

Chapter Two

Peggy, 1921: If I'd known how bad it would hurt, I may not have let that man lay eyes on me, much less his hands. Just when I thought for sure I was going to pass out from the pain, my body did its job and delivered the child as I squatted over a quilt holding on to my neighbor lady's shoulders. It was just after dark October 23, 1921.

The neighbor lady Francis cut the umbilical cord with a borrowed filet knife, then handed the sticky infant to me. The only privacy was a wall of people, as the whole village huddled in the schoolhouse just a quarter mile from the fish docks.

“Our Heavenly Father has blessed you with a healthy little girl, Peggy. Here she is.”

I could see Francis's lips move but couldn't hear her words. The roar of the winds drowned out even the baby's hearty wail. I held the bawling, squint-eyed infant and cried myself, not because it had hurt like hell. That was almost forgotten. I cried because I'd just delivered a perfect beautiful baby girl to a hell hole I'd been wanting to escape ever since I'd arrived.

Since my husband Joe wasn't here for the birth, I figured it was my right to name her. I settled on Aida Mae after my mother. Joe had named his first born Roosevelt after the president. Roosevelt was born just before Joe's first wife was dead from summer fever before the boy even started primary school.

For some reason, his chums nicknamed him Rosey, an unlikely nickname since there was nothing as gentle as a flower about the angry boy with his father's steel blue eyes.

Rosie came over to meet his new sister after the lady chores were done and the baby was fed and napping. The fierce howl of wind pounded on the double schoolhouse door, threatening the long pine rail and chain holding it closed. The baby startled awake with a scream.

"Hey, I know. We'll call her Stormy," Rosie said, standing up after a quick look at the puckered infant, as angry as the storm itself.

"Her name is Aida Mae after my mother," I said, but he'd already left to join his pals.

I rested and tried to enjoy the time off my feet but wondered why Joe hadn't come with the other men from the waterfront after securing the boat. When the last captains and crew were let in, water was already over the schoolhouse porch. Stragglers struggled to tie their boats to the porch rails. I knew the door would stay closed until the storm was over.

When a gust howled like a tortured animal, the local minister shouted out a prayer, but most of us ignored him.

"We pray for our safety, Lord, as we welcome the arrival of little Stormy Stuart, a blessing to our village in this time of fright. Let your light shine on

any out to sea in this ferocious hurricane. Bring them home safely. Amen.”

As the eye arrived and the storm stilled, I heard mothers hushing children, a man shuffling a deck of cards in the corner and the lone snore of one of two town drunks who'd made it to shelter. Then the wind shifted and strengthened, and we settled in for the second blow. At daylight, Rosie helped the men push open the schoolhouse doors.

It took a good while to dig through the heap of debris as tall as the school itself. When the path was cleared, we all stood silent in shock.

The storm without a name slapped us good. The surreal tangle of mattresses, smashed boats, tin roofing and fishing nets landscaped a forever-changed waterfront. Rosie reached for the baby as I stepped from the porch into a neighbor's boat, one of few to survive. After handing her to me, he sloshed away on foot with the men to survey damage to the waterfront and to find his dad.

As we rowed slowly toward higher ground, a snake slithered by in a big hurry. We passed a man sitting upright against a tree, obviously dead. His eyes were wide open as if surprised his head hit the tree so hard. The man's hand still held tight to the rope leashed to his coon dog. The dog was dead too, hung when the wind wrapped the rope tight around the tree. At least the dog's eyes were closed. It looked peaceful compared to the man.

At first sight, Cortez looked flattened--the fish houses and the icehouse, everything gone. Further in the distance, I could see what remained of the Albion Inn where I've worked since Joe brought us here. It was strange looking over the rubble to the waterfront where yesterday, the view had been blocked by cottages and trees.

"Oh my God." I steadied myself against the gunnel for fear I'd faint. The same neighbor who delivered the baby put a hand on my shoulder.

"It's okay Peggy," Frances said. "He's got the boat someplace save. You'll see."

I wasn't the only one wondering how my husband could run off in a storm and not let me know. The baby cooed in my lap and opened her blue eyes, the same color as Rosie's.

"She's really pretty, Peggy. I think she's a sign of good things to come."

"Let's hope so, 'cause I don't see much good from where I'm looking right now. And where in the Dickens is my Joe?"

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Peggy met her Joe four years ago when he'd gone up to North Carolina after fishing went dry in Cortez. He stayed with relatives up there until the fish went spotty there, too. So, he decided to head back to Cortez, with a side trip to Amelia Island to break up the long rough trip. Plus, he was curious how the

fishing might be on the upper east coast of Florida.

Peggy was working tables at the Palace Saloon in Fernandina. It was just her luck Joe showed up at the bar that night, then took up one of her booths for the rest of it. He tipped her every time she brought him a beer and a shot, and he ordered dinner to take with him before the kitchen cleaned up.

At closing time, Joe was waiting outside, hoping to steal a kiss.

“Peggy, you are just about the prettiest thing these eyes have ever seen. May I please walk with you home? It’s too late for you to go alone.”

“Well, you won’t have to walk me far,” Peggy said, turning slightly to her left and then to face a door under the same awning. “I live right upstairs.”

“Well, let me walk you up then.”

Peggy had to admit the man had an interesting grin.

“Nice try, Joe. I’ve got to work early tomorrow. You get on to where you’re staying.”

Joe lit a cigarette, and the match made his face glow. He smiled at her and tipped two fingers to the brim of his hat.

“I’ll see you for breakfast then, Miss Peggy.”

She climbed the stairs and went quickly to the front window where she could watch him walk toward the waterfront. She couldn’t help smiling and thinking about how fun the night had been, how quickly the time passed after

Joe came into the Palace.

He ate every meal at the Palace for the next four days and was there at closing time every night. On Saturday, the night before Peggy's day off, Joe walked her upstairs. She lit the oil lantern in the room with its single bed, writing desk and rocking chair. They sat on the edge of the bed, facing each other, knees touching. Peggy untied her hair and turned to her desk to reach a comb. When she turned back, his lips were on her cheek, then her forehead, then her own lips.

She backed away for a moment, ran a comb through her hair and turned to replace it on the desk. When she turned back, his arms were around her waist, and then she was close against him. They sat like that for a long time, then lay down on the narrow bed.

"I love you, Peggy. I want to marry you and take you with me back to the other coast. I want you to think about it the rest of tonight and in the morning. I'll be here at noon to pick you up for a picnic at the beach."

He let himself out. She got up to change into night clothes and use the piss pot, stopping at the window in time to see him step out of the bushes across the street, adjusting his fly. She waved, and he waved back. Peggy's mind was already made up.

The truth was, she didn't have much to live for in Fernandina. Since her

mother passed, there was no one who'd miss her--except the Palace. They'd beg her to stay, but she knew they'd find someone else to fill her hours and this space upstairs.

When she woke from a surprisingly restful sleep, it took her no time to pack her one small suitcase. She left it just inside the door when she walked downstairs at noon. Joe was waiting with a wicker picnic hamper and a jug from the Palace. She recognized it because she often helped bottle tea and pack picnic hampers for visitors heading to the beach for the day.

A wooden bucket flipped upside down was Peggy's step up into the solid-looking wagon. Joe handed the picnic supplies up and the bucket, too. She could use it like a foot stool, he said, so her feet wouldn't dangle. Joe walked to the front of the rig, stopped to look the horse in the eye, then climbed up himself.

"Duke and I had a little confrontation this morning over an apple," Joe said. He showed Peggy a large bite mark on his right hand, which he then placed on her left knee. He gave her a smile which she returned. He picked up the thick reins with his left hand and said, "Go Duke."

Duke shot forward so quickly, Peggy was thrown back against the wagon bed. She laughed as Joe helped her recover, pulling her forward with the hand from her knee.

“Hold onto your hat, honey,” Joe laughed. “Duke’s a quick start, but he settles right down.” again even faster time She liked his laugh a lot.

It was sunny, a Sunday, and there were many picnickers. Joe found a spot by a dune with clumps of sea oats offering some privacy. He spread a blanket which they anchored with their shoes. Peggy unpacked the hamper, noticing the Palace had done Joe proud, and rightly so. He’d been their best customer all week.

First, Joe grabbed a chilled shrimp and dipped it in a spicy sauce. A fish spread came with thin buttered bread and two kinds of pickles. Plus, there was fried chicken and half an orange-iced pound cake.

“How many people did you say you were feeding?” Peggy asked while she unbuttoned the cover she’d worn over her swim dress. It didn’t make her uneasy that Joe watched every button. They made eye contact once. Then he went back to watching the buttons.

“Aren’t you going in the water?” Peggy asked him since it didn’t appear he’d brought or worn swimming clothes.

He pulled a pint from his hip pocket, splashed some in his tea and took a good sip.

“No, I’m just going to sit here and watch you. And I’d like your answer when you’re done swimmin’.”

Peggy loved the feeling of him watching her like that. He'd watched her work at the Palace, and he studied her face as they lay in the dark on her narrow bed. It made her feel wanted. That's why she'd said yes. His laugh cast a spell on her.

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Here it was: four years later, and I still look forward to him coming to bed, to hold me and tell me it will all be fine.

“No need to worry,” Joe always says. “I've got my Peggy, my lucky charm.”

Now, wading toward what might be left of home with my newborn daughter, I'm shaking and laughing out loud. But the laughter twists to tears.

“What now, Joe? How are you going to fix this mess?”