

THE COLOR OF LIGHT

A Maggie MacGowen Mystery



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Also by Wendy Hornsby

THE MAGGIE MACGOWEN MYSTERY SERIES

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The Color of Light

Chapter 1

SIX GIRLS WALK DOWN the sidewalk away from the camera, seemingly unaware anyone is watching them. Foreshortened by the telephoto lens of the old Super 8 that captures them, weighted down by backpacks and school projects, they seem like spindly giants as they move through long morning shadows. They are ten and eleven years old, still coltish—leggy, hipless, breastless—apparently confident about their place in the small universe encompassed within this comfortable, leafy neighborhood.

A skinny girl wearing stovepipe blue jeans and red high-top sneakers, walking near the front of the pack, seems to be the primary target of the lens. The resolute set to her shoulders, head held high, suggests that she and her cohort are on a mission.

The camera's wide field of vision places the girls within the usual dance of morning along the narrow tree-lined street: a car backs out of a driveway, a gardener mows a lawn, a dog chases a squirrel, a deliveryman drives his route. Now and then branches obscure the shot as the cameraman pans to one side or the other with some apparent interest in stands of shrubbery or garden walls; potential hiding places? Clearly, it is the progress of the girls that draws him.

One by one, new arrivals enter the frame from either side and merge with the group, until there are twelve girls. Each newcomer greets the others with a hand slap or a conspiratorial nod of the head before falling into formation.

At the last driveway before the corner, a boy about the same age as the girls waits with his mother. The mother is quietly, unfashionably beautiful in a starched pastel blue shirtwaist dress. The boy is pretty like his mother, his straight dark hair slicked back from his forehead, roses in his round cheeks. Puppy fat makes him seem younger than the girls; his mother looks at him as if he is made of pure gold.

As the girls approach, the boy begins to strain against his mother's grip. The mother gives her boy a few cautionary words and receives a duty kiss in return. She releases him to join his friends. His polished black brogans make a sharp contrast to the intentionally scruffy, brightly colored sneakers worn by the girls.

The cameraman loses the children when they turn at the corner. By the time he catches up to them, they have formed a line across the road, shoulder to shoulder, facing down a group of boys who seem to have been lying in wait. There are half as many boys as girls, but the boys are bigger, older, railed out, already well into puberty, young toughs trying to look like bikers: blue jeans worn low on narrow hips, rolled cuffs, tight white T-shirts showing off budding biceps. The film has no sound track but the body language makes it clear that the toughs taunt the girls. But the girls, and their single boy, hold their ground.

The girl wearing red high-tops strides forward until she is nearly toe-to-toe with the hobnail boots of the opposition leader, a snaggle-toothed youth with a greasy blond pompadour. He cants his body forward and yells into her face while stabbing his middle finger toward the small boy who is shielded by the girls. Red high-tops shakes her head to whatever blond pompadour is saying. Frustrated, he pushes her hard enough that she drops one foot back to keep her balance. Instead of returning the shove, she crosses her arms and faces him directly, speaking in a voice so soft that he has to lean forward to hear her.

What she says seems, at first, to confuse him. But after he tries a verbal comeback or two, his face and his bravado suddenly collapse. Sobbing, he runs back through the line of his buddies and out of the frame.

I hit the Stop button and the image on the television screen faded to black.

“God, Maggie, you had balls.” Detective Kevin Halloran of the Berkeley PD, my friend since childhood, sat forward in the big leather chair in my late father’s den, where we were holed up in front of the television set, as we had when we were teenagers, too broke then for a real Saturday night movie date, or so he’d say. There was a wistful smile on his weathered face when he turned toward me. “Every kid in Berkeley knew you made Larry Nordquist cry. What did you say to the little punk?”

“Nothing I’m proud of,” I said.

“Did you know that he’s out on parole?”

“Gracie Nussbaum told me.”

“If he comes back to Berkeley, you better watch yourself.”

“That scuffle happened over thirty years ago, Kev,” I said. “I’m not worried about Larry Nordquist.”

“If you say so.” Kevin lifted a shoulder, a dismissive shrug. “Gracie also tell you that Beto took over his dad’s deli?”

“She did. I went in for a sandwich the other day,” I said. “Beto gave me an extra pickle and comped my drink.”

“That’s our Beto,” he said with fondness, as if Beto were still the chubby ten-year-old in the film, clinging to his mother’s hand, and not the rotund forty-something he had become. “Beto would love to see that little movie, Mags, to see his mom. I forgot how damn gorgeous Mrs. Bartolini was. She was what? Chinese?”

“Vietnamese,” I said, hearing the catch in my voice as I remembered what lay ahead for her the day the film was shot; what lay ahead for all of us.

“So?” Kevin dipped his head toward the television. “This is what you asked me to come over and see, you kids walking to school? You made it sound urgent.”

“Beto told me you’re looking into his mother’s murder,” I said.

He nodded. “I took it on as a favor to him.”

“What have you found?”

“*Bupkis*.” He held up empty hands. “I started with *bupkis*, and that’s exactly what I’ve come up with; nothing. After thirty years, whatever evidence there was—and there never was much—has disappeared, rotted, or died. Every lead petered out a long time ago. I’m only going through the motions because my friend Beto asked me to.”

“So, you’re not doing a serious, all-out investigation?”

“Of course I am.” The question embarrassed him. “Department resources are tight, but I’m doing what I can with what damn little I have to go on.”

His focus slid from me to the blank television screen and back again. “What’s that have to do with—?” Before he finished the question he nailed me with a glare. “Hey, you’re not thinking about doing one of your TV-show hatchet jobs on Beto’s mom are you? Because I don’t—”

“Dear God, no,” I said, reaching for his arm.

“No ‘Maggie MacGowen Investigates’?”

“I promise you, no.”

“You promise, huh?” he said. He tried to look intimidating, but I saw a flash of the big tease he had always been hovering behind the effort. “You know you can’t lie to me, Maggie MacGowen. We have a soul bond that’s stronger than a blood oath.”

Clueless, I asked, “We do?”

“You bet.” He lifted the corner of his cheek to wink at me. “We got each other’s cherries, Maggie. That’s sacred.”

“Since you put it that way,” I said, trying not to laugh; he’d caught me off guard. “Cross my heart, no TV project on this one.”

“Okay. Now that we have that settled, you want to tell me what I was supposed to see on that film besides scrapping kids in funny clothes and bad hair?”

“The film was shot on the same morning that Beto’s mother was killed.”

“On that very day? Thirty-some years ago? You can’t know that. Hell, Mags, I barely remember breakfast this morning.”

“Some things you don’t forget.”

He hesitated, thinking through what he knew and what he remembered before he shook his head. “After all this time, you can’t possibly be sure.”

“But I am.” I leaned toward him. “The police came to school that day at lunch time. We all thought we were in trouble for fighting, but they were there to take Beto home to his dad before he heard about his mom from someone else.”

“Even so, thirty years is a long time.”

“There’s something else.”

I walked over to my dad’s desk, took an envelope out of the top drawer and carried it across the room to him. He pulled out the single Polaroid photo inside, saw what it was, and blanched: In the faded photo, Beto’s mother lies at the base of a granite outcropping at Indian Rock Park a few blocks from our homes, half-naked, long dark hair in a loose spill across her face. She looks more like a doll that has been dragged through mud and cast away by a willful child than like the quiet, reserved woman we had known in life.

“Jesus Christ, Maggie.” He turned the photo face down on the table beside him. “Where the hell did you get this?”

“I was clearing out Dad’s desk— you know Mom has given up the house. I found it locked in a strongbox with the film I just showed you.”

“If you’re thinking your dad took the picture, he didn’t. It’s one of a series taken at the murder scene by the original crime scene investigators,” he said. “The rest of them are in the evidence box locked up in my office. The question is, how did your father get hold of this one?”

As an answer to his question, I took the yellowed envelope the photo had been in and pointed to the embossed return address, BENJAMIN G. NUSSBAUM, M.D., my father’s closest friend.

“Doc Nussbaum,” he said, nodding as he carefully placed the photo back inside the envelope. “He used to give the department a hand from time to time, sit in on autopsies when there was a gunshot wound involved so he could testify in court as our department expert. He was a M.A.S.H. surgeon during the Korean War so he knew a hell of a lot more about gunshot wounds than any of us ever could; we don’t get a lot of experience with murder in Berkeley. He must have bagged the picture and given it to your dad. The question is, why?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?” I said.

He aimed his chin toward the dark television screen. “Did your dad shoot that film?”

“As far as I know, he did.”

“There’s no record in the evidence log that he ever showed a film to the police.”

“I’m sure that he didn’t,” I said. “Your people would have kept it.”

“If you’re right about what day that was, then you kids were just about the last people to see Mrs. B alive.”

“That’s why I thought you should see the film.”

“Uh-huh.” He sounded skeptical.

“Kevin, was Mrs. Bartolini raped?”

“Looks that way.”

“Did they do a rape kit?”

“Sure, but it’s long gone.”

“You had the coroner do a search for it?”

“Hey, Maggie?” Voice low, words drawn out, sounding like my dad when he was about to deliver a scolding. “I know you play at being an investigator when you put together your TV shows. But just for a minute, why don’t we pretend that I’m a real cop and I know what I’m doing?”

“I don’t doubt your ability, Kevin,” I said. “But this is new information to me. I’m shocked by it. Whenever I think about Mrs. B in death, I see her as she was in her coffin, looking as serene as a Christmas angel. Not like this.” I tapped the back of the envelope. “This was brutal, angry. Help me out, here. What happened to her?”

He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly as if he felt put upon. “You saw; it was ugly. She was battered, maybe raped, shot in the chest, and dumped in a public place. That suggests that the perp meant to humiliate her or her family, or to upset the peace of the community.”

“He succeeded in all the above,” I said. “Who was he?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? There was blood found on her teeth and lips that suggests she might have taken a chunk out of her attacker. A sample was collected.”

“Is that lost, too?”

“Lost? No. Gone, yes,” he said. “Thirty-something years ago, blood type was about all they could get from blood or semen. We didn’t have DNA labs and cold case units back then. There wasn’t enough of either found on her for typing, so the samples were disposed of during routine house cleaning when the coroner moved to a new facility. Okay?”

“Okay.” I gave his knuckle a flick as I smiled up at him. “Just to be clear, I get paid fairly well to play at investigating.”

“I didn’t mean that as a shot.”

“Sure you did.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “God, I’ve missed you, Maggie.”

He started to rise from his chair and I thought he was ready to leave. But he glanced at the dark television and a new thought seemed to occur to him.

“Why was your dad out there filming you that morning, anyway?” He looked over his shoulder at me. “Did you tell him there was going to be a rumble?”

“Hardly. Would you have told your parents that you were heading off for a showdown with a pack of middle-school bullies?”

“They’d have locked me inside the house,” he said. “But your dad was there, he saw what was happening. Why didn’t he try to stop it?”

“He taught me to fight my own battles,” I said. “If things had gotten out of hand, he would have done something. But they didn’t, did they?”

“Did you know he was there?”

“No.”

“So, why was he?”

“Does it matter?”

“I can’t know that until you tell me what you know. Everything you know.”

I sighed, sat back down in my chair and rubbed my eyes. For a while—not long enough—I was married to a homicide detective. No one could ever successfully tell my Mike that there was something he just did not need to know. I had no reason to believe that my old friend Kevin, now Detective Halloran, was any less relentless than Mike had been. I also trusted that Kevin, like Mike, would be discreet about what he learned.

Kevin still watched me, waiting.

“It’s a long story, Kevin.”

He glanced at his watch. “I have time.”

“Lordy.” I did not want to go into all the sordid details, and sordid they were. I said, “The short version is, the woman who raised me, Mom, was not my birth mother.”

"Everyone knows that now," he said. "It was all over the news last winter when your birth mother died. I DVR'd the interview you did on TV so I could watch it a couple of times. I record all your TV shows, Maggie. We all do."

"The woman used to lurk around me."

"Your bio-mom?"

"Isabelle," I said.

"Isabelle," he repeated. "Your dad withheld information from the police to protect Isabelle?"

"More likely he was trying to protect me and Mom from whatever Isabelle might do."

"And Doc Nussbaum helped him?"

I nodded. "He understood the stakes."

"So, you were adopted?"

"No," I said. "You know the story by now. Dad had an affair with a graduate student when he was in France working on a project. And, *voilà*, me."

"The student was Isabelle?"

"Yes."

"And your mom, meaning your father's wife, raised you?"

"What can I say? She's a saint."

Kevin *tsk'd*. "Your dad is the last person I would ever suspect of fooling around. The way he used to watch me, jeez, like he thought I was up to something."

"You *were* up to something," I said. "You were trying to get into his daughter's pants."

Kevin blushed at that. He looked over his shoulder and around the room where, nearly three years after his death, my father's presence still hovered. Leaning close to me, Kevin whispered, "Was your dad always out there, watching you? Us?"

I shuddered at that awful notion, thinking about some of the stupid stunts we pulled as kids. Fortunately, the statute of limitations had run out on even the worst of our transgressions.

"He couldn't possibly have been out there all the time," I said. "I think someone tipped him off whenever she was in the country so he could keep an eye on me."

"She? Your mother?"

“Isabelle,” I said.

“He was afraid Isabelle would snatch you?”

“Among other things,” I said. “When my dad took me away from her, my arm was in a cast. Dad had a restraining order against her.”

“Did she ever try to kidnap you?”

“Not that I’m aware. But she did lurk,” I said. “In the strongbox where I found the film I showed you, there were a dozen more film reels, and she is on every one of them.”

“You are a big snoop, Maggie,” he said, laughing. “You couldn’t resist seeing what was on the old reels so you went out and had them converted to digital so you could see them, didn’t you?”

“Occupational hazard I guess, just like you, Mr. Detective,” I said, feeling no chagrin. “What would you have done?”

“Exactly what you did. If I could squeeze the processing fees out of the department budget.” Kevin glanced toward the television. “Is *she* on that film?”

“She is.”

“Show me.”

I hesitated before restarting the disc where we left off, with Larry Nordquist running away down the street and his pals quickly dispersing.

My little group, triumphant, reassembled and continued on toward school. When we crossed the next intersection, a busy commercial street, Dad stopped following us and remained focused instead on the front of a neighborhood pharmacy. Behind the reflections of the street on the shop’s front windows, people can be seen moving around inside the store. Someone—a silhouette—stands inside the door, looking out. After we passed by, the door opened and a slender woman—Isabelle—stepped outside. She watched us for a moment before she began to follow in our direction. Suddenly, she stopped and turned as if someone had called to her. Her face registered alarm at first, and then great pleasure when she must have seen that it was Dad who called out to her. Seeing her face light up chilled me; Dad did have that restraining order for good reason.

“That’s her?” Kevin asked, moving forward for a closer look. “Your real mother?”

“The woman who gave birth to me, yes. But she wasn’t my *real* mom.”

“Can you zoom in on her?”

“Not very much.” I paused the last frame and enlarged it until the image dissolved into a disorganized mass of pixels. “The film stock Dad used has low resolution. There isn’t much that can be done with it.”

“Did you ever meet her?”

“The only time I ever spoke with her was the night she died. But I didn’t know who she was until later.”

He cocked his head to study me. “Why weren’t you going to show her to me?”

“Because she is not germane to the issue at hand.” I hit Stop and watched Isabelle’s scrambled image fade to black.

“*Germane*? Give me a break. I only went to San Jose State, not to Cal like you and your egghead friends.”

“You chose to go to State because you thought you wouldn’t have to work as hard.”

He conceded the truth of that, a cocky grin on his face as he rose and crossed to the television. “I wanted to play football, but I didn’t want to get hurt. Those guys at Cal are big.”

He ejected the disc. “I need the original film reel, too.”

“Thought you might.” I went to the desk and took it from the drawer.

“Copies, too, please.” He held out his hand.

“You have the only one.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“It’s true,” I said. “When the TeleCine technician at the San Francisco affiliate of my network made the digital conversion of the original Super 8 reels yesterday, he burned one disc each and downloaded the files to the Cloud.”

“I have no idea what you just said.”

“I can access the film from any computer, anywhere I can get Internet. But there is only one disc. So far.”

“God, I feel like a dinosaur.”

I was ready to say good-bye—I had work to do—but he began to walk a slow circuit around that very familiar room, probably for the

last time, looking at pictures on the walls, books in the cases, various little mementoes my father kept around where he could see them. Reminders of a good life.

One beautiful spring afternoon, Dad sat down on a bench in the backyard for a little nap, and never woke up again. My mom stayed in their big old house in Berkeley, alone, until late this spring when I persuaded her to move closer to me and my college-age daughter, Casey, in Southern California. In early summer I had spent a few days with her in the house where she and my father had lived for half a century, the house where they raised my older sister and brother, and where they brought me when I was very young, helping her to decide what she wanted to take with her to her new apartment. The rest she left for me to deal with; the task was too huge for her, too fraught. So, there I was, spending a July week—maybe two—stirring up dust and occasional ghosts buried among the family’s accumulated treasures and detritus as I cleared out the place for the next tenant, the university’s housing office; the University of California, Berkeley, where my father taught, and my alma mater, was only a few blocks away.

Kevin lingered beside the leather sofa set in a niche among bookshelves. It was on that couch during the summer before my senior year in high school, on the night before Kevin left for college, that I surrendered to him that which Sister Dolores of Perpetual Sorrows, the morals and standards officer at the convent high school where my parents stashed me, referred to as my most precious jewel. Or as Kevin called it, my cherry.

Running a hand over the arm of the sofa, a wistful smile on his face, Kevin asked, “What are you going to do with the sofa?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“If you’re going to dispose of it...”

“I can just see you dragging that home to your wife. How would you explain it?”

“Did I tell you we’re not—”

I put up my hand to stop him. “I’m seeing someone, Kevin.”

“Mrs. Nussbaum told me.”

I laughed. “I don’t know why anyone in this town bothers with the Internet when we have an information resource like Gracie Nussbaum.”

“You gotta love Gracie.” He flashed a smile that was so full of sweetness that I remembered why I had once found him so irresistible.

He picked up a small framed photo of the two of us in high school, flicked something off the glass and turned it to face me. “Your prom or mine?”

“Could have been either,” I said, walking over for a closer look. “Since we went to different schools I wore the same dress to both.”

“May I?” He had already slipped the picture into his pocket before I nodded assent.

I saw the grin that suddenly lit his face, but I didn’t see his move coming. There was an arm around my shoulders and one under my legs and when I had re-established a relationship with gravity I was prone on the sofa with Kevin’s substantial bulk atop me.

“Clever move, Kev,” I said, pushing against his chest. “What’s this about?”

There was the strangest look on his face, as if he were more surprised than I was about the position we were suddenly in. Ages ago, when we were dating, he thought that particular maneuver was just awfully funny. But he wasn’t smiling as he gripped my side in his big hand and gently squeezed my rib cage as if he were checking a tomato for ripeness.

“Don’t you dare tickle me,” I said, batting his hand away. “I hated it when you tickled me.”

“Yeah.” His hand relaxed but he didn’t remove it. He didn’t smell the way I remembered, no Brut, no pepperoni—more like shampoo and scotch. “It’s just... God, you used to be such a bag of bones.”

“And now I’m fat?” I shifted sideways until I was out from under him, wedged on my side with my back against the back of the sofa. He relaxed, stretched out facing me.

“Jesus, no,” he said. “It’s just... You have more substance than you used to have. I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Funny thing, buddy,” I said, giving him a nudge. “Last time you flipped me over your shoulder I was seventeen years old. A little girl. I’m all grown up now.”

“That’s the thing of it,” he said, brow furrowed as he searched my face for something. Was he counting lines in my crow’s-feet? “We were golden back then, weren’t we, Maggie? Golden.”

“You were a good boyfriend, Kevie.” I combed my fingers through his mussed hair. It wasn’t as thick as it once was, or as dark; the furrows made by my fingers exposed a lot of pink scalp and silver streaks. “Every Friday night, except during football season, you put on your letterman’s jacket, borrowed a car and drove down to pick me up from school. You were handsome and smart and fun, and I was the envy of everyone in school.”

“Everyone include the nuns?”

“Especially the nuns. You were a nice Catholic boy.” I propped myself up on an elbow and looked down at him. “But that was then.”

“Just for old times’ sake, how about we get rid of all these clothes and have one more bare-assed roll around on this big sofa?”

“Might be interesting,” I said, struggling to sit up; he gave me an assist. “But it’s a real bad idea.”

“Sometimes, though, don’t you wish you could go back?”

“Not for a minute,” I said, straightening my shirt. “I’m in a pretty good place right now, not perfect but pretty good. It took a lot of work to get here. I don’t want to go back.”

“What if you could, though, knowing what you know now?”

“Same answer.” I swung my legs over his hips and pushed against him, trying to get to my feet. Instead of giving me a hand, he disentangled himself from underneath me and scooted around until he was sitting upright next to me. I stood and held out my hand to him. “I’d probably just make a whole new set of mistakes. Besides, when we were kids, if we knew half what we know now, we would have ended up in Neuropsychiatric. No thanks. To tell you the truth, some of the big secrets from back then, I wish they had just stayed secret.”

He looked up from checking that the Beretta affixed to his belt was secure. “What secrets?”

“The truth about my parentage for one,” I said. “And I could have lived the rest of my life without seeing that photo of Mrs. Bartolini.”

“You could be right, but I look around at the way things are now and I wonder if the whole world has gone to shit. I mean, tell me honestly, what do we have to look forward to?”

“Kev?” I took his face between my palms. “Why don’t you do what other guys our age do when they feel this way? Go buy yourself a Maserati.”

He finally smiled. "On a cop's salary?"

"Then have a messy mid-life fling with a twenty-two-year-old blonde."

"Already tried that." His face colored. "Didn't work out so well."

"Could that be the reason you and the wife aren't...?"

"That's part of it."

I shook my head. "Kevin, Kevin, Kevin."

"This guy you're seeing," he said as he tucked in the front of his dress shirt and pulled his jacket straight. "It's serious?"

"It could be," I said. "Too soon to say. But I don't want to do anything that might muck it up."

"Let me know if it doesn't work out," he said, checking his watch. Suddenly, he was the cop again. "I have to get back to work."

"Me, too." I looked around the room at all the laden bookshelves that needed to be sorted and packed up. "You'll let me know what you find out about Beto's mom?"

He grew still, looking down at me with his cop face on. He was at least eight inches taller than me so I had to lean back to look up at him.

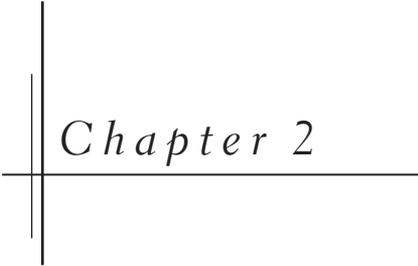
"I need to know, Maggie," he said, the heel of his hand resting on the butt of his gun. "Who did you invite over to see that film? Your friend or a cop?"

"I'm not sure."

"When Beto asked me to look into his mom's case again, I warned him that he might not like what I found out, especially if it implicates his dad in some way," he said, watching me closely. "Mag, what if my investigation turns up something that points to *your* father?"

"I'd like for you to tell me. As a friend."

"We'll see," he said. "We'll see."



Chapter 2

AFTER KEVIN LEFT, the house felt hollow, as a house does when all of its inhabitants have moved away. I didn't count myself among the missing because I hadn't lived there for a very long time. If I had left some essence or emanation anywhere, I thought it would be at my own house down south.

I went back to the task of cleaning out Dad's big old mahogany desk, the undertaking that had been interrupted the day before when I found the films locked away in a bottom drawer.

A man's desk is a very private zone. Who knows what you might find there, besides a random crime scene photo or films of the owner's former paramour, and various other things a man's widow might prefer not to learn about her late spouse? That's why Mom had left the job for me. And rightly so.

I found that Dad had kept a neat file of his correspondence with Isabelle, my natural mother, after she relinquished custody of me. These weren't love letters, far from it, at least on his part. But seeing them would have been a painful reminder to Mom of Dad's infidelity, though my very existence must have been daily proof enough that it had occurred.

Because it might be useful to me as Isabelle's estate wound its way through the arcane French probate system, I set the file in a box with other things I found in the desk that I wanted to keep: handmade cards from my brother and sister and me, an old address book, a few