

Hidden Secrets
By Chantal Bellehumeur

About the book (Short story):

While cleaning out the attic of her deceased grandmother's Victorian farmhouse, Alice discovers old letters and diaries she can't help but read. Their romantic and emotional content end up revealing many shocking secrets that lead to a series of questions Alice feels the need to investigate.

Excerpt:

Patricia and her older sister Betty inherited their mother's old Victorian farmhouse when she passed away at the ripe old age of ninety-nine. It had been in the Smith family for generations, so they didn't have the heart to sell it despite the high maintenance and necessary renovations it now required.

The lovely Sussex home had not been fully lived-in since the start of the new century, when Patricia and Betty were forced to place their elderly parents in a nursing home due to their deteriorating health.

Although either woman could have moved into the house with their husbands and children at the time, without necessarily having to get into farming, the location was not convenient for them. Betty was already nicely settled further North in the English city of York while Patricia and her husband preferred to remain living in the heart of London, so the sisters used the home as a shared family cottage. With their easygoing mother's approval, they had rented it out to close friends on occasion.

The majority of the original farmland had been sold a while back, but thousands of acres were still being leased to local farmers. They used the fields to grow various crops or allow their animals free range like the Smiths had done for centuries.

The old barn had to be demolished, but the renovated stable still stood on the far-left side of the fenced-in property and was ready to welcome new horses.

Now that Patricia and her husband were retired, they were seriously considering the permanent move to the peaceful country as well as the purchase of a couple of riding horses and some chickens to collect fresh eggs like in Patricia's youth.

Betty didn't mind her younger sister wanting to take over the estate. She continued to show a lack of interest for the large house and land despite all the good memories she had of living there; her favorites included riding her first pony as well as her horse.

Despite her love for the busy city, Patricia had equally enjoyed growing up in the big country house with its surrounding front porch. She too, had loved horseback riding although rarely had the opportunity to do so with her sister as a child because of their eleven-year age difference.

The equestrian passion was passed on to her only child Alice, who had loved visiting her grandparents at the farmhouse when their health still allowed them to receive visitors. She deeply enjoyed helping out with the tame horses and taking them out of the stable for a ride.

Alice also loved playing in the large attic of her grandparents' house even though it was really dusty, poorly lit, and full of cobwebs. She liked the fact that it was packed with what the adults considered accumulated junk. The musty attic had not been properly cleaned up in over a hundred years, and Alice liked to go treasure hunting there.

As a curious and adventure-seeking child, Alice had often snuck up there alone against her parents' wishes. Although she was allowed in the attic with an adult for short periods of time, her parents didn't approve of her playing in the gloomy unventilated room by herself when she asked to do so. They said it could be dangerous and bad for her health. But, Alice always did her best not to breathe in the dust particles in order not to cough and draw attention, and she wore the wool slippers her grandmother had knitted to protect her feet. Her movements on the creaking wooden floorboards were cautious, in order to avoid being detected and also from stepping on hard objects or any protruding nails.

Alice always asked for help when wanting to lift up or push something heavy that was in her way. So, eventually her parents accepted that Alice would always consider the attic as her special playground whether they allowed it or not.

Ceding to their daughter's wishes, they helped Alice tidy up a small section of the attic for her to safely play in. They rolled out an old rug onto the floor's open space and brought up a rotating fan to air out the room, using a long extension cord to plug it into the downstairs hallway socket. In addition, they added new lightbulbs to some of the stowed antique lamps and found electrical sockets inside the attic to plug them in even though Alice was usually content going up there with a simple battery-operated flashlight.

When she explored in the attic, Alice always found old toys to play with. Among her findings were jigsaw puzzles, cloth dolls, vintage bears, a train set, a rocking horse, a drum, soldiers, a large wooden spinning top, wooden blocks, and a lovely tea set.

She loved playing mommy with the five porcelain dolls she found in a wooden crib one day, even though their partially cracked faces creeped her out almost as much as the clownlike figure that sprang out of the rusty Jack-in-the-box she had made the mistake of cranking once.

Her favorite finding was a large wooden dollhouse resembling her grandparents' magnificent home and decor. It even had miniature versions of some of the vintage furniture and trinkets inside. Although her parents offered to bring the large unit and accompanying dolls down to her guestroom, Alice preferred to play with it in the attic like everything else she found in there.

On occasion, Alice played dress-up using the numerous feathered hats she found in cylinder vinyl boxes, plus long dresses, gloves, and lacey hand fans or parasols she pulled out of large wooden or metal chests, as well as pretty jewelry kept in beautiful musical boxes. She liked to look at herself in the long oval mirror standing tall among the other antique furniture and pretend she was a lady.

As Alice grew older, her interest in toys and costumes was switched to hardcover books. She found a lot of worn out fictional classics as well as old history volumes in the attic, and liked to read them by the small circular window. She had moved an old rocking chair there to make herself comfortable, as well as a vintage floor lamp for times when the sun didn't provide enough light.

Alice, now forty-one years old, felt she had a lot of nice childhood and adolescent memories in that old house; particularly in the attic. She felt as nostalgic going back inside as her sixty-six-year-old mother did.

Although Alice had originally come to help her mother clean up the vacant house and get rid of unnecessary items, she found herself needing to spend some alone time in the attic before watching things go.

As Alice slowly scanned the dusty room with her blue eyes, she spotted a small metal chest she had always been curious about. It was just sitting on her dust covered rocking chair, with the bright sunlight shining directly on it like a spotlight.

The chest had always been locked, and despite her numerous searches over the years Alice never found the key to open it. She had even asked her grandmother if she knew where the key was once, and simply receiving a shrug as an answer. Her grandmother then told her to ask her horse one day and winked.

The two horseshoes currently sitting on top of the chest reminded Alice of that comment and it made her laugh to herself. Her grandmother had often said odd things. Although she often spoke in solvable riddles, her word puzzles started making less and less sense over the years.

Before her grandmother was placed in a home, Alice would sometimes get sent on treasure hunts. Her grandmother would give her written riddles to solve as clues, and Alice would have to find the next one until she located a hidden surprise such as a bag of candies or a chocolate bar. It had kept her entertained.

Snapping out of her pleasant reverie, Alice decided to try picking the integrated lock of the chest to finally find out its mysterious content. She used one of her metal hairpins to do so, not really certain it was actually going to work.

When the lock finally budged, allowing the lid to open, Alice let out a sign of satisfaction. She eagerly opened the chest and first saw that something was wrapped up in a white handkerchief. It turned out to be a stack of folded yellowed papers nicely tied together with a thin red ribbon. Attached to the ribbon was a delicately weaved loop the size of a ring, made from what appeared to be very thin twigs. The chest also contained several leather-bound notebooks. She opened one of the crispy books at a random page and discovered that it was an old diary with entries dating back to the year 1937.

Alice thought she recognised the neat cursive handwriting on the yellowed pages of the book, and the name inscribed on the front page in bold black letters confirmed that the diary had belonged to her sweet grandmother Agnes.

The middle-aged woman felt torn between reading the content of the old diary and respecting her grandmother's privacy.

The guilty feeling Alice felt at not instantly returning the intimate book inside the chest didn't last. Her curiosity got the best of her, as usual. She reasoned that since the diary's owner was no longer alive, it was okay to read it. Alice actually waited for a ghostly figure to challenge otherwise, and when her grandmother remained unseen or unheard Alice concluded that she should definitely read it.

But, it would have to wait.

Alice carefully placed the diary back inside the chest along with the folded papers wrapped back up in the handkerchief. She quickly brought it to her car, a black Mercedes, without mentioning her remarkable findings to her mother.

A whole week later, when Alice was back home in Bath, she told her two videogame-focused teenaged boys as well as her loving husband that she needed some alone time and went directly up to her study. It

was the only room in the modern house, designed by her architect husband, with a Victorian style décor. The large maroon curtains were drawn, as always, allowing the evening sun to shine brightly into the small cozy room from the bay windows. Alice would not have to turn on her antique reading lamp for hours.

In the comfort of her favorite long chair full of decorative cushions, Alice eagerly opened up the metal chest again and took out the folded papers. She carefully pulled on one of the tips of the red ribbon to untie the loose bow, collecting the delicate twig loop, and unfolded the first page. It was a letter affectionately addressed to Agnes from a man named Alfred.

Alice read the passionate love letter, trying not to blush. It felt a bit strange to witness somebody other than her grandfather expressing his love for her grandmother.

She moved on to the second letter which was just as passionate and also poetic; all the letters were, although Alice could not help but notice the many misspelled words and grammatical errors. She was intrigued by the fact that they often referred to secret rendez-vous by a weeping willow tree.

There was a giant weeping willow by the narrow river in the woods, at a short distance away from the Victorian farmhouse, and Alice wondered if that is where her grandmother and Alfred used to meet. She also wondered why they felt the need to hide their love for each other.

The last letters of the bunch hinted at the fact that Agnes' parents would have never approved of their union which made the document Alice found next even more of a shock. It was an official marriage certificate signed by Agnes and Alfred on September 9th 1938. A witness whose name she didn't recognise had signed the legal document as well.

Alice had been aware that her biological grandfather was not her grandmother's first husband. It was a known fact that her aunt Betty's father had died serving in the Second World War ten years before Patricia was born, but his name was George. Alice wondered if his middle name might have been Alfred, or if George had felt the need to use a mysterious alias while secretly courting Agnes.

Alice made a quick mathematical calculation in her head, and deduced that her grandmother had married at the young age of sixteen according to the signed document. Agnes had always told everyone that her and George had gotten married when she reached adulthood. This made Alice wonder who this Alfred fellow was, and what had happened to his marriage to Agnes.

Figuring that the answers to her growing questions were in the diaries, Alice picked up the first one and began reading it as though it were a romance novel.

The pages revealed that Alfred was a nice strapping boy a year younger than Agnes. He came from a poor family, and was hired to work on Agnes' wealthy parents' farm. Although it was forbidden for Agnes to socialise with any of the help, her rebellious side made her do the opposite. She had many secret friends below her social stature, as her parents would have called them. Agnes found the girls of her own stature annoyingly gossipy, generally boring, and kind of useless. She hated boarding school and how fake everyone there acted, although she did admire some of the other girls' artistic talents since she had none.

Agnes could be her true self with Alfred. Although always polite, he didn't care about proper etiquette and rules. He was fun and adventurous like her. They were best friends, and eventually became more.

Alfred started reciting his own prose to Agnes, and she eventually started helping him brush up on his writing skills because he never got the chance to complete his education. The love letters soon started, along with the secret meetings which were mostly at night.

Nobody suspected their growing affection for each other. Agnes only confided in her diary.

Agnes confessed to repeatedly sneaking out of her bedroom in her riding clothes with a flashlight, and quietly taking off with her calm horse Bella to go meet Alfred. She had given her lover a battery-operated light too.

The only time she ever got caught walking around the house at an odd time, she convincingly stated that she simply could not sleep and wanted to check on the horses. Although her father believed her, he sent her back to her room and she had to wait a whole hour before trying to leave again. Alfred had patiently waited for her.

Alice fought hard to keep her tired eyes from closing since she wanted to know more, but finally gave in once she finished reading the first diary and got ready for bed.

“What were you reading?” her husband Mark asked to make conversation. “Just an old book I found at my grandmother’s house,” she casually answered.

Alice was happy Mark didn’t ask for more details since she wasn’t ready to tell him yet.

The next day, Alice resumed her reading shortly after breakfast.

Agnes revealed giving herself up completely to her lover, in the wheat field under the shining stars, and that they were intimate several more times after that special night.

She later exclaimed her intense joy at Alfred's romantic marriage proposal despite the fact that they had to keep their engagement a secret.

Although Alfred had eloquently presented her with a ring he had crafted with the fallen twigs of their willow tree, Agnes didn’t wear it on the fourth finger of her left hand as she traditionally should have. Instead, she kept it on a silver charm bracelet which she wore around her right wrist.

Alice discovered that the private exchange of marital vows that had taken place by the willow tree two weeks after the engagement had not been the lovers’ only secret.

Agnes had been with child and tried to conceal her condition as long as she could from her religious parents, mainly to give her and Alfred a chance to find a place to move in together. However, they figured out her predicament months before she even started showing. Agnes could tell that her fatigue, unusual lack of appetite, and obvious nausea aroused their suspicion. On top of often running to the loo because she felt that she was going to be sick, Agnes had a dizzy spell that ended up requiring medical attention.

When the Smiths found out about their daughter’s pregnancy, they angrily demanded to know whom the father was.

Alice pridefully gave an honest answer, expecting her parents to simply evict her from the household at worst. She had been mentally preparing herself for the day she would have to move out of her parents’ home and adjust to a whole new lifestyle as a low-class citizen. Unfortunately, things really didn’t go as planned.

Alfred was dismissed as a farm boy despite Alice's crying pleas against it. She told her parents of their love and marriage, thinking it would help matters, but they made sure the unapproved union got annulled. They didn't feel that Alfred was good enough for their daughter, and scolded her for acting irrationally.

They expressed being ashamed of Agnes, and kept her locked up inside her bedroom suite like a privileged prisoner until after she had given birth. When she reintegrated into society, Agnes was forced to continue her parents' lie and say that she had been suffering from scarlet fever.

During her six long months of unjust captivity, Agnes longed to see Alfred but he never came to visit or even sent word to her. She missed him deeply and felt slightly abandoned, yet knew her hateful parents were entirely to blame for his lack of communication.

Her only company during that lonely time was the baby growing inside her. She talked and sang to it regularly, made it listen to the comical radio shows or the classical jazz and upbeat swing records she played on her phonograph by getting closer to the sound machines, read it books from her personal collection, and rejoiced when she felt the baby's little kicks or punches.

Alice loved her unborn child and was looking forward to meeting her; she had a feeling it was a girl.

A discrete midwife came to the house a few hours after Agnes's water broke. After twelve hours of painful labour, Agnes happily thought that she would finally be able to see her and Alfred's flesh and blood. However, the strict-looking midwife nonchalantly proclaimed that the baby girl was stillborn and quickly left the room with the small bloody child after cutting the umbilical cord.

Agnes did not believe the old woman, claiming that she heard her baby crying. Although she was told that the anesthetic chloroform given to her to dim the pain had made her hallucinate, Agnes argued otherwise. She was convinced that her baby was alive, and fiercely demanded it be given to her. Because of her outburst, she was given a sedative to treat her hysteria.

Nobody had allowed Agnes to hold or even see her newborn child. They all told her it was for her own good, and she went into a severe state of depression.

Alice could not believe what she was reading. She realised on several occasions that tears had formed in her eyes and wiped them away each time. She felt horrible for her grandmother, and wondered if the baby really had been alive and taken from her.

The diary indicated that her grandmother never stopped believing her daughter was living with another family somewhere. Agnes was desperate to find her, mainly just to see her face and make sure that she was okay. However, she had no clue as to how and didn't know anyone who could potentially help her.

In the next diary, Agnes continued writing about her sorrows for months which brought Alice down. It was especially difficult for her to read about her grandmother's strong desire to end her own life. But she kept reading anyway, feeling too involved to stop, and found a hint of hope midway.

Agnes received an anonymous message informing her that her daughter was alive. At first, she thought it was from Alfred finally reaching out to her. But Agnes soon realised the handwriting was different.

She kept the small piece of paper between two of the pages of her diary. Alice read the simple sloppily written words "she alive" several times. Her grandmother wrote that she had done the same, quite emotionally.

The overwhelming feeling of joy seized her, and Alice knew without even having to read it that her grandmother had felt exactly the same.

Alice realised that her heart was beating faster than usual, and imagined the same thing must have happened when her grandmother discovered she had been right about her daughter all along. The diary confirmed Alice's thoughts.

After taking a few deep breaths, contently smiling, Alice continued reading.

Agnes didn't know what to do about the unexpected message, so she kept it to herself in hopes that more news would come. Knowing that her and Alfred's daughter was alive was enough to make her start smiling again on a daily basis for the time being.

To read the rest of the story:

-Purchase on **Amazon** as Paperback or Kindle:

[https://www.amazon.com/Hidden-Secrets-](https://www.amazon.com/Hidden-Secrets-ebook/dp/B094PWKM7/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Hidden+Secrets+chantal+bellehumeur&qid=1620825014&sr=8-1)

[ebook/dp/B094PWKM7/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Hidden+Secrets+chantal+bellehumeur&qid=1620825014&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.com/Hidden-Secrets-ebook/dp/B094PWKM7/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Hidden+Secrets+chantal+bellehumeur&qid=1620825014&sr=8-1)

-Available to download for FREE on **Smashwords** for a limited time:

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/1083791>