

AN UNLIKELY CONCLUSION

CHAPTER ONE

Ruth Squire Kirby clutched the letters close to her breast and drank in the hint of violets emanating from the parchment, Mother's signature fragrance. In the cold, upstairs bedroom of her childhood home, she'd found the beribboned stack on the mirrored bureau, exactly where Mother intended for her to look. It was over.

Trembling, she'd opened each one and read the heart wrenching words, the story that ended so tragically.

The goal was now accomplished. She was married, and to the man her parents had chosen. The journey to this wish had been fraught with unspeakable danger, death, and destruction. Lies and secrets, exposed to the light of day, completed the circle of deception and impacted her life forever.

Each letter told the story. Mother's story. She could only imagine the fear that beat in her mother's heart as each year went by, never knowing when, never knowing who would show up at her door and seek revenge.

Whether divine providence or accidental misfortune, two women, mother and daughter, battled a male dominated world. Unwilling to leave the future to old world propriety, each woman took charge of their destiny—many times clashing with one another while fighting separate inward struggles.

Tears slid down the smooth softness of her cheeks as she, once again, read the tale as described by the woman who lived it and mourned the mother she never really understood.

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Priscilla Squire removed the white gardenia from her graying hair, and sighed, relieved. The dream she held so dear was now a reality. Her only child was a married woman.

“I've never seen a more beautiful bride. Her raven hair and creamy complexion stood out against the lovely wedding dress. She truly was a vision.” The handkerchief she'd given Ruth to carry was folded

carefully in her hand, a keepsake. “Her life is beginning the right way, the way it’s supposed to begin, with love.”

She pressed the perfumed memento to her nose. “I’ll cherish this day forever. My daughter will have the happiness I could never find.”

The screen door banged softly shut as she walked outside to quickly wave goodbye, anxious to get out of her sturdy shoes and best navy dress. Even though surgery had been a couple of weeks ago, she was still weak, but she wouldn’t have missed this for the world.

The automobile disappeared around the corner, and she was about to go in, when a cold hard object jabbed the small of Priscilla Squire’s back sending shock waves through her spine.

The scream died in her throat as the assailant twisted one arm behind her back and spat, “Scream and I shoot you now.”

“Not here, please.”

His raspy voice breathed hoarsely in her ear. “Agree to meet me, tonight, or your daughter will never get off that train, old woman.”

The familiar stench of whiskey soured her stomach. She’d know the odor anywhere. It was burned in her memory. “Zapelli.”

The gun jammed harder into her back. “Tonight.”

She flinched at the pain, but nodded and tried to remain upright. Fainting now would put Ruth and Peter in danger. There was no choice. Nothing could ruin her daughter’s special day. She wouldn’t allow it. Not her past sins, not this wretched man—nothing.

“Where?” she whispered.

“You know the place. The dock. The alley where you killed my father. The same alley where you destroyed my business. Midnight.”

Before she could agree, he was gone. She stood, shaking, on the front porch of Mrs. Whitewood's boarding house steps. All the guests were gone. Robert was on his way to the station, taking their daughter and her new husband, Peter to meet the train. She was completely alone.

A man was dead because of her. It happened long ago, and now, the debt arrived at her door and demanded to be paid.

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Mr. & Mrs. Peter Kirby. Ruth continued to say it over in her mind, tapping out the rhythm to the tempo of the train's wheels on the railroad track.

It's happened. We're married, forever and ever.

Peter squeezed her hand.

"Happy, Mrs. Kirby? You look as though you've discovered some delicious secret."

"I *am* happy. It's so much like a dream." She dared a glance at her handsome, blonde husband and smiled.

"Are you sure this is what you want? To be married, that is?"

"Oh yes, I'm positive. Please don't doubt me. Not now."

The conductor stopped in front of them and requested their tickets. "Newlyweds?"

Peter pulled them out of his pocket. "Why yes, how did you know?"

The ticket punch squeaked, and the silver haired conductor handed the vouchers back to him.

"I've been doing this job over twenty years. I can spot 'em a mile away. Good luck to you." He tipped his cap and walked on.

"I guess we're pretty obvious. Do you suppose all couples look as green as we do? I can't imagine your parents as young lovers, or mine either."

His reference to her parents cast a shadow over her mood, and she moved slightly away from his shoulder to gaze out of the window.

It was like him to sense the shift in emotion, and he did immediately. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to dredge up painful memories.”

“It’s only—I hated to leave her standing on the porch. She should have come with us to the station, not stay by herself after the long convalescence in the hospital. I’m not convinced she is completely healed. Father didn’t want to abandon her either, especially as all the guests had gone home. She looked so alone and fragile standing there. I’ve never seen her appear anything but strong and capable, always in control.”

He held her hand firmly. “She’ll be fine. Sarah is there. You know she will look after her.” His hand slipped from her grasp, and he wound his arm around her shoulders.

The comfort of his nearness eased any anxiety. “Yes, dear Sarah, my little Irish maid. I don’t know what we would have done without her. She’s certainly more than an employee, she’s a dear friend.”

He kissed her cheek, and his lips lingered softly. “Let’s not worry about it now. This is our honeymoon. This is what your mother wanted, after all. No more sad thoughts. We’re putting the past behind us and starting fresh. We have a whole week in New York, so put a smile on that beautiful face, Mrs. Kirby. I insist we have a wonderful time.”

The winter scenery rolled by, and the train’s steady rhythm calmed her while she settled back against her husband, anticipating the new world ahead. A week in New York simply made her breathless. Restaurants, Broadway shows, dancing, sight-seeing, everything she could dream. Excitement made her tremble, and she gazed up at Peter.

“Yes, I’ve worried about many things these past two months, it’s become a habit. You are absolutely right. I’ll put it out of my mind and think about the honeymoon and relive our wonderful wedding ceremony. It was beautiful, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, my sweet, perfect.”

Sleepiness overtook her and the warmth of Peter’s arms around her helped to ease her mind and relax. She thought back on the wonderful day, and as she fell asleep, she remembered the words.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together...”

Thirty minutes later the jar of the train woke her. Peter slept beside her, head resting on the corner of the wooden bench, softly snoring. An odd sensation sent chills coursing over her skin. She lifted her gaze, gave a start, and clapped a hand over her mouth. Directly across the aisle sat a coarse looking man, fedora tilted over his forehead, and what looked to be two days growth of beard, staring at her, unblinking.

She tried to look away, but couldn't.

He moved his hand to open his jacket and revealed a pistol resting inside a black leather shoulder holster.

Panic gripped her. Instinct told her to wake Peter,

Deliberately, the stranger placed one finger on his lips and shook his head.

She continued to stare while he gave the sign with two fingers that he was watching her, stood, and retreated to the back of the train. He disappeared through the compartment door.

“Peter, Peter, wake up, please wake up.” She jostled him and whispered hoarsely. “There's a man...”

He raised his head, squinting against the bright light coming through the window.

“Okay, okay, I'm awake. What is it? Have we arrived?” He rubbed his eyes and swished a lock of hair out of his eyes.

“There was a man. Sitting over there.” She pointed to the empty bench.

“Yes, my dear. It's a train. There are other passengers.” He looked up and down the aisle.

“You don't understand. He stared at me...and he had a gun.”

He glanced, again, to where she pointed. “A gun? Are you sure? Well, it's probably some sort of policeman. A private detective or something.”

“A policeman with a rumpled coat and two days growth of beard? No, he pointed at me, like a...a warning.” She huddled closer to him. “Please, go and look.”

“Which way did he go?”

“I don’t know. Through the compartment door and back that way.” She indicated the rear of the car. “Go, please go and look.”

Peter disappeared through the cabin door, footsteps echoing down the hall.

Moments passed.

What if the man comes back? Oh, God where did Peter go and why did I send him?

The minutes dragged, her heart pounded, sweat dampened her palms. More footsteps, closer and closer.

She whispered aloud. “Oh, please let it be Peter.”

A large frame appeared in the doorway.

“Peter! I was so scared. I thought he came back.” She jumped into his arms.

He chuckled. “Hey, it’s fine, darling. Whoever it was is gone, now.”

They returned to their bench, and he drew her into his lap. His arms tightened around her, and he crooned, “Don’t you think you might have been dreaming? You nodded off pretty quick. With all that’s happened, maybe your mind is playing tricks on you.”

She snuggled closer. “Well, I guess so. I don’t know. It all seemed so real.”

Peter gently pushed her away. “I know what we need. Food. Let’s go get some dinner in the dining car. I think we’d both feel better. I hardly ate a thing at the reception. The day was so fast and furious my nerves took over. I’m hungry.”

“The dining car?” She glanced around. “If you say so, but I warn you, I have no appetite.”

“That’s my girl, and I bet you’ll have hunger pangs when you get a whiff of the food.” He stood and offered a hand.

They rocked back and forth, the train pushing and pulling them in all directions. She watched him—glancing, cautious. A worried look furrowed his brow, and she wondered if he was hiding his

concern. They finally made it to the dining car, and once inside, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee enticed her, and hunger returned.

The attendant seated the pair, and she searched the menu, the menacing man fading from her mind. While the waiter filled their water glasses and asked if they wanted coffee, she'd already decided on what to eat, a warm chowder and baked chicken.

Peter gave their orders, and the waiter hurried away.

"I guess I'll have to learn what you like to eat, now that I'm your wife. I didn't know you liked steak, or that you liked it well done." She sighed. "I have so much to learn."

He sipped the hot brew. "Plenty of time to learn those things, besides, Mother will help you with all the recipes." His eyes twinkled. "I am a pretty fussy eater, you know."

They both laughed and enjoyed their coffee.

She took a moment to inspect the rest of the dining car. "It's so fancy in here. Look at the beautiful linen tablecloths and the china. Why the cutlery is silver. Are you sure we can afford this? I wouldn't mind eating a boxed lunch or something if we need to save money."

"No need to worry. I've taken great care. Your parents and my mother made sure we would have a lovely honeymoon, if you'll remember."

Before long, their food arrived. They shared meal and togetherness dispelled her qualms altogether.

The chowder warmed her, lifted her spirits, and she started to doubt what she had seen earlier.

Maybe it was a dream, after all.

The car filled with other passengers. The low buzz of conversation and clinking of silverware added to her sense of well-being. She looked around at the finery of the women and the dapper appearance of the men. In the low light of the diner, her confidence restored itself.

She looked across at Peter. His fair good looks made her heart skip. "You and Cal made a fine pair at the altar today. I was so proud he stood with you."

“He’s a fine friend, indeed. It’s fortunate you met him.”

“Yes, wouldn’t it be fabulous if he and Hattie married soon?”

He smiled, cut his meat, and held the fork in the air. “They’ll do it soon enough. If I was a betting man, I’d say Cal will push her to make it right away. She has her hands full with the boarding house, she’ll need his help.”

Irritation flushed its way through her veins, but she stifled a reply.

I’ll overlook that remark because its Cal. Hattie is a very capable business woman. She doesn’t need him to oversee the business. Surely he knows that.

He cut another piece of steak. “Did I tell you where we are staying in New York?”

She glanced up. “No, you didn’t. Where?”

His fork clattered onto the plate. “The Biltmore.”

“My goodness, isn’t that out of our price range?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but a commotion in the back of the car diverted his attention.

She turned to follow his gaze.

The steward was scuffling with an unkempt man in a fedora. He shouted and fought like a madman. The ticket master burst through the door and tried to strong arm the man out of the door, but not before she got a look at him.

“That’s him! The man that sat across the aisle. He’s got a gun. Peter, I wasn’t dreaming. That’s the man.”

The scuffle escalated, shouting ensued, and Peter rushed around and pushed her under the table. A shout echoed through the car, “He’s got a gun!”

Passengers scrambled past them trying to escape, screaming.

She trembled and tried to pull him under the table with her, but there wasn’t enough room.

“This can’t be happening. I thought it was all over.”

He whispered for her to be quiet. The scuffle moved closer to where they were huddled, but before he finished his sentence, a gunshot pierced the air.