benefactors. They knew that Jacob and a group of people were building a community down there, and they knew that I was helping Jacob. Whenever they were cleaning out closets ... getting rid of old clothes ... books ... toys ... even furniture, they would let me know and I would send someone around to collect them. From time to time, if there was a dire financial need, I would ask Charles and Caroline for help. They never refused, and they never asked too many questions. I tried not to impose on them too much...” Peter’s voice trailed off, then he added, “It was Charles who helped me pay for the antibiotics and medical supplies last winter when the plague swept through the Tunnels.”

She couldn’t hide the look of shock on her face. “OH, PETER!” she exclaimed.

“*Please* keep in mind, Cathy,” he rushed to speak. “I only found out about your involvement in the Tunnels a few months before Charles had his stroke. I wanted to tell him, but his health was already ... *delicate*. I didn’t know how he would react. And **he** made me promise *not* to tell you about his condition. He didn’t want you to worry about him.”

He raked his hand through his hair again. "What a mess," he mumbled to himself. "I wanted to tell you, Cathy ... *Really, I did*, but I didn't know how ... Not without breaking promises I had already made to him, and others. I thought I had time to sort it all out, but I was wrong about that."

She stared at him in disbelief. "How *many* secrets have you kept, Peter?"

Peter laughed ruefully. "To tell you the truth, I've lost count over the years. That seems to be my specialty, though, doesn't it? I've sometimes felt that I was keeping all the world's secrets."

He could see the disbelief in her expression. He could see the anger clouding her eyes. "Cathy, you *must* understand, *people's lives* depended on me keeping many of those secrets. Please don't be too angry with me. Just remember ... I've kept *your* secrets *too*." He looked at her knowingly.

She suddenly felt like a leaky balloon as her anger quickly dissipated. "Yes, you have,



Peter," she grudgingly acknowledged. "Yes, you have." Her last comment was more of a sigh than a statement.

With her thoughts turning inward, she leaned back again in the chair. She was thinking about all of the secrets she had kept from her father, and from her friends. Secrets that had created a chasm between them that she had never been able to bridge to her satisfaction. How many times had she wanted to tell him? How many times had she asked herself if she could trust him to understand? And how many times had she decided *not* to confide in him?

"Was I wrong, Peter?" Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Was I wrong not to trust him? Do you think he would have understood ... about Vincent and me? *Should* I have told him?"

Peter could hear the deep regret in her voice. He perceived that she was doubting herself and the choices she'd made. He weighed his words carefully. "That isn't for me to say, Cathy. They weren't my secrets to tell, and they weren't fully yours either. You knew your father better than I did."

She shook her head. "I don't know anymore, Peter. I'm not sure that I did," she said, as the tears began to slip down her cheeks. "I'm beginning to wonder if I ever really knew him at all. Maybe we never really know anyone."

“You know that he loved you, don’t you?”

She smiled a little and nodded. “There is no doubt about that. He loved me more than anything... more than life itself.”

Peter smiled broadly and nodded. Reaching for the box of tissues, he wiped the tears from her cheeks and patted her face. “Then what else is there to know, Cathy? ... What else even matters? He knew you loved him, and he loved you ... to his very last breath. They both did.”

Catherine quietly gathered up the letters and photographs from Peter’s desk. She looked at one of her mother with Peter.

The love between them was clear. She looked up at him. “Thank you, Peter, for being there for her, for being someone she could trust with her secrets ... *and* for being someone I could trust with mine,” she added.

“I have an idea,” Peter said hopefully. “Why don’t you come home with me for dinner? You might as well know everything now.”

“You mean there’s more?” Catherine asked, a little worried about what else she might learn.

Peter smiled sadly and nodded as he reached for his coat on the back of his chair. “Yes, Cathy, but don’t worry. I think it’s high time for you to know what an amazing woman your mother really was.”

