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A Maze of Secrets

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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Prologue

From Maggie's Sometimes Journal

August 7, 1936

Last week Mama had a package from her old piano teacher, Madame Bebe'. Madame was born in France, but she taught at the convent school in Ireland where Mama went. I've heard lots of funny stories about Madame.

The package had a magazine from 1912 called The Little Bell. Imagine! Mama was only ten years old.

Inside was a prayer copied out in English. The prayer was probably written by St. Francis of Assisi. It's easy to memorize. Mama asked us to say it as much as we can because it's about sowing good things to weed out bad things. Like a person should sow love instead of hate, or joy instead of sadness. We have a farm, so we should know all about sowing!

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

DONNA PATTON

*Grant that I may not so much seek to be
consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love.
For it is giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.
(Father Esther Bouquerel, *The Little Bell*)*

I might keep a journal. Mama said Madame kept one for twenty-five years. Imagine! Aunt Sophie gave me a dime for helping tear rags into strips for rugs. I bought two nickel tablets at the Five and Dime. I glued a cute picture of the Dionne Quints to one cover for a journal.

September 7

Me and Em started school on the FIRST DAY! There was an essay contest at school. I won. The prize was ten silver dollars, but I don't get to keep it. There's a rule it must be given to the poor, but I choose how to spend it. Every time I talk to someone, they give me a different idea. I'm not sure, what I'll decide. I'm taking the money back to school so Miss Grace can keep it until the Harvest Festival.

*Nothing too interesting ever happens around here. Just the usual—school, church, and chores. Ever since the excitement last summer, things have been pretty ordinary. I'm sure all my adventures are over. Em says I should think of us last summer like a book, **The Secret of the Madonna**.*

Like we are both Nancy Drew solving a mystery.

Chapter One



Gone in a Wink!

Vanished! Maggie Brandenburg stared at the neat pile of schoolbooks covered in brown paper. A wrinkled spelling list sticking out of *Voyages in English* fluttered in the sweet-scented, autumn morning. The blue-velvet pouch with silver ribbons had been right on top of the stack. It wasn't there now.

Just a few minutes ago, when she'd heard Paige holler for help, Maggie set the books, a lard pail holding her lunch, and the jingly pouch on a stump by the side of the dusty road. Now, everything was the same except for the missing pouch and an apple from the lunch pail. Two bites were missing, and the fruit had already turned brown at the teeth-shaped wedges.

Maggie had only been gone long enough to rescue Paige from an attack of blackberry canes. Seconds to tell Paige to catch up with her friend, Susan, to insist she didn't mind walking alone.

Maybe less than five minutes for someone to come along and snatch *it* away. *Darn Em, anyway! If she'd waited instead of racing off to school with Billy, she could have rescued Paige or guarded the money.*

Where was the pouch? Those silver dollars could not have walked away by themselves. Someone—or something had taken them!

Maggie swiveled around, prickles of fear popping up under the sleeves of her dark-green sweater. She wished she'd asked Paige to wait. The woods on the left side of the road were dark and mysterious.

Maggie looked hard at the oaks, maples, and tall, scrubby bushes turning yellow and rust under the September sun. A faint path led into the trees through the waving stalks of goldenrod and purple asters.

Apples don't bite themselves. Someone took the pouch. I have to get the money back!

Maggie had won the Silver Dollar Essay Contest, but the money wasn't hers to keep. In less than two months, at the Harvest Festival, Maggie would be expected to hand those silver dollars over to Mayor Cox.

This is horrible! How could she stand in front of the whole town and tell them someone had stolen the money for the poor? *I can't!*

She took one shaky step toward the path as a faint whisper of music floated through the trees. The cheerful notes filled the morning, danced from leaf to leaf, and joined the chorus of gladsome bird song. Maggie's heart should have trilled along with the happy tune, but it

skipped a beat instead. Although Paige insisted that she'd heard music coming from the woods, Maggie had heard only chirps, tweets and the rustle of leaves.

"I followed fairy music," Paige whispered, enchanted, when Maggie tromped into the woods to untangle the little girl's silky hair and blue hair ribbon from the thorny blackberry patch. "Don't you hear it? Maybe its flowers singing."

Maggie hadn't heard the music then, but now the jaunty tune tickled her ears. There was something spooky about mysterious notes coming from an unknown instrument, even if they did make her toes wiggle to dance.

The music proves someone's hiding in the woods! Fairies aren't real, so it has to be a person. The person who took the silver dollars? If I don't get it back—

Maggie's stomach twisted into a giant pretzel of gnawing worry. Her legs flapped like wet washing on a clothesline, but she took a shuddering breath and an uneasy step closer to the path.

Suddenly, the trees loomed shadowy and menacing. A bird warned in a sinister *caw, caw* that sounded like *go back, go back*. Bumps of dread prickled along the back of her neck and up her dark braids. *There's no reason to be afraid. I'm not afraid. I'm . . . augh! It's got me!*

Everything froze—Maggie's heart, her breath, and her feet in sturdy saddle shoes. The thing, whatever it was, had grabbed her from behind, yanking her to a sudden, jolting stop. It took a few dread-filled seconds of agony before Maggie realized the truth.

She half turned to see one long, dark braid tangled on the thorns of a blackberry bush, like Paige's predicament earlier.

A simple tug and she was free. "Silly me." She gave a shaky giggle. *I'm not afraid. I'm not—*

"Leave at once!" a deep, gruff voice growled from a dense thicket of blackberries. "Never return!"

Maggie didn't need a second warning. The blood in her arms and legs quivered. Dread settled in her stomach like a block of ice, the twenty-pound size. She spun around and ran faster than she'd ever run before. Her heart pumped like a runaway Model T Ford. Bushes slapped her face. Thorns scratched her hands and took gleeful delight in pulling snags in her green sweater and wool, plaid skirt. Mama would be awful mad about the state of her new school clothes, but Maggie couldn't worry about that now.

Finally, after a hundred years, she stumbled out of the woods and into the clearing. Maggie leaned against an oak and placed a hand over the stitch in her side. Her breath came in ragged gulps. *I don't think . . . it followed . . . me.*

Looking back at the dim, sinister woods, Maggie saw something floating among two maple trees, right between the leaves in their autumn glory. *It can't be! It's impossible.*

She expected *it* to just float to the ground, caught on a current of air, maybe fallen out of a bird's nest. But it didn't. Waving as if it were alive, a brown leather glove floated high and proud. Maggie's feet grew roots into the ground and her legs turned to stone.

It looks like a real hand but there's no arm attached.

A rustling sound to the right made Maggie twist in that direction. At first, she couldn't see what had caused the strange noise. Suddenly, a square-like window opened in a hedge of boxy, waxed vines, and a face appeared.

Maggie covered her mouth to hold in a startled gasp. An eye peeked out, an unusual blue-gray one, glaring with fiery fury. A mouth crimped in anger. The rest of the face, including another eye Maggie hoped, lay hidden behind long strings of gray, knotted hair. A bright, pink flower perched in the hair, so she knew it must be a woman.

Maggie stared at the strange face, unsure what to do. She glanced back at the glove, still suspended mid-air, and watched in horror as it gave a jerky wave. She twisted around. Had the face seen this odd phenomenon too?

Gone! Maggie blinked once then twice. The spot where she'd seen the woman was now a solid wall of leafy green. There was no opening. No woman.

"I saw someone!" Maggie whispered, to herself. "She was right there." *Or was it over there?* The hedge looked as solid as a green wall. The waxy leaves twined into a living fence.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

Maggie couldn't figure out the odd noise. From somewhere beyond the hedge, a cackling laugh rang out.

Maggie did the only thing possible. She snatched her books and lunch pail from the stump and ran toward school.

Chapter Two



The Mystery Girl

Maggie turned her cheeks to the warmth of the late afternoon sun and took an appreciative sniff of burning leaves. Pleasant thoughts sang through her mind. *I love my new bike! Riding is wonderful! No, glorious! I love the wind in my hair and the sun on my face.*

Maggie's heart and lips hummed with contentment as she added up her blessings. *Thank you, God! We have a forever home now. Our family is together, and Papa doesn't have to work so hard. Mama's face isn't always pinched with worry. For the first time in a long time, I started school on the first day. I love Miss Grace! I love school, except—*

It was as if the sun went behind a cloud, darkening Maggie's list of blessings. A week had gone by, but **THE PROBLEM** still lurked in her mind in giant black letters. This morning as they delivered Aunt Sophie's jam in Hillbrook, Maggie had hoped to find the courage to tell Em. So far, she hadn't. Admitting she'd been careless enough to let the essay money get stolen would be hard.

Maggie had scoured the woods every chance she got that week, keeping a lookout for the strange floating glove. So far, she hadn't found a single clue to point to the thief. There hadn't been any more crazy-sounding laughter or spooky voices, so that was a blessing

But the silver dollars were still gone. *If I don't find that pouch, it will ruin everything.* Maggie frowned and her happiness oozed away. *I have to find—*

Suddenly, a little boy squirmed under an orchard's split rail fence. His matchstick arms bulged with apples as he darted into the road without looking. Halfway across, the apples plopped from his tightly crossed arms. Leaning over to gather them, the long sleeves of his sweater drooped over his hands.

"Look out, Em!" Maggie shouted as she swerved her bike. Her legs pumped furiously on the pedals to keep from riding over the spindly child cowering in the road. "Watch out!" she hollered back, twisting around to see Em's hazel eyes widen with horror.

The warning came too late. Em sailed like a runaway tornado down the hill, brown braids flapping. Worse, she'd been showing off by riding without holding the handlebars.

Now, she grabbed on tight and tried to circle around the boy. Her back tire thumped over the spilled fruit, causing the bike to wobble dangerously close to the edge of a steep cliff.

Maggie dropped her right foot to the dusty road and held her breath. *Don't fall into the ravine!* she pleaded silently.

Em's feet slipped. The pedals spun and twirled out of control. As the runaway bike neared the treacherous edge, Em had no choice but to let go and tumble off. She landed on her knees with a thump, a puff of dust, and a groan. The bike sailed over the edge and vanished from sight.

Snapping branches, pings, and dings.

Finally, the sickening crunch of metal hitting a solid object told the sad tale as the bike hit the bottom. Maggie's stomach twisted into a knot. Dropping her bike, she ran to Em. "Are you hurt? Your knee's all bloody."

Em shook her head but didn't get up. She cupped the skinned knee in both hands and rocked back and forth. Tears filled her eyes.

"Is anything broken?" Maggie glanced at the little boy to see if he'd been hurt. To her amazement, he'd stopped crying and sat in the middle of the road nibbling an apple. In spite of his tear-streaked face, his blue-gray eyes were calm, and he wore a sweet, vacant smile. "He looks okay. Wonder who he is?"

Em ignored the question. "How's my bike?"

Maggie went to peek over the cliff. One glance told her all she needed to know.

"Well?"

Maggie cringed. "It's hard to tell."

Em stood and hobbled over. After a quick glance, she turned her back and blinked away tears. "My beautiful bike. What'll I tell Aunt Sophie?"

Their first-ever bikes had been a gift from their aunt. Two weeks ago, they'd gone to Harper's hardware store to

pick them out. It took a few days to learn to ride using a beat-up bike Mr. Duncan unearthed from the storage shed.

Only when the girls were sure they could keep their balance had they ridden the new bikes. Neither of them wanted a scratch on the shiny surfaces. Telling Aunt Sophie Em's costly bike was ruined would be painful.

I'm glad it's not me, Maggie thought then pushed down a prick of guilt for feeling relieved. It wouldn't do any good to rub salt in the wound by reminding Em what Mama had admonished.

"No shenanigans now," she'd warned in her Irish lilt. "Or you'll be on foot again. None of this riding without holding on or such. Havin' a bike is a privilege you'll not be takin' advantage of or you'll be doing without."

"It wasn't your fault." Maggie put an arm around her twin. "You couldn't run over that boy."

"It's all *his* fault!" Em shoved Maggie's comforting arm away. "He ruined my bike!"

"Not really." Maggie tried to stem Em's anger, always an impossible task, but her sister refused to listen.

Em stomped over to the boy. "What's your name?"

Before he could answer, a strange girl stormed down the hill holding a skirt full of apples. She dumped the apples, shoved Maggie out of the way, and stopped inches from Em's face. "Leave him alone!"

"He made me wreck my bike!" Em hollered back. Her fists balled up, ready to fight.

"Lies!" The girl's piercing blue-gray eyes smoldered. "I seen you try to run down my brother."

“I didn’t! I tried to *miss* him.”

“Fancy kid!” The girl sneered the words like a curse. “Think you own the world. Think because we don’t have no fancy clothes, we ain’t as good as you. Think you can run over True an’ won’t nobody care.”

“That’s not so,” Maggie murmured.

A wave of pity swirled through her heart at the girl’s shabby dress, the hem loose and dangling around knobby knees. Although Mama had always seen their clothes were clean and mended, Maggie knew well the shame of wearing a threadbare dress.

The girl might have been pretty if she bothered to wash her face or comb her wispy, white-blond hair. But one look at the mean, hard look on her face wiped out any pleasant thoughts.

“You’re wrong,” Em argued. “He ran out in front of us. Ask him.”

“I can’t!” she screeched. The girl’s skinny cheeks colored redder than a Coca-Cola sign. “He don’t talk, an’ don’t you say anything bad about him either!”

The little boy got up and limped to his sister, sniffing and rubbing a bony arm across his dirty face. Grabbing the edge of her worn skirt, he pressed a runny nose into the folds and made an odd humming sound.

“Poor True.” She patted him on the back of the raveling, droopy gray sweater. She doubled her other fist and shoved it inches from Em’s nose. “Nobody runs over my boy and gets away with it. I oughta beat you up.”

“Honest, she didn’t.”

Maggie grabbed Em's arm to keep her from one good punch. "We're sorry he's frightened, but she never touched him." Maggie tried to breathe like her chest wasn't pressed tight with fear.

It didn't work. Although Em could usually give as many punches as she got, the girl looked mean and wiry enough to get the best of anyone. "C'mon, Em," she whispered, tugging her reluctant twin a few steps farther away.

"No! Your brother ran in front of me." Em's face flushed. Arms across her chest, she bristled like a rooster ready for battle. "My bike's probably ruined. It's his fault, or yours. What were you doing in that orchard anyway? Stealing apples?"

"Let's go." Maggie pleaded.

"Boo-hoo." The girl's dirt-streaked face twisted into near glee. She ignored Em's jab about stealing. "Poor little rich kid broke her shiny toy. So, buy another one." Her eyes raked them with pure hatred.

The jab was so unexpected that tears stung Maggie's eyes. "We aren't rich," she corrected in a timid voice.

The girl turned and rolled scornful eyes in her direction. "You got fancy bikes, fancy clothes, prissy shoes . . ."

Maggie looked down at her shoes, surprised by the insult. *Saddle shoes are prissy?* Although she enjoyed the solid, no-holes-in-the-soles feeling, Em called them clunky clodhoppers.

"No, we aren't," Em argued back. "My aunt bought the bikes, but we didn't get to keep any of the treasure."

Maggie knew it irritated Em plenty that the family

hadn't become rich overnight after finding the missing Brandenburg fortune. "Be quiet," she cautioned in a tone meant only for her sister's stubborn ear. "Remember what Papa said."

Keep the treasure our secret, Papa'd warned.

With the Depression still on, it wasn't safe to let people know they had money stashed away for a rainy day. While the whole world—most everyone who read the newspapers anyway—knew about Maggie finding the heirloom statue of the Madonna the past summer, only their family and the Duncans knew about the Brandenburg gold and jewels.

As Maggie feared, the girl's eyes lit up with a greedy gleam.

"Treasure? You talkin' about Garrett's Gold? You ain't found it or Daddy would know. More lies to keep us from looking ain't 'cha? Couldn't tell the truth if it come up an' bit you on that stuck-up nose. Anyway, Daddy's got a map, so there! He knows exactly where that treasure's hidden."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Em said. "But your brother ran right out in front of Maggie from an orchard where *you*"—Em came down hard on the word—"Don't belong. I should tell Sheriff Willing. Bet he'd make you pay for those apples."

"We don't know they stole them," Maggie murmured, remembering a line in the prayer Mama had been teaching them. "Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace." Maggie hoped for peace between Em and the girl.

Please, God?

"Don't it always go that way? The rich got the sheriff in

their hip pocket. Know him by name an' everything." The girl's voice oozed contempt, but some of her arrogance cooled. Her shallow face paled. The hateful leer of her lips flipped down in defeat, like losing battles was nothing new.

She ran her tongue over chapped, peeling lips and spoke in a gruff don't-care voice. "Guess True ain't hurt. Guess nobody got to tell the sheriff anything."

"Maybe I will anyway," Em raged. "If my bike's ruined, somebody's going to have to fix it. I'm telling—"

"Hey, you kids!" a man bellowed from the orchard. "Get back here or I'm calling the sheriff."

The girls turned and stared at the red-faced farmer limping across the bumpy orchard grass.

The strange girl gave a startled gasp. She jerked the boy's stick arm roughly and scooped up some of the apples into her cupped skirt. "Run, True!"

Quicker than the wind rustling through the fallen leaves, the pair darted into the woods. Before Maggie could blink, they'd vanished into a meadow of goldenrod.

"Come back!" Em shouted.

"Let's go." Maggie watched Mr. Bixby. He hurried across the road, tugging a red suspender onto his shoulder and holding tight to a straw hat bobbing on his head. She avoided testy grownups whenever she could, and Mr. Bixby had always been gruff. "He might think we stole his apples."

"Where'd them brats go?" He hobbled up, a hand held over one side. His breathing came in ran-too-fast spurts, and his face glistened with sweat. "I almost caught 'em. That's the third time this week."

His eyes narrowed and he bent down to glare into Maggie's face. "You see where they went, girlie?"

"I . . . um . . ."

Em pointed into the woods. "That way."

"Dang!" He sighed in resignation. "Who are they? If you know, you better say."

"N-no, sir," Maggie stammered while Em glared. "We never saw them before."

"Harump," he grunted, tugging the other suspender over the shoulder of his red flannel shirt. "When I catch them two, I'm calling the law. Can't make a profit with drifters stealing my fruit."

Looking at the apple trees overburdened with ripe fruit, Maggie couldn't see that letting a few poor children take some apples, maybe the only food they'd have to eat, could hurt his profits much.

Still, as Mama would say, *stealing is stealing*. Maggie remembered her family going hungry plenty of times, but they'd never resorted to stealing. If they passed an orchard and were hungry, Papa found the owner and offered to do chores in exchange for a certain amount of fruit.

Maggie would never forget the week they ate peaches, peaches, and more peaches until she couldn't even think of a peach without feeling her stomach heave.

"Stealing's stealing," Mr. Bixby announced just like Mama. "You see them kids again, you tell me, you hear? Aren't you Sophie's grandkids?"

"Great-nieces," Em mumbled. She edged toward the cliff.

“Yes, s-sir.” Knees trembling, Maggie gave him a quavering smile and helped pick up the apples left behind.

“Hey, which gal won that Silver Dollar Essay Contest? Saw the story in the paper a few weeks ago. It was one of you, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.” Maggie’s face flamed. “It was me.” *Don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t—*

“Got any plans for the money? It’s not long until the Harvest Festival.”

“No, sir,” Maggie answered, uncomfortably aware that in less than two months she’d be expected to hand over ten *missing* silver dollars. “Not yet.”

She was grateful he didn’t ask more questions.

“Thanks,” he grunted when all the stray apples were collected. Using his straw hat as a basket, he dumped the fruit into it and grumbled about *pesky kids*. He climbed over the split-rail fence and into the orchard without another word.

Maggie watched him vanish through the neat rows of apples trees. Slowly, the knots uncurled in her stomach and she took her first deep breath since the bike crash.

Who were those kids, anyway? Wonder what treasure the girl was talking about? I wonder too if the mystery girl knows anything about my missing silver dollars.