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The Secret of the Madonna

A MAGGIE AND EM MYSTERY



Donna Alice Patton



Books by Donna Alice Patton

MAGGIE AND EM MYSTERIES

The Secret of the Madonna

A Maze of Secrets

Secrets in the Cellar

Shh! It's a Secret!

TALES FROM THE GARDEN OF MYSTERIES

Snipped in the Bud

Squashed at the Fair

Spies Among the Lilies

TALES OF THE WEST

Jenny and the Hooky Playing Fiasco

Jenny and the Cattle Rustling Catastrophe

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Chapter One



The Providential Letter

W here?
A white, iron bed squeaked as Maggie Brandenburg opened her eyes. She shoved a heavy, unfamiliar log cabin quilt off her legs. Across the room, a battered mahogany dresser held a vase of purple chicory and honeysuckle. The missing drawer pulls gave the dresser a smug expression, as if daring her to solve this puzzle.

Where am I?

Aside from the bed and dresser, the room held only a washbowl on a stand and a straight-backed chair with a rush seat. The wall was graced by a lone picture of a Guardian Angel helping two children cross a broken bridge.

One window with a built-in seat framed a glimpse of an enormous oak tree. A wonderful springtime aroma of honeysuckle sailed in on the morning breeze, lifting the muslin curtains.

Somewhere nearby, a cow mooed. Another answered.

With her eyes closed, Maggie could almost imagine springtime on their own farm. That is . . . if they had still owned it.

How did I get here?

“Em?” Maggie turned to her sister. “Where are . . .”

Em? Where is she? Heart thumping, Maggie leapt out of bed, her feet thudding on the hardwood floor. Finding herself in a strange room was scary enough, but to wake up without her twin? That was even more confusing. Never in all her eleven years could Maggie remember a morning when she’d woken up in a room alone.

She searched frantically around the room, hoping to find a clue of her missing sister and spied something familiar draped over the chair. A dress. Green, wrinkled, but unmistakably hers.

Outside, a rooster crowed, and all at once, Maggie knew. *We’re at Aunt Sophie’s. Em and I are here for the whole summer. We each have our own room and maybe—*

Maggie squeezed her hands until they ached. *Maybe if everything works out all right, we can stay. Forever.*

If . . . so many ifs.

Always that pesky word to dim the great possibilities in life with its chance of saying no instead of yes. *If there truly is a treasure and IF we can find it. If. Oh, Blessed Mother! Mama says you promise to help anyone who asks. Couldn’t you help us? Please? Let all the ifs come true?*

Maggie pulled off her shabby nightgown and exchanged it for the worn dress.

Once upon a time, right after the Depression started,

Mama had bought the dress in a store. The color was once like crocus shoots poking through the snow—a fresh, crisp green. Tiny white daisies with sunny yellow centers had sprinkled it then.

Too much scrubbing over a washboard had worn the daisies into unrecognizable specks. It now took more imagination to see the flowers, but Maggie was determined to try. If she couldn't find one whole daisy, then the Depression would "win."

"If we stay strong during these hard times," Papa always said, "we'll come out the winners."

Each day it got harder to stay strong. Especially when you always had to be the new girl in school, the one who couldn't raise her hand for fear the seams under her arms would split. Maggie dreaded those rare months when they lived somewhere long enough to go to school. Not that they went much. Traveling around so Papa could find work took most of their time.

"Don't be such a chicken," Em often scolded. "You tell those Mary Jane girls you're as good as they are."

Mary Jane was Em's taunt for all the girls who wore new dresses, white anklets, and shiny, patent leather shoes. If someone teased or poked fun at her clothes, she let her fists do the talking. School, like prissy girls who never had to move in the night, didn't bother Em. She could strut into a strange classroom and be best friends with someone before lunch.

Usually, Maggie blinked away tears and prayed she wouldn't disgrace herself by crying on the playground. If

they could stay at Aunt Sophie's, maybe school would be different. *Another if.*

Sighing, Maggie knelt on the window seat. It had been late last night when Mama and Papa left them at Aunt Sophie's. There hadn't been time to see more than dark shapes pressing close to the white, clapboard house. Maggie pushed aside a curtain trimmed in green thread, eager for her first look in the daylight.

A big barn to the right of the oak tree took up most of the view. The barn was so close that she could have thrown an acorn and hit the gray-shingled roof. Two horses, a dappled gray and a pretty chestnut mare, looked up in surprise as Maggie leaned out the window, brown braids dangling.

She laughed just for the joy of it.

We're here. Finally. Will this be the view I might see every day for the rest of my life? I hope so. Please, please, let it happen.

Ever since this awful Depression had stolen their farm four years ago, Maggie prayed one prayer. *Please, God, let us have a real home again.* Her stomach ached with longing whenever she thought how much it would mean to her family.

Please, Blessed Mother, do like Mama says and be true to your promise. Let me know I can trust in You.

Each morning, Mama led them in her favorite prayer, "The Memorare."

"Remember, oh, most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, and sought thy intercession was left

unaided . . .”

Mama’s voice always came down strong on the words, never and unaided. “That’s a sure promise, girls,” she’d say. “We can trust her to help us and give us another home.”

One day, Maggie hoped to trust Mary as Mama did. *If only, if only . . .*

Maggie leaned against the windowsill and said her morning prayers. The Memorare first, and then a heartfelt thanksgiving for the providential letter. If it hadn’t been for Aunt Sophie’s letter, Maggie knew where she’d be right now. Not looking out the window of her own room but stuck in the back seat of their Model T on the way to Michigan.

As sure as daffodils and Easter, each spring found their family of four heading for Sam Carstairs’s potato farm near Lansing. Mr. Carstairs grew over 100 acres of potatoes and depended on Papa for the planting. He also ran a small vegetable and home-baked food stand near Highway 33. Taking care of the stand fell to Maggie, Em, and Mama.

There were also six small tourist cabins for people who came to fish in a pond he stocked with bass and catfish. They had to keep the cabins clean too.

It wasn’t a horrible place, especially not compared to some of the shacks they lived in the rest of the year while Papa found an odd job or two. It wasn’t even as awful as having to sleep on the ground in someone’s field, tensed and waiting for *something* to jump out of the dark. Mama always said they should be glad for steady employment when so many in the country went hungry and homeless.

Still, Mr. Carstairs's wasn't a real home, but just another place to "make do."

A shiver of anticipation coursed through Maggie's heart. Hadn't Aunt Sophie's letter fairly promised it would be the answer to all their prayers? Proof the Blessed Mother had heard their petitions and answered?

A home. A place where Mama could grow roses again. And surely that big barn held some room for Papa to set up a small woodworking shop. He was always happiest with a smooth piece of wood to carve into something useful or beautiful. Happier than when he was trudging through Mr. Carstairs's potato fields with his shoulders stooped and his face browned from too much sun.

If . . . again that pesky word.

They'd already been on their way to Michigan when they stopped in Tucker's Grove. Each May, they stopped to check General Delivery for mail. Moving around while Papa followed crop planting or harvests, they could never tell their handful of relatives where they might be or when. Mama had picked Tucker's Grove as the one place they passed through twice a year.

Maggie sighed as the memory came back . . .

Papa parked close to Riley's General Store. Each year, Maggie measured how much the tin Coca-Cola sign on front of the screened door had faded. This spring the "la" in Cola had worn away to a dim outline of the letters. Pockmarks and what looked suspiciously like a well-chewed wad of gum decorated the sign.

Still, that icy bottle of Coke made her dry mouth water. Maggie could almost taste the wet sweetness of it pouring down her parched throat.

“I’d sure like a Coca-Cola,” Em grumbled. “If I was rich, I’d drink it every day.”

“Like as not, you’d soon tire of it.” Mama put a stop to Em’s complaining with a stern frown in her direction.

Mama was forever telling the girls not to make Papa feel bad by wishing for things he couldn’t afford. “I’ll check the mail and buy some bologna and crackers for lunch. We’ve still got plenty of fresh water in the jug.”

When Mama walked toward the store, Em muttered, “water” under her breath. Only Maggie heard and ignored it, as she ignored most of Em’s grumbles. What good would it do to fuss about having to drink hot, stale water? If they were thirsty, it was all they had.

Although Maggie couldn’t help wishing they had just one spare nickel for a Coca-Cola to share. It had been a long time since they’d had such a treat.

“Mary Jane.” Em nudged Maggie roughly in the ribs and pointed out the window.

Maggie shrank against the seat, hoping the girl coming along the sidewalk didn’t notice her. Even without looking, she knew how the pretty girl with bobbed hair would stare.

Her eyes would pick out all the dents and rust spots on their Model T then rake over the many boxes and bundles, and the galvanized washtub hanging off the back with rope. Maggie had seen the smirk of too many faces or worse, their looks of pity.

Leaning with her arms crossed on the window, Em stared until the girl passed. Maggie pressed back into the seat, knowing if the Mary Jane showed the slightest hint of scorn, Em would stick out her tongue.

“Don’t stare at her.” Maggie begged. Not that Em would listen.

Thankfully, Mama came out of the store, the screened door slapping behind her with a rattle of the Coca-Cola sign.

“Look, a letter.” Maggie nudged her sister.

“Well, now twinnies”—Maggie remembered Papa’s exact words—“looks as if our Katie has a letter that’s put a twinkle in those Irish eyes. Ah yes, she’s the most beautiful woman walking down the street.”

Maggie agreed. Mama with her pleasant smile, sparkling green eyes, and her lovely auburn hair was prettier than a movie star like Maureen O’Hara.

Not that Mama would admit as much.

“Me with flaming red hair like a cardinal,” she’d moan, “surrounded by three brown sparrows to make me look that much brighter.” She often wished someone in the family looked like her, but it did no good. Maggie and Em were both dark-haired and hazel-eyed like Papa.

“Who’s the letter from?” Papa asked.

“Looks to be from your Aunt Sophie,” Mama answered, passing it through the open window. She handed Em the brown package before she wrestled with the passenger door. Two years ago, it had rusted off. Papa had attached it again by twisting a wire through the roof.

Maggie couldn’t help being glad the Mary Jane hadn’t

seen Mama unhooking the door. You sure never saw a Shirley Temple movie where she had to rewire an auto door back on. Even in the movies where Shirley was poor, all the auto doors worked to perfection.

Papa smiled, holding the envelope up to the sunlight coming through the windshield. “Wonder why she’d be writing me?”

“Only way to know,” Mama teased as she unwrapped the butcher paper with the hunk of bologna, “is to open it.”

With her knife, she cut a circle of bologna and slit the circle into four perfect triangles. She flipped each slice onto a cracker before passing them around. “Eat up, girls. Jack, you’d best keep your strength up to open that letter.”

“Listen to that, girls. Your Mama thinks she’s ready for the radio. Might be you’ll be taking Gracie Allen’s place on the *Burns and Allen Show* soon.”

“Go on with you.”

Smiling, happy because Mama and Papa were happy, Maggie bit into the spicy bologna and crispy cracker. She savored every bite. *Yummy!* They often skipped breakfast, so the only sounds for the next few minutes were chewing and swallowing.

“Anyone ready for another?” Mama asked. “Jack, you’ll wear that envelope open if you keep holding it up to the light like that. Stop bein’ such a tease and open it.”

“Temper, temper,” Papa taunted. He took the knife and slit open the letter. Unfolding the closely written pages, he began to read out loud.

DONNA PATTON

Dear Jack and Katie,

Forgive me for beginning a letter with bad news, but Hiram passed away three months ago. He wasn't the easiest soul to get along with, but he was my brother. I'll miss him.

I'm sure hoping that you and the girls can now make your home with me.

Maggie's heart lurched as Papa read the thrilling words. A home. Was this letter the answer to all her prayers? The next words sent her dreams crashing into despair.

Only problem is, I can't be sure how much longer I'll have the farm. Mr. Gooch from the bank was here last week and said I owe five years in back taxes. Don't know how this can be. About a month before he died, Hiram told me he'd paid the taxes and not to worry. You remember your uncle, he never lied.

My only hope is if you and Katie or even the girls can give me a hand this summer, we might be able to earn enough to pay something to the bank, Mr. Gooch said he'd be satisfied if we have half by September. If not, they'll sell the farm at auction.

The strawberry patch is ready to bring in some cash. If you can help, we might come out on top of this problem.

THE SECRET OF THE MADONNA

Either way, you'll have a home with me as long as it's here. And who knows, if you come, maybe your girls will find the lost Brandenburg treasure. We sure do need it along about now.

*Love to you all,
Sophie Brandenburg*

“A treasure?” Maggie wiggled on her seat. “An honest to goodness real treasure?”