

An Unlikely Beginning
By Patty Wiseman

Chapter One

In the far corner of a seedy speakeasy known as the Blue Feather, seventeen year old Ruth Squire tried to avoid the interested eye of a repugnant patron. The impatient bartender waved his hand toward the stage—it was her turn to sing, but the metallic taste of fear drenched her tongue and slithered downward until her stomach burned. She took a step back.

A female voice whispered from behind, “Remember why we are doing this Ruthie. You can’t abandon him now.”

Slowly, courage overtook the fear. One step—another, until she stood center stage. The piano began the prelude, and she closed her eyes. A few tremulous notes exhaled through ruby lips, but strengthened as memories of the murderous carnage at home unfolded and steeled her will. The choice to save him was hers. Instead of a pack of crude, bawdy men in a smoke filled room, she envisioned Peter, the man she came to rescue. Her eyes opened, and she remembered...

Late Friday afternoon, February 1929

A shard of light punctured the somber, country scene, a flash that vanished so quickly, Ruth Squire wondered if it was imagination or reality. The next instant, a well-dressed man emerged from behind a far off willow tree and disappeared down the dirt road, alone. From that distance, she couldn’t tell his age, but noticed the black fedora hat, the dark suit, and shiny black shoes. In light of the recent murders, not only in Detroit proper, but even in her own house, fear reminded her it wasn’t over.

The snow fell silently, covering the dead grass, and dusting the grave stones in the antiquated cemetery on the edge of town. Winter decided to creep into the quiet necropolis as if to remind its temporary occupants who remained in charge. There was no rhyme or reason to this murder, no logical explanation, yet here they stood in front of a casket about to be lowered into the ground. Ruth’s heels sank into the lifeless sod, but at her side, Peter Kirby gripped her elbow a bit tighter. She wanted to cry, tried to force it...almost willed the tears to spring forth, but when she blinked, the rough sandpaper she called eyelids dissolved any thread of emotion. So far, the year 1929 was a complete disaster.

The air was silent except for the forlorn cry of a faraway mourning dove. Ruth looked to the sky and felt tiny snowflakes kiss her numb cheeks. We shouldn’t be here, this shouldn’t be happening. Whose bizarre idea was this, anyway? She looked up into Peter’s solemn face. A shiver ran through her and it was an automatic response to lean into him for warmth. The last thing she wanted to do was attend this funeral. Her heart was too raw, the pain too fresh. Surprised at the paltry attendance, she looked from one stone face to the next. Why did they bother to come? Why did I?

Finally, the last scripture was read, the last hymn was sung, and the ritual handfuls of dirt thumped against the wooden box deep in the hole. It’s over.

Peter deftly steered her toward the automobile, settled her into the front seat, and wrapped a plaid, flannel blanket around both legs. She smiled at him for his thoughtfulness. Mother was right about him, at least. Maybe her motive to marry me off was skewed, but at least, it turned out to be the right choice...maybe. “Let’s go straight home, Peter, I’m sure Father is feeling our absence. He was more than a little upset when I insisted he stay home. The guilt grows each day for my part in his pneumonia. Has it only been a few weeks since I tried to sneak out my bedroom window? Look at the havoc I’ve wreaked and the lives I’ve destroyed in such a short time.”

“Ruth, I will not hear anymore talk of your blame. You were acting no different than any other young woman in your position. Do you think you were the first girl to sneak out of a window?” Peter squeezed her hand. “Think of it this way...we would never have met if you had let that window stifle your adventurous spirit.” He smiled. “Your mother wouldn’t have arranged the marriage between us. It could have been so much worse. We could have hated each other, had no attraction whatsoever. Let’s not let all this unpleasantness tear us apart. We were meant to be together.”

The grim landscape passed by in a kaleidoscope of white snowflakes. Ruth tried to make sense of the conflict in her soul. How can Peter think that? Mother and Sarah, shot. A strange man gunned down in the hallway, and who was the man at the door who ran away? Guilt played a continuous scene-by-scene silent movie of the past events in her head, leaving her exhausted and depressed. It was my fault, she thought. All of it.

It all appeared so innocent at the time. She was young, impulsive...adventurous. Sneaking out of bedroom windows was almost a rite of passage at seventeen or eighteen years old. Everyone did it. This time, something snapped in Mother and decided the solution to this insubordinate behavior was to marry her off to Peter Kirby. Appalled at the time, Ruth fought against it—until she saw him. Sun kissed hair, piercing blue eyes, athletic build. She fell hard for him, much to her surprise. Unfortunately, Hattie Morgenstern came to claim a childhood betrothal to Peter from their homeland. Once more, Ruth acted impulsively and ran away, setting in motion a series of sinister events.

My fault, I admit. I acted impulsively, once again. But am I to blame for Mother’s plight? I am certainly not responsible for the actions of the scoundrel Captain Alexander Adams. All this insanity began long before I was born.

Peter spoke gently in her ear. “Ruth, we’re home. I must see to my horses and the milk route. I will be back after I take care of the obligations.” He helped her out of the automobile, and they walked hand in hand to the front door. “I know this isn’t the proper time to talk about this, but in light of what’s happened, I think we need to marry right away.”

“Peter,” she paused, heart torn, but unable to shake the remorse. “Talk of marriage is out of the question, tonight. My mind cannot process more. I think I want to be alone tonight—with Father. He is so ill. There’s no one to tend him. I’m sorry, but...”

“Ruth, please, you do not have to explain. We’re all exhausted. I want nothing more than for your father to recover. Take all the time you need. My own mother has been devastated. I’ll call on you in a few days. We’ll talk then.” He bent to kiss her cheek.

“Thank you, Peter. I am all he has now.” One hand remained clasped in his as a silent moment passed between them. She looked up again. “It is going to be alright, isn’t it Peter?”

“Time is a great healer, my love. Things will return to a normal pace, I promise.” Peter opened the front door and ushered her inside.

Imaginary lead weights clung to her feet as she trudged up the stairs. She stood by the bedroom window; the same window used for the doomed escape, and watched Peter drive away. Even after the automobile disappeared into the distance, she stood with the curtain pushed aside, and stared at nothing, thoughts tumbling. “How can I fix this? More importantly, how can I marry Peter with Father’s life in shambles? I can’t leave him. This house is too big, too empty...” A shiver coursed down her spine. “Can’t think about that now. Father needs his medicine.”

The chill in the hallway was a reminder the big drafty house was now her responsibility. Father must stay warm. She stopped in front of Mother’s bedroom door. It was closed. “I wonder if I will ever be able to enter that room—the closet, the letters.” Her fingers rested on the doorknob, and she could almost smell the fragrance of violets. If she opened the door, the scent would be her undoing. She continued down the hall to Father’s room.

His feeble voice answered her knock with an almost inaudible “Come in”, and she entered slowly. “Papa? How are you feeling?”

A hacking cough greeted the question.

She ran to the overstuffed chair and readjusted the heavy wool blanket around his shoulders and the lap quilt around both knees. He was shivering. “Father you are so cold. I should never have left you. I’ll turn up the heat.”

The coughing subsided, and Ruth watched him shake his head.

“No, daughter, I am fine. We can’t afford the extra fuel. Leave it be. Maybe a fire would help, but I haven’t the strength to fetch the wood.” He stared vacantly at the stone hearth.

Ruth stood abruptly. “I can get the wood, but first you need your medicine.”

While she filled the spoon with the elixir, he continued to protest. “It’s no job for a girl. These blankets are warm enough, no need to strain yourself. It’s not ladylike. Just fix me some hot soup, and I’ll be right as rain in a day or two.”

She stopped at the door and looked back. “Father, I can manage a few sticks of wood. Sarah always built the fires when things got a little chilly in the rooms. If she could do it, I can too. I’ll build the fire, and then get right on your soup.”

“It’s no work for a young girl.” Robert Squire patted his knee. “Ruthie, please come here. Tell me about the funeral. Were there many people? What about the service? I should have been there with you. You should never go unescorted.”

Ruth returned to him, sat on the floor, and laid her head on his lap. “Peter was there. It was much too cold for you. Not many people attended. I wasn’t surprised by that. The air was bitter. It’s over, Father. We need to get on with our lives, now.”

The wind rattled the glass panes; a gust of air escaped through the flue and sent a shiver through her body. “This old house. I think we may have to sell it, Father. It costs too much to keep it in good repair.”

“I’ll not leave this house, Ruthie. Your mother and I spent our entire married lives here. You were born in this house. I can hire help. You need to start your life; marry Peter.”

The clock chimed the hour, and the light from the window faded to almost black. Ruth was reminded dinner would not cook itself, and the night air would bring more cold. She pushed up from the wood floor, hugged Father, and tightened the blanket around his shoulders. “Dinner needs to be addressed. I cannot sit here and coddle you.” She kissed his forehead. “I’ll be back with your soup and wood for a fire. There is no time to think of Peter when you need me so much.”

He tried to protest, but Ruth closed the door softly. She knew, in her heart, she was the cause of all this tragedy in their lives. The shooting would never have occurred if she hadn’t tried to go dancing with friends. So much was lost. There would be no marriage to Peter. In less than a month, she had changed from a girl to a woman, from a self-centered child to the lady of the house. Responsibility loomed like an anvil ready to drop and crush the life out of her.

The kitchen welcomed her, warm and cozy, but did little to assuage the tumult deep in her soul. The soup stock bubbled on the stove, the steam warmed her face, and the freshly cleaned vegetables disappeared, one by one, into the hearty broth as the large knife clicked against the wooden cutting board. Was it only a few days ago? How can life continue to march ahead?

The scene at the wharf blazed a knife track through her brain. It played a vivid tableau, over and over. She would never be free of it. They were all there. Cal Taylor, her friend from Barkley’s Women’s School, Hattie Morgenstern, fresh from Holland to honor a childhood betrothal to Peter, the man *Ruth* wanted to marry. The extortionist banker, Eric Horton—found dead in the river—his body dragged from its murky depths. Never in her life had she witnessed such a thing, and she remembered every detail. Cal’s worried voice saying he saw a gunman in the window. Peter dragging her back to the car, the mad chase behind Cal and Hattie, Father’s shaken voice, almost in tears, as he realized his wife was at home, alone; the set of Peter’s jaw as he fought to keep up with the others.

The autos pulled in front of the house. At first, they all shouted at each other, trying frantically to open the doors, but Peter saw it first and hushed everyone.

In a flat tone, he announced, “The door is open. We’re too late.”

Ruth whispered beside him. “What does it mean?”

The air split with the sound of a gunshot, and then another. A man ran out and disappeared down the alleyway.

Peter and Cal jumped from the automobiles and bounded up the steps, Robert Squire close behind. Peter stopped at the top step, pointed at the women, and shouted. "Stay where you are."

Ruth watched Father brush past Peter and disappear inside. An ear-piercing scream sent a bone-shattering chill through her. Both Cal and Peter entered the house, and moments later, returned with Father grasped between them, his head hanging, sobbing uncontrollably.

Terrified, Ruth ran to the men, shouting, "What is it, what happened?"

Hattie caught up and wrapped her arms around Ruth. She tried to wrench away, but Hattie held firm.

Peter held on to Robert with both hands, and Cal did the same. Father was hysterical.

"You cannot go in there, Ruth. It's complete devastation. We must call the police." Peter shouted.

She struggled against Hattie's grasp, but the taller woman held her fast. "But what of Mother? Please, tell me what happened. Where is Sarah?"

Neither man answered. Peter gave Robert over to Cal who continued across the lawn to the house next to the Squires, the women close behind. Cal pounded on the door until the lady of the house answered, white faced.

She opened the door only slightly. "I heard gunfire. What has happened? Is it the gangs again? Mr. Squire what is going on over there?"

"We'll explain later. Do you have a telephone? We need to call the police...and the hospital," Cal said.

The woman allowed them in, and the authorities were alerted. While they waited, Cal explained the scene inside the house. Three people were sprawled on the floor, Sarah the maid, Ruth's mother, and another man—a stranger.

Robert sobbed in the corner as Cal continued. "Peter went back to see what he can do for the wounded. Let's not think the worst until he brings us a report."

"Mother," Ruth whispered. "And Sarah." She went to her father to comfort him. "It will be fine, Father. They can't be dead. It will be alright, you'll see."

"You didn't see it, daughter. Blood all over, Mother lying on the floor, Sarah behind her. They are dead, both of them. I just know it."

They heard the sirens as two police cars screamed to a stop in front of the Squire's house. A few minutes later, Peter's shadow filled the doorway.

Ruth ran to him and pleaded, "Peter, what is the news. Are they dead? Please I have to know."

Peter took her in his arms. "I have good news and bad news, Ruth. Come and sit down."