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ISBN: 9798573377759

1 OVERHEARD

In the backseat of the police car with its siren blaring and lights blazing, Cathy Newsome lay unconscious and close to death, headed for Crescent City General Hospital where she was vice-president of nursing. All because she couldn't leave an overheard conversation alone.

"Does Cathy know?" Cathy Newsome overheard while navigating her canoe through an unexpected fog that shielded her from the speaker's view. She recognized the voice as belonging to Dr. John Hampton, the chief pathologist at Crescent City General Hospital. It was magnified by the fog and seemed to come from her fiancé Dr. Greg Mathison's porch.

"I doubt it," replied Greg.

Startled to hear her name, Cathy stopped paddling. Do I know what? Was there another woman in her fiancé's life? A painful divorce left her unsure of herself and this question reinforced her fear she was not worthy of Greg. She was sure others found his six-foot well-proportioned frame, and deep blue eyes extremely attractive. Despite being engaged to Greg, she believed he could have any woman he wanted and wondered why he had chosen her but thrilled that he had.

Before she could process any further John added, "We were pretty ingenious getting you to buy the new house next to hers. And you followed through by courting her and finally becoming engaged. Now if she gets suspicious or anyone else starts asking questions, she will support you like she did when Carla started making wild statements about your patients. At first, I didn't think you were happy about romancing her, but you came through. By the way congratulations on your engagement. You know, you can always have another woman on the side."

"I have no intention of having another woman on the side, or otherwise!" Greg said indignantly. "I love Cathy." Cathy heard silence for a moment then, "Maybe my attention to her started with ulterior motives, but once I took the time to get to know her, it became the real thing. I do love her."

"Sure, sure you do...," came the disbelieving voice of Peter Sampson, the chief pharmacist at the hospital.

"I'm telling the truth!"

"Ok, ok, don't get huffy," responded John, "We've had a good thing going the last four years. I would hate to see it compromised. And we must support Marcia replacing Carla as the oncology supervisor, she doesn't look for trouble."

"I hear you," Greg replied.

"What will you do if Cathy finds out?" John asked.

"Why should she?"

"If she does, you're going to have some choices to make. Is she going to want to go along? I hope you know what's at stake."

“Leave it alone John,” Greg returned defiantly. “I can take care of any problems.”

“I hope you can.”

Cathy felt her chest tighten and fought to keep from hyperventilating. What should she not know? Why did John and Peter want Greg to marry her? Was she being taken advantage of? And what was she not going to want to be involved in? She remembered vividly the incident with Carla, the late oncology nursing supervisor who had questioned a lack of side effects in Greg’s patients who were receiving chemo but was puzzled as to how it could relate to their discussion. She had told Carla to cease and desist in her comments because she believed it to be malicious gossip.

Sitting stiffly upright in the canoe, the relaxation a few hours in her canoe provided now gone, she kept listening. The conversation, however, turned to the ongoing football game which could be heard in the background, with each voicing an opinion about the players and outcome.

She forced herself to quietly dip her paddle into the water and silently resume her path towards home. After what seemed like forever, she finally sighted her dock through the fog. Maneuvering the canoe to shore just short of her dock, she disembarked and quietly pulled it out of the water. Implications of the last few minutes hung on her like the fog. She found a spot on the beach and sat down where, if the fog were to suddenly lift, she would be out of sight of anyone on Greg’s porch.

Staring at the now ghost-like lake without really seeing it, she asked herself, “What is it that if I know will be a problem for Greg?” Her mind turned to how happy Greg made her. She remembered the last four years, the painful divorce from Nathan, her mother’s death a year after the divorce, taking the job in her hometown as vice-president of nursing at Crescent City General, and moving into her childhood home on Crescent Lake. Adding to the difficulties, the move uprooted her son Jason from his friends and compounded his anger at Nathan’s leaving. He had finally overcome these feelings and was doing well in school, partly she felt, due to Greg’s influence.

She too had had to adjust. Compared to the thousand-bed teaching hospital where she left a position as supervisor of the medical units, Crescent City General was small; only two-hundred and fifty beds, but it had a friendly atmosphere. It had, however, been a rocky start. Many of the old-timers remembered her as the difficult candy-striper she was in high school and had difficulty accepting her in a new role. Now in her third year, most of the staff realized the characteristics which made her seem difficult as a candy striper helped her to make changes that improved morale and patient care and had forgotten their initial resistance.

The dampness added to Cathy’s discomfort and she forced herself to get to her feet and walk towards the house. Quietly climbing the steps to her porch and letting herself into the house she made her way to the closest easy chair, sank down, and let it surround her. So many confusing thoughts. Did Greg really love her? Although she heard him say he did, her old insecurities were still there. What she overheard just didn't make sense. It must be either something at the hospital or something about Greg’s relationship with her. Thoughts of

either were unsettling.

If only she could talk with Vicki. She had grown up with Vicki, who with her husband Victor now had a successful law practice in Crescent City. She recalled Vicki laughingly telling her she never knew if Victor, who grew up in North Dakota, married her because he loved her or loved the idea of living on a lake. Nevertheless, theirs was a happy marriage, and Cathy at times was a little envious.

If Vicki and Vic had not been on the second week of a well-deserved Baltic cruise, she and Vicki, both in their canoes, would've been on the lake and Vic would've been in his little sailboat, a Sunfish. He would've seen the fog coming and warned the ladies, as he called them. Then she would've been home before the fog caught her unaware.

Vicki would not be home until this coming Friday. She was the one person with whom Cathy could share anything, a trait they shared since high school. Then it was about boyfriends or those they wished they had. She had talked about Mike Benton, now chief of detectives in Crescent City, and Vicki about Jason, another classmate. In retrospect, those problems were little problems, but she remembered how serious they were at the time.

She barely heard the slamming of the backdoor announcing Jason's arrival. Now a senior at Crescent City High, he too had a rocky start. Used to a large city high school in a university town where newcomers were not unusual, he found that Crescent City High did not quickly welcome newcomers. Eventually, his natural friendliness overcame their reluctance, but until then life had been difficult. Thankfully, he was smart, and schoolwork came easily which was both a blessing and a curse. He didn't have to study as hard as his friends to maintain a decent grade average, a situation Cathy felt was not preparing him for college or real life and which concealed his full potential.

"Mom, I want to go to the movies tonight with Conrad and the other guys, "Can I have the car?" Not hearing an answer, he walked from the kitchen into the living room. Seeing her he called, "Mom, I need an answer." Barely aware of his presence Cathy continued staring into space.

He started to repeat his question when he saw her blank face. Concerned, he asked, "Mom, what's the matter? Is something wrong?" Not knowing how to tell him, and not ready to share, she ignored him and as if in a trance walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

Obviously agitated, Jason again repeated his request through the bedroom door, only louder. Despite her concerns, the loudness of his voice brought her to the present and she realized she would at least have to acknowledge him. "Jason, I, I, can't think right now," she said through the door. "Please be patient."

Feeling weak, she lay down on the bed as a few tears began to slide down her cheeks. Everything had been so perfect. Engaged to a man whom she found to be kind and considerate, and whom she felt lucky to have. She believed she finally had found true happiness. Was it only an illusion?

The phone rang, and Jason yelled, "Mom. it's for you, it's Greg."

"Tell him I'm," she started to say busy, but after a pause in which she tried to get herself

together, reluctantly answered, "I'm coming."

"Hi, Greg," she forced herself to say in what she hoped was a normal voice.

"What time can you be ready?" he asked.

Despite conflicting thoughts about Greg, she did want to see him. "Uh... I guess I can be ready about six-thirty..."

As she hung up, she wondered if there had been a break in the fog allowing her to be seen eavesdropping on their conversation. With these disquieting thoughts, she sat down to see Jason looking at her and, now impatient, repeat his car request.

"All right, you can have the car. But be home by ten o'clock. This is a school night."

"Thanks, Mom. Don't worry, I'll drive carefully."

"I know."

He looked at his Mom with concern. Having only each other to rely on these last four years, they had developed a rapport not usual between teenage sons and their mothers. Like her, he could sense another person's discomfort and now said, "Mom, please tell me what's bothering you. I know you were looking forward to tonight."

"Later, Jason, please I can't talk about it now."

"Is it about Greg?" he asked with deep concern.

"Yes and no," she said truthfully, afraid about what could cause problems for Greg if she knew. Was it about his relationship with her or the hospital? If there was something that shouldn't be happening at the hospital and it involved Greg...her happiness would also be at stake. Oh, but it couldn't be she told herself. Greg is so idealistic in his approach to medicine. Was he going to be leaving Crescent City General and hadn't told her yet?

This year it seemed her life had turned around and she was finally moving on. When Nathan walked out telling her he deserved a prettier, more feminine woman she was left with an empty feeling. As if to fulfill his statements she stopped caring about how she looked and gained twenty pounds. The divorce was also hard for Jason. Nathan's not wanting visitation rights, let alone custody, wounded him deeply. At least Nathan paid his child support, but because she had a job as a nurse, there was no alimony.

Falling in love with Greg and getting engaged to him was a turning point for her. She knew she was far from the prettiest single female in the hospital or town and wanting to be deserving of Greg's attentions she started paying more attention to her appearance. She had her brown hair cut short to take advantage of its natural curl and started losing the extra twenty pounds, even though her five-foot eight-inch height helped conceal them. Her newfound happiness made real smiles, accompanied by a twinkle in her dark brown eyes, come more often. Still, lingering insecurities from her ex-husband's comments were never far from the surface making her susceptible to self-doubts.

"Mom, you can trust me," he said studying her.

Looking away she said, "It's not about trusting you. This is something I have to work out for myself." She turned to face him and added in what she hoped was a normal voice, "Have a good time, but remember to be home by ten."

Although obviously unhappy about his Mom, Jason left the topic alone knowing she

would tell him when she was ready. Using his ability to discharge responsibility for things he could not control, he said, "Ok Mom."

She heard the backdoor to the kitchen slam as Jason departed. That was one habit of his which she could not break. He announced both his arrivals and departures with a loud closing of the door.

She thought about Jason. He and Greg had, she thought, a good relationship, one she knew Greg worked hard to develop. Knowing of Jason's interest in the engineering feats of the ancient Egyptians, as a graduation gift Greg was planning a trip to Egypt next June for the three of them. Whether it was the relationship with Greg, Jason's natural friendliness, making the senior varsity lacrosse team, or all the above, his attitude change was welcome. In fact, she thought, he was again the cheerful son she had known previously. His improved attitude made him take his studies more seriously and his grades went from decent to excellent.

At six-thirty sharp, Greg was at the door, all smiles, telling Cathy he had booked one of the best tables at the Lake View restaurant. The restaurant, situated on top of a hill on the north shore of Crescent Lake, was one of Cathy's favorites.

"Tonight, we are celebrating my luck at being engaged to the most wonderful woman on earth. I can think of no better place to celebrate our one-week engagement than the site of our first date."

Caught up in his enthusiasm and wanting everything to be as before, she gave him a broad smile and said, "Greg, you know that's my favorite restaurant. Shall we both order the same things we did on our first date?"

"And we'll start with that great wine!" he said ushering her to the car. During the ride to the restaurant, Cathy found her doubts fading. Still, she just had to ask some questions.

"Greg, are you planning to stay at Crescent City General?"

"Of course, why would I leave?"

"I don't know, more money, more prestige?"

"Cathy, I have everything I want right here. Especially you," he said with a smile as they pulled into the restaurant parking lot.

Waiting until they were sipping the wine, Cathy studied Greg and asked, "Greg, with your choice of available women, why did you choose me?"

Caught unaware, Greg grinned and said humorously, "It always pays to have a good relationship with the vice-president of nursing."

"Why?"

"Why not? I know if I have trouble with any of the nurses, I can get your ear."

"Greg, you always treat the nurses with respect and do not need an inside track with me or any other person." Finally, she added, "Greg, do you really want to marry me?"

"Cathy, what would make you ask such a thing? You must know I love you. Have I done something to make you wonder?"

After a moment's thought, she replied, "It's just there are so many other attractive women around here, and they don't all come with a teenage son."

“For me, Jason is an added attraction. I’m glad he comes with you. He’s a very special young man and I enjoy our relationship. He’s the son I wanted to have except things didn’t work out for us. You know Cathy, he is going to become a very successful adult. I don’t know your ex, nor what Jason inherited from him, but I do know Jason has been blessed with your positive outlook and friendliness, and yes, common sense. Common sense in a person as smart as Jason is a real bonus.” Looking at her kindly he added, “You still doubt yourself, don’t you?”

“I suppose you’re right. As I’ve told you, it was very hard on me when Nathan told me point blank I was not womanly enough, and he needed a more attractive, younger woman, and added that he had found one. You don’t quickly forget punishing remarks from someone you thought you loved and thought loved you.”

“Cathy, I can’t help it if he’s blind and dumb, but what he said was one-hundred percent wrong. I find you very womanly, and extremely attractive. Buying the house next to you was the luckiest thing I ever did. It gave me a chance to move beyond our professional relationship and find out how wonderful you are, not just as the nursing vice-president who has improved patient care and morale, but as a woman, a truly wonderful woman.”

Comforted by these statements which she desperately wanted to believe, Cathy smiled and gave her attention to the salad the waiter delivered. As the waiter was clearing the salad plates, Greg asked, “Have you decided who is going to take Carla’s place as supervisor of the cancer units?”

“Both Cheryl Somers and Marcia Runyon have applied for the job. However, I’m strongly considering Cheryl. She’s no Carla in terms of qualifications, but she did learn a lot from her and has taken the lead in the unit in terms of evidence-based practice. And she is popular with the staff.”

“What about Marcia?”

“From my observation, she’s not ready. Cheryl has her certification in oncology nursing, but Marcia doesn’t. She’s working on it, but not as seriously as perhaps she should if she wants to advance. But the final decision will be made by Harlan Franklin, the president of the hospital, after consultation with the Board. I gave Cheryl a huge vote of confidence together with hard evidence. I presented the qualifications of each to him and the rest of the C suite to consider.”

“You do know, don’t you, Marcia is Anne Dodson’s niece? As you may remember Anne was in line to have your position and deeply resented it being given to you. She gave you kind of a hard time at first, didn’t she?”

“That’s all in the past. Despite some past green-eyed jealousy, I supported Anne in getting an education in evidence-based practice, arranged great library privileges for her, and helped her become the “go-to” person in this area, all of which changed her attitude. Basically, we want the same thing, excellent patient care. Anne needs to be in charge of something and I made it possible. She has contributed a lot in this role, and I think is enjoying her new status.”

“Is it possible if Marcia does not get the position Anne will again be playing political

games which will reflect badly on you?

“I suppose it’s possible, but I have to think of the hospital. Tell me truthfully, Greg, aside from nepotism whom do you think would do a better job?”

“I don’t.... know,” he replied half-heartedly.

“I do. And I believe Cheryl will make you and the other oncologist much happier. Patient care is the bottom line. With all your ranting and discontent about how insurance and pressure to do procedures are ruining medicine, I should think you would want the best nurse for the job.”

“I do, but I don’t want to see a return to the politics you had to endure when you first started.”

“Neither do I, but I believe I can help Anne to understand that at this time Cheryl is more qualified.”

As they were about to leave the restaurant Greg asked her if she would like to go out on the deck and enjoy one last glass of wine.

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty tired.”

“I’m not surprised, out all afternoon in your canoe. I saw you earlier before the fog started. How did you find your way home?”

“Followed the ripples. And sounds from the shore, like the football game I heard from coming from different places, hoping they were on our shore.”

“Did you hear the game on my porch?” The question seemed to be more of a statement than a question.

Wondering if she had tipped her hand, she quickly retorted, “I don’t know whose porches they were, or what was said. All I wanted was a beacon and to get home.” Laughing uneasily, she added, “Next time you know I’m on the lake and it suddenly becomes foggy put out the strobe light. OK?”

Later getting ready for bed, Cathy thought about the afternoon and evening. She desperately wanted to believe the comments she overheard from Greg about loving her and his reply to her questions about choosing her.

But what was it she didn’t know? She finally told herself that he knew Anne had lobbied for her niece and she had the job. It could explain why Greg was half-hearted in his reply about who would be the best choice; a conclusion which helped her believe there was nothing more to what she overheard. And to criticize herself over how overwrought she had been over nothing. This combination of thoughts allowed her to ignore the comments John and Peter made about wanting Greg to court her, and that those two believed that if Marica were selected for the oncology supervisor, she would not ask questions.

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Chapter 4: A Death in the Family

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Chapter 6: Life Goes On
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To read the rest of the chapters see: <http://dlthede.net/CanoesSecret.html>