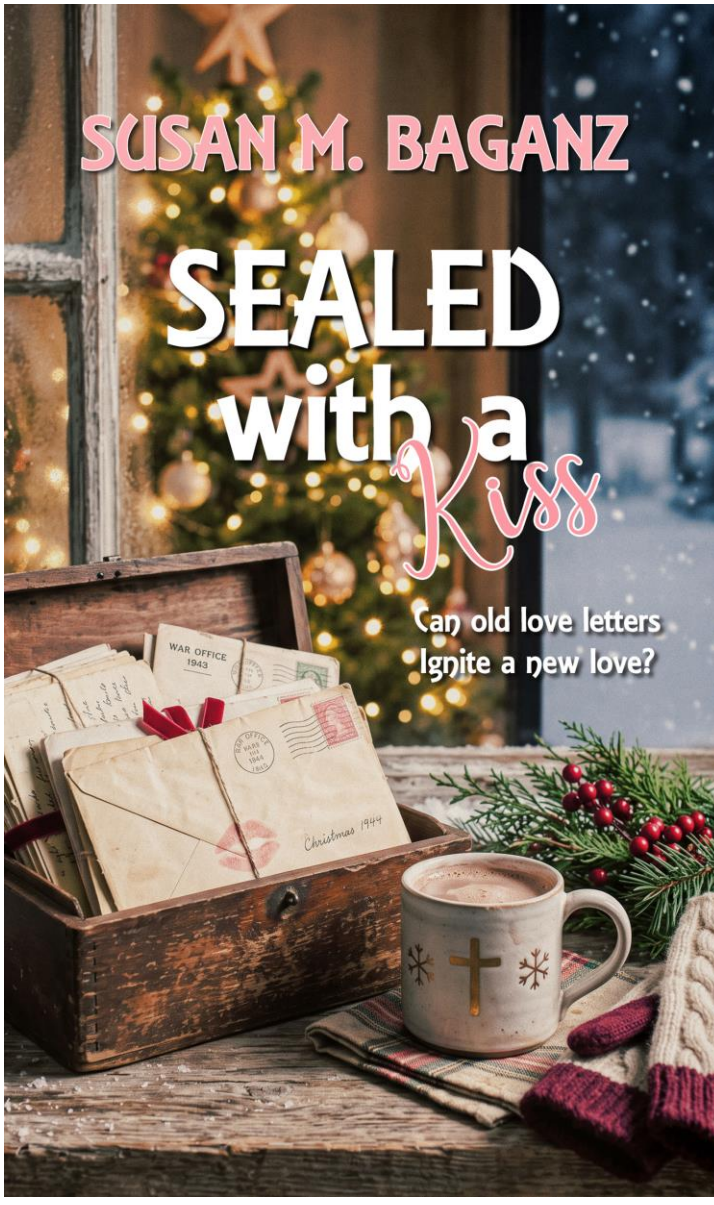

SUSAN M. BAGANZ
SEALED with a Kiss
Can old love letters Ignite a new love?
WAR OFFICE 1943
Christmas 1944

Sealed with a Kiss

Susan M. Baganz

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Sealed with a Kiss COPYRIGHT 2026 by Susan M. Lodwick

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, including but not limited to being used to train AI, without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version(R), NIV(R), Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations, marked KJV are taken from the King James translation, public domain. Scripture quotations marked DR, are taken from the Douay Rheims translation, public domain.

Scripture texts marked NAB are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* Copyright 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2026
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0557-6
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Doris and James S. Pollard and a love that survived WWII

Books by Susan M. Baganz

Black Diamond Series Regency Romantic Suspense

The Baron's Blunder (Prequel) novella
The Virtuous Viscount (Book 1)
Lord Phillip's Folly (Book 2)
Sir Michael's Mayhem (Book 3)
Lord Harrow's Heart (Book 4)
The Captain's Conquest (Book 5)

Orchard Hill Contemporary Romances

Pesto & Potholes
Salsa & Speed Bumps
Feta & Freeways
Root Beer & Roadblocks
Bratwurst & Bridges

Contemporary Romantic Suspense

Whitney's Vow
Madi's Secret
Finnian's Rescue

Chapter 1

Tears poured down Cori's face as she stood in Great-grandma's attic sweeping the floor. She thought she'd cried enough at the funeral, but here, amongst the last of Great-grandmother Maisy's belongings, the grief hit hard. Most of the boxes and other old items had been removed. After this house was ready to sell, the memories of Great-grandmother Maisy Mae would only be in her heart.

Tiny open windows on each end of the attic space let in the cool, damp autumn air, but she'd managed to collect most of the dust bunnies. She dumped another pile of debris into the garbage and swiped at the tears with her sleeve. "I miss you, Grandma." She glanced at her jeans and T-shirt, grubby from the task at hand.

One last look into all the nooks and crannies of the attic would complete the task.

A box tucked away in a dark corner caught her eye. How had she missed that? It blended in with the wood floor. Cori leaned the broom and dustpan against a wall. Grateful for her work gloves and old jeans, she dropped to her knees to crawl to the corner under the sloping roofline. *Oh, please don't let it be a mouse nest!* An involuntary shiver overtook her as she reached for the box. It was stuck, so she tugged at it a

few times with increasing force, and when it finally came loose, she almost fell over backwards.

She crossed her legs and placed the box in front of her. It was bigger than she'd first thought and made of wood. There was a latch but no lock. *Hmmm.* Cori brushed off the dust instantly regretting her action as she sneezed again. She flipped the latch and opened it.

Letters? The envelopes were addressed to Maisy Mae Marble, at Great-grandmother's childhood address forty-two miles away. It looked as though they were all written by a soldier named Joseph Peters. His name, rank, and address were in the upper left corner of each envelope.

While curiosity ate at Cori, the chilly air and dust compelled her to close the box and carry it to the stairs. She closed the windows, grabbed the garbage, dustpan, and broom, and hauled those down before returning to retrieve the box.

Downstairs, she turned out the attic lights and shut the heavy oak attic door. She paused and released a sigh as memories of running all the way up the stairs flooded her mind. Games such as hide and seek, along with hunting for hidden treasures, were memories that belonged in the past. The memory of the fun and laughter with her siblings pushed a smile through her grief.

Going through the empty rooms, she paused to take in the moment. Once it was on the market, Cori hoped a new family would make as many precious memories here as her family had.

She picked up the box, stepped out and locked the

front door, and went down the steps. The crunch of leaves on the walkway reminded her once again of the fragility of life. *Thank You, Lord, for the years I had with Great-Grandma Maisy Mae*. Cori could imagine her great-grandmother dancing a polka with her great-grandfather in heaven. No more tears or pain for either of them anymore.

~*~

Later that evening, after a shower, clean clothes, and soup for dinner, Cori sat at her kitchen table and opened the box. A musty aroma wafted from inside where the letters were stacked neatly and organized by postmark date. She opened the first one.

Dearest Maisy Mae,

We haven't even shipped out yet, and I am unable to tell you where I'm going. Please don't forget about me. I know the ring isn't much, but I will marry you when I return from this war and promise to buy you a better ring when I can afford it. I wish we could have wed before I shipped out, but your parents were right. It is not fair to you, although I pray you will wait for me. The hope of a future with you will sustain me in what might be darker days ahead.

Thank you for the photograph. I will keep it on me always, so you are close to my heart. I will confess I'm equal parts excited and terrified to defend our country. I pray you will be proud of your soldier always. You are in my thoughts and prayers. Every moment I think of you brings a goofy grin to my face. The guys in my squad rib me about it, but they are jealous. No one has a girl as pretty as you waiting

for them. You are more than beautiful to me. Your faith in Jesus causes you to shine from within due to your kindness and grace. How God would ever consider me worthy to be yours is beyond me, but I am grateful.

All my love, always and forever,

Joey

Cori sat back in her chair, puzzled. Joey was not her great-grandfather's name. It never showed up in the family genealogy her mother had done. This was not a man Maisy Mae ever married. Was this her first love? What happened to them? Was Joseph "Joey" Peters still alive?

Those thoughts teased her throughout the night as she tried to sleep. What must it have been like to get letters like this? No video chats, no email, no cell phones or easy communication. The wait for one precious letter would have been torture for someone in love, especially when that someone was away at war.

Tomorrow, she'd investigate. With that decided, she drifted off to sleep dreaming of a soldier and a young woman, walking, holding hands. She couldn't see their faces, but it didn't matter. Grief and sorrow struck her anew at the loss of her great-grandmother, Maisy Mae. The reality struck her, too, that no one had ever loved her like that.

~*~

Joe dumped another round of old papers and magazines into the large garbage can. "Grandad, why have you never cleared all this stuff out?" he groused

into the empty air. He had been working in the attic of his grandfather's home for a week, and had finally reached the end of it all. He sighed and took a deep breath, releasing all his frustration. Where had all the energy gone that got him through boot camp? He glanced at his left hand, enclosed in a protective glove that had been white but was now black from all the dirt.

He'd hoped to come home as a decorated soldier and move on to a promising career. Being wounded, not even in combat, was a double injury. His medical military discharge was the straw that broke him. He'd wanted to serve as his great-grandfather had, with honor. And he had, but not for as long as he'd hoped.

Great-grandfather had made it home uninjured physically, even after being a prisoner-of-war for months, after being captured towards the end of WWII.

Great-grandfather wouldn't talk about those years, but Joe suspected they haunted him. There'd been times in Joseph's childhood when late in the evening he'd heard muffled shouting from Great-grandfather and the soothing tones of Great-grandmother. It didn't happen often, but when it did, Joseph had worried…and wondered. Great-grandfather had gently deflected questions about the war, in ways that Joseph realized only after he'd grown up. He couldn't even ask Gramps, because Gramps hadn't been born until the war was over and Great-grandfather had been rescued.

After dragging the garbage can to the first floor, Joe finally took a break. In the spare room, he pulled

up a chair to go through some boxes he'd brought down. He'd seen enough of those antique shows to know that there could be hidden treasures. One could always dream, right?

The news droned on in the other room, loud enough for Joe to make out the words. Gramps had probably fallen asleep again, a side effect of his latest stroke. Gratitude washed away any sense of failure at his injury. What a privilege it was that he could be here to help care for the man who'd taught him how to hunt and fish when his own father was too busy with work. It was the least Joe could do, and the task gave him purpose.

For now.

He started going through a box, tossing some things in the garbage, others in recycling, and some to be considered for donation. He opened an old Army trunk with a nameplate that read PETERS. Inside were his Great-grandfather's Army uniforms. Shoes, combat boots, and camouflage. He would keep those. Why? Because Great-grandfather was a hero. A man who'd suffered untold pain and loss.

Great-grandfather had lived across the street from Joe's parents when he was growing up. He'd hung out with his great-grandparents often and his great-grandfather had imparted as much wisdom as Gramps had. Like father, like son, Joe supposed. He'd enjoyed hanging out, until he got into high school and became more interested in football, girls, and work.

He gently ran his hand over the uniform on top with the name PETERS on it, similar to the one that

adorned his own uniforms. He hoped his great-grandfather would have been proud of his namesake.

He uncovered a tattered shoebox at the bottom, and set it on the table. Dried out from age, the yellowed tape no longer held the top secure. Joe lifted the lid and set it aside. Wow! Inside, there were letters, and the postmark indicated these were from Great-Grandpa's time serving in WWII. What a treasure.

The feminine script was fanciful, and the return address unfamiliar. He flipped the first envelope to the back side to see the faded red outline of lips. He grinned. Great-grandma was quite a woman, and it was sweet to think of her sending Great-grandpa love letters. He flipped through the envelopes to the oldest one and started to read.

Dearest Joey,

You just left for your deployment and I already miss you. Was I wrong to agree with my parents to wait until you return? How will I bear it? I worry that our kiss might be the last one, and being held in your arms as you hugged me tight, will only be a fading memory over the years. Please return safely. I'm already pleading with God to bring you back to me.

I understand you have a job to do and that you take service to our country seriously. I admire your devotion to do your duty. I will pray and write letters and wait eagerly to see and hold you again. It's hard not knowing where you will go and what you will do. Will you face the enemy on the battlefield? I'm already asking God to fight for you.

I realize that it may be a while before I get a letter from you, but I will write often in hopes that you will not go for

long without hearing from me. I love you so much and anticipate a wonderful life together when you return.

Faithfully yours,

Maisy Mae

Wait. What?

Who was Maisy Mae? His great-grandma's name was Anna. Joey and Anna. Who was this Maisy Mae? And why had he never heard of her? Did Gramps know about this woman?

His alarm went off. He set aside the letters, went to the kitchen to gather Gramps's medication, and got a glass of water.

"Hey, Gramps, time for meds," he said, giving the water and the little cup containing the medicine to Gramps.

"It's not fun getting old and relying on these to keep you alive." Gramps took the cup and tossed the pills in his mouth. He took a long drink. "Thank you, Joe. What are you doing today?"

"Just going through stuff from the attic. It's all cleaned out now but I'm sorting through things down here. I found some old letters in Grandpa's Army trunk." He paused as Gramps glanced up at him. "Love letters," Joe finished.

Gramps frowned. "My dad didn't meet mom until after he was rescued. She was a nurse in the Army. Who are the letters from?"

"Some woman called Maisy Mae. So you never heard of her?"

"Not a peep. Interesting. What's for dinner?" he

asked.

Joe gave him the menu he'd thought of on the spot. "Hamburgers."

Gramps grinned and gave him a thumbs-up. He then turned up the sound on the game show he was watching, and yelled his own answers to the questions.

Joe chuckled and went to prepare the evening meal for the two of them.

After dinner, his cell phone rang.

Joe took a deep breath and slowly let it out before clicking the accept button.

"How's it going, son?" Dad asked.

"Gramps is resting well. He was able to speak better today and ate well."

"Good to hear. I'm sorry you're stuck doing this. I'm grateful you could be there until we can figure out something better. I'm flying out to Pennsylvania tonight and won't be back for a week. Check in on your mom when you can."

"I'm glad to be here with Gramps. We get along fine. And of course I'll call Mom."

"It's not a good long-term solution for you, Joe. We've been over this before. Now, how is your recovery going? Have you made any plans?"

"I'm still healing and doing all my physical therapy. I'm working on my goals for when I'm better. Almost done with that first online class. Gramps needs care. I believe he would lose the will to live if he were to be moved to a nursing home."

"It is not your responsibility to be his caregiver, Joe. I don't want you to put your life on hold."

"I'm not putting anything on hold. It's an honor to be able to be here for him. Today I've cleaned out the attic. I'll start tackling the other rooms after I finish up. I found Great-grandpa's Army uniform today and some love letters."

"Who wrote the letters?"

"Her name was Maisy Mae Marble," Joe said.

"Guess we all die with secrets," Dad joked.

"Makes me wonder what happened between them. I've only read one letter, but she was in love with him."

"Maybe it wasn't reciprocated. It doesn't matter now. I'm glad you're making progress." He paused. "I have to go, my other phone is ringing. Talk to you soon. Love you, son."

"Love you too, Dad."

The call disconnected. Why couldn't his father accept that Joe needed to heal? He said, "I'm glad you're making progress" but his tone sounded more like "I'm disappointed you're not making more progress." Every call left Joe unsettled, feeling as though he'd failed. It also bothered him that Dad felt others should care for Gramps, and not in the comfort of his home. As long as Joe was here, Gramps would be safe and cared for. That was his job for now and he was content with God leading him to this time and place. As much as he despised his injury and the consequences of it, the blessing had been his availability to be here for Gramps.

His thoughts turned to the box of letters. They were a mystery that puzzled him. He couldn't shake

the idea that they were important somehow. The dryer dinged, and he continued to the laundry room. The clothing wouldn't fold itself.

~*~

Cori spent the next morning researching names and addresses. Could the mysterious Joey still be alive? It might be worth hunting down the man to learn more about the younger Maisy Mae, and what had kept them from spending their lives together.

She located a few men named Joseph Peters. Where did her great-grandmother's Joey live? She found an obituary for a Joseph Peters but also found a listing for someone else with the same name. She did a further search and was able to get a phone number. Should she call? Anxiety welled up within. What would she even say? What did she really want to know? Was this man her great-grandmother's first love? What had happened?

She shook her head at her own romantic happily-ever-after tendencies. But this story hadn't ended that way, had it? She wanted to learn more about the secret past her beloved great-grandmother hadn't shared.

Maybe she'd pray about it first. Prayer was always a good start, wasn't it?

CHAPTER 2

The next day, Joe's cell phone rang. He didn't recognize the number and hoped it wasn't another spam call. He clicked accept. "Hello?"

"Hi. Um, I'm searching for a Joseph Peters, is this the correct phone number?" a sweet, hesitant, female voice asked.

"Yes," Joe answered. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"I have a weird story. Did you know a woman named Maisy Mae Marble during World War II?"

Wow, what a weird coincidence. Joe tapped the shoebox on the table. "Not personally since my father hadn't even been born yet. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, you're not the man I was looking for then. I found some letters from Joseph Peters written to my great-grandmother during World War II. I haven't read many of the letters yet, but am curious as to what happened between him and my great-grandmother."

"That could be my Great-grandfather," Joseph said. "I found some similar letters the other day but haven't had time to look at them."

"And you're named after your Great-grandfather?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, I am. My great-grandfather was

Joseph Peters. He passed away five years ago now."

"Oh, I'm sorry for your loss." She was silent for a bit.

"Are you thinking my Great-grandfather wrote the letters you found?" Joe asked.

"Well, I was curious. Do you know anything about him and a woman named Maisy Mae?"

"Yesterday was the first I'd ever seen that name, which is not my great-grandmother's name."

"Yesterday?" her voice was incredulous.

"Yes. I'm cleaning out my great-grandfather's attic, and I found a box of letters from Maisy Mae in with his uniforms."

"Wow. What a strange coincidence that we find the letters at the same time." She went silent for a long moment and then spoke again. "Joey Peters isn't my great-grandfather's name. I never heard of him. I'm glad to learn he came back from the war alive. The thought that he had died at war and that was the reason they never reunited, was too sad to consider."

"For some reason they didn't get married. So you're curious about what happened?" Joe asked. He picked up the letter that was still resting on the table.

"Yes. I guess it's strange. I don't really know why, but finding out feels important. And you found out about Maisy Mae because of some letters?"

"Right. I only read one, but she signed her name at the bottom."

"Oh, would you mind sharing the contents of her letters with me?" she asked.

"How do you propose I do that?" He sat down,

intrigued.

"There are a few ways. You could take photo with a cell phone and send me copies or scan them and email them to me, or we could meet via a video call and discuss what would work best to get them to me. I realize this is a huge imposition, and I don't mean to make extra work for you, but I would appreciate it. Or, if you don't want to deal with it and plan to toss them, I'll pay for the postage if you could mail them to me."

"I wasn't sure what to do with them. I wasn't thinking about tossing them, though. Now I'm curious, too." Joe had to admit he was more intrigued by Maisy Mae's great-grand-daughter's voice. "We could try a video call after you tell me your name."

"Oh. Oh. I'm so sorry. Where are my manners?" She gave a nervous laugh. "I'm Cori Martin."

"You already have my cell phone number. I assume the number on my caller ID is yours?"

"Yes. When would be most convenient for you?" she asked.

"The earliest I could do would be tomorrow after 1:00 PM. I'm in the central time zone."

"So am I. I'll text you the video-chat link."

"Would you mind emailing it, instead. That'd make it a little easier for me since I'll be on the computer.

"Sure."

"OK. Sounds good." He typed in his email and sent it.

"Oh, and one more small favor…" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Do you have a photo of your great grandfather? I would love to see the man who captured my great-grandmother's heart the first time."

"I'll look through some old photo albums. Would you provide a photo of a young Maisy Mae in return?" His curiosity was aroused, not only about the mysterious first love he'd never heard of before, but also this young woman with such a beautiful voice. Did she resemble her great-grandmother?

"I have one I can send to you."

"Thank you."

Was she a believer? His interest was piqued further. An alarm buzzed in the kitchen. "I need to go. I look forward to meeting you on video-chat tomorrow."

"Thank you, Joseph."

It wasn't often people called him by his full name. It had been too long since he'd dated anyone if he was becoming all gooey over a woman's voice. "You can call me Joe. Have a good night, Cori," he said.

"Good night, Joe."

Joe set his phone on the table and rushed to take the brownies out of the oven. They were his great-grandmother's secret recipe. While he was working hard to get Gramps to eat healthy, a little chocolate treat didn't hurt now and then.

"Joe!" Gramps called.

"Coming!"

Tonight, he'd try to read a few more of the letters to see what he could discover before the video call tomorrow. He wondered again about Cori. What