

BRINGING
MAGGIE
Home

Kim Vogel
A NOVEL
Sawyer

Praise for
Bringing Maggie Home

“*Bringing Maggie Home* is beautiful, deep, and engaging! Don’t miss out on this powerful and emotive story.”

—CINDY WOODSMALL, *New York Times* best-selling author

“In *Bringing Maggie Home*, Kim Vogel Sawyer has once again woven a story so rich and unforgettable that it leaves her readers both satisfied and hungry for more. Her storytelling ability invites her readers into each scene. We laugh and cry, squirm and ache with the characters as if they were family members...even the absent ones.”

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including *A Fragile Hope* and *As My Parents Age*

“*Bringing Maggie Home* by Kim Vogel Sawyer is one of those books you can’t put down until you’ve gulped the last page. The multilayered novel merges themes of restoration with a compelling search for a long-missing sister. I highly recommend this satisfying and richly imagined novel!”

—COLLEEN COBLE, *USA Today* best-selling author
of *Beneath Copper Falls* and the *Sunset Cove* series

“High praise for Kim Vogel Sawyer’s *Bringing Maggie Home*! Kim intricately weaves the lives of three generations of women, each one affected by the tragedy of Hazel’s losing a sister long ago. The depth of the characters and God’s perfect timing are illustrated throughout their journeys. Already an award winner and a best seller, Kim takes her wonderful story to an extraordinary new level of writing.”

—DIANNE BURNETT, *Publishers Weekly* reviewer and former
fiction editor for Christianbook.com

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When Grace Sings

When Love Returns

When Mercy Rains

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BRINGING MAGGIE HOME

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For my girls—*Kristian, Kaitlyn, and Kamryn.*

I know I didn't do everything right,
but I hope you know I always loved you.

Hope deferred maketh the heart sick:
but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life.

—Proverbs 13:12, KJV

Mid-July 1943
Cumpton, Arkansas
Hazel Mae Blackwell

Hazel set a porcelain cup and saucer on the overturned apple crate in front of her little sister. “Madam, would you like cream and sugar in your tea?”

Maggie nodded, making her Shirley Temple curls bounce. Her hair—what Daddy called flaxen—shimmered under the noonday sun, almost as yellow as the roses painted on the cup.

Jealousy sparked in Hazel’s heart. Why couldn’t she have inherited Mama’s sunshiny-yellow hair and sky-blue eyes the way Maggie had instead of Daddy’s dirt-brown hair and eyes?

“What do you say?” Hazel asked the question as tartly as Mama.

“Yes, pwease.”

“*Pluh*-ease,” Hazel said.

“*Pwuh*-ease.”

Hazel sighed. Maggie was just-turned-three, as Daddy often reminded Hazel when she got impatient with her sister. Sometimes she wished Mama hadn’t waited so long after Hazel to have another baby. Wouldn’t it be fine if almost seven years didn’t stretch between them? Mama and Daddy were always telling her she was lucky to have a sister, and Hazel loved Maggie. Of course she did. But sometimes . . .

“Pwease, Hayzoo Mae?”

She lifted the lid on the doll-sized sugar bowl and spooned out pretend sugar. Then she pretended to pour cream. No matter how much Hazel begged,

Mama never let her waste real sugar and cream for her tea parties. She used the spoon to stir the air in Maggie's cup. "There you are."

Maggie's apple cheeks dimpled with her smile. "Fank you." She picked up the cup between her fingers and carried it to her rosy lips.

"I hope it isn't too hot."

Maggie made noisy drinking sounds. Her blue eyes rounded and she pursed her lips. "Ooooh, it is hot! I bu'n my tongue!"

Hazel stifled a chuckle. Playing make-believe with her doll had never been this fun. Maybe she should have let Maggie use her special tea set before. But she'd waited until her sister passed her third birthday, the same age Hazel had been when she received the set for Christmas from Memaw and Pappaw Blackwell. She hadn't trusted Maggie's baby fingers not to break one of the fragile cups or plates.

She picked up her own cup and held it close to her mouth. "Blow on it." She puffed breaths into her cup, smiling when Maggie imitated her.

With the sun warming their heads, they sipped and smiled at each other and helped their dollies eat pretend cookies from the serving plate centered on the crate. Hazel's imagination painted their surroundings from a dusty yard to the fancy city restaurant she'd seen in a magazine. With linen-draped tables instead of a handkerchief-covered crate. With ladies wearing silk instead of homespun. So easy to see in her imagination. She even pretended her hair was shiny yellow curls trailing down her back instead of wind-tossed, dirt-brown, pin-straight locks lopped at shoulder level.

She picked up the plate and offered it to Maggie. "Would you like the last cookie?"

Maggie reached out her pudgy hand.

The screen door squeaked open and Mama stepped onto the porch. "Hazel Mae? Maggie?"

Maggie rolled sideways to push herself to her feet, and her bottom bumped the crate. The teacups and serving pieces wobbled. Gasping, Hazel dropped

the plate to steady the table, and the plate landed on the sugar bowl. Both the plate and the lid to the sugar bowl snapped in two.

The lovely daydream shattered. “Oh, Maggie, look what you did!” Hazel snatched up the halves of the once-pretty plate with its circle of painted yellow roses and green leaves and hugged them. Surely her heart was broken in half, too. “Why can’t you be careful? I should never have let you touch it.”

Tears swam in Maggie’s blue eyes, and her lower lip quivered. Mama hurried across the yard, her bare feet stirring dust. Maggie buried her face in Mama’s apron skirt.

Mama scowled at Hazel. “For shame, yelling at your sister. It was an accident.”

Hazel stared at Mama’s hand on Maggie’s head, the fingers petting, sweet and soothing. Why didn’t Mama soothe Hazel? She’d suffered the loss. “But she broke the serving plate. And the sugar bowl lid.”

“You dropped the plate, Hazel Mae. You broke the pieces.”

But she wouldn’t have dropped the plate if she hadn’t been trying to keep the crate from falling over. She said so, too, even though Daddy would probably say she was talking back.

Mama’s scowl deepened. “Arguing won’t fix things.” Then a hint of sympathy crept into her eyes. She set Maggie aside and held out her hands. “Give it to me. If there’s a clean break, I can glue it together.”

Hazel swallowed the words hovering on her lips—*It won’t be the same*—and reluctantly transferred the halves to Mama’s keeping. She gave her the pieces of the sugar bowl lid, too.

Mama slipped all the pieces into her apron pockets. “Put your toys away and then come to the kitchen. I have a job for you to do.” She returned to the house.

Her jaw clenched so tight her teeth ached, Hazel transferred the fragile tea set to the brittle grass. She turned the crate right-side up, settled her doll with its stuffed cloth body in the bottom, then began arranging the teapot,

cups, saucers, and plates around the doll. Maggie bent over and reached for a cup.

Hazel pushed her sister's hand aside. "Don't."

"I hewp?"

"No. Let me do it."

"Kay." Maggie picked up her doll, the one Daddy ordered from the Montgomery Ward catalog for her last birthday, and wrapped her arms around it. She rocked side to side, making her pink muslin skirt sway. "We pway again tomorrow, Hayzoo Mae?"

Not with the tea set. Not ever with the tea set. "We'll see."

She lifted the crate and carried it inside, Maggie trailing her. She ordered her sister to the kitchen, then trotted upstairs and tucked the crate in her closet, way back in the dark corner where Maggie was afraid to go. With the tea set safe, she clattered down the enclosed staircase to the kitchen.

Mama was waiting with the egg basket. She smiled as she gave it to Hazel. "Go to the blackberry thicket and pick as many ripe berries as the basket will hold. Don't dally now. I want to bake a cobbler for our supper."

Hazel's mouth watered. A cobbler used lots of sugar. It was a treat. Especially blackberry cobbler since Mama usually turned the dark berries into jam. "Is company comin'?" She hoped not. If they had to share the cobbler, they'd get only one small portion each.

Mama's eyebrows rose. "Don't you remember? It's Daddy's birthday."

She ducked her head. She had forgotten. She'd need to hurry so there'd be time to draw Daddy a card to give him at suppertime. She looped the basket over her arm and headed for the door.

"Take your sister with you."

Hazel spun around. "Oh, Mama, please don't make me. She'll slow me down."

Mama's lips set in a stern frown. "I have things to do, too, and I need her out from underfoot. Take her." She pushed both girls out the back door. "Hurry now."

How could she hurry with Maggie along? Her sister's short legs would wear out halfway to the patch. But arguing would waste time, and she could almost taste that blackberry cobbler already. So she ordered Maggie to tuck the ever-present doll under one arm, grabbed her sister's free hand, and took off at a brisk pace, giving little jerks now and then to keep Maggie going.

A wagon rattled up the road from the west, and a big shiny touring car came from the east. The girls clambered onto the rough edge where the ground sloped sharply upward. Hazel kept her arm around Maggie, tapping her toe impatiently at the delay. The wagon went on by, but the car slowed to a stop, and Mrs. Burton, the lady who ran the orphans' home on the west side of town, stuck her head out the open window.

"Good morning, girls." She pinned her warm smile on Maggie. The little girl always earned a smile from folks—she was so little, as pretty as a china doll, so likable. And Hazel couldn't decide if that made her proud or jealous.

"Morning," Hazel said.

"Mo'ning," Maggie echoed.

"Where are you two off to with that basket?"

Hazel wished she'd hurry on. They needed to get to the thicket. "Gonna pick blackberries. Mama's makin' a cobbler."

The woman sighed. "I'm sorry I can't give you a ride. Thicket's in the wrong direction for me. But you two have fun. Don't stick your fingers, you hear?" She gave a little wave and then the car growled on.

Hazel led Maggie to the center of the road again, where wheels had carved two smooth ruts. She squinted ahead, thinking. About a half mile up the road, a path carved by deer led directly to the blackberry brambles, but there was a shorter route. It was rougher and harder to get through, but the quicker she picked the berries, the quicker she could go home and get started on her card for Daddy. She wanted to spend lots of time on it and make it extra nice so he wouldn't know she'd forgotten his special day.

"C'mon, Maggie. This way."

Her little sister beamed up at her, her face all sweaty and curls drooping.

She looked so cute, Hazel caught herself smiling back. They left the dirt road and climbed a slight rise, ducking beneath low-hanging tree branches and pushing between bushes. Maggie panted, her little face red, but she didn't complain, even when branches pulled her hair ribbon askew.

"We're almost there." Hazel lifted a snarl of branches and gestured Maggie through the opening. Hugging her doll against her chest, Maggie squeezed past Hazel. Hazel moved behind her and let the branches slap back into place. Without warning, Maggie stopped.

Hazel sidestepped to keep from trampling her sister. "What're you doing?"

Maggie pointed silently to a chunk of displaced earth. Her face puckered with questions.

Even though they needed to hurry, Hazel couldn't resist crouching down and lifting the piece of ground held together by grass roots. Underneath, in a smooth hollowed spot, four little bunnies curled together in a ball. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Lookee, Maggie—baby rabbits."

Maggie's face lit, and Hazel sensed a squeal coming on.

"Shhh." She touched a finger to her own lips and shook her head. "Don't scare 'em. Let 'em sleep."

Wonder in her blue eyes, Maggie knelt next to Hazel. "I pet 'em?"

"Nope."

"I wanna pet 'em, Hayzoo Mae."

Hazel gave Maggie the explanation Daddy had given her the first time she found a bunny burrow. "If you touch 'em, the mama won't come back. They'll die without their mama. You don't want the bunnies to die, do you?"

Her little sister shook her head so hard her sweaty curls bounced.

"Then we gotta leave 'em alone." She lowered the chunk of earth over the baby bunnies and rose. "C'mon." She grabbed Maggie's hand and moved on.

Maggie trotted alongside, stumbling now and then because she kept her face angled toward the spot where the rabbits slept. At the blackberry thicket, Hazel settled Maggie in a patch of shade with her doll and shook her finger

at her. "You stay put." While her sister played with her doll, contentedly jabbering, Hazel picked berries as fast as she could. Her fingertips turned purple and she got stuck more times than she could count, but she ignored the pricks and kept picking, glancing into the basket now and then to judge her progress.

The basket was a little over half full when Maggie's happy chatter changed to a shriek. Hazel jerked, the basket rocking on her arm. She sucked in a breath and turned to scold, but the words died on her lips when she spotted a black snake, nearly five feet long, slithering through the grass only a few feet from where Maggie was sitting.

Hazel dropped the basket and leaped in front of her sister. The snake changed course, but now it headed in the direction of the rabbit burrow. She couldn't let that awful snake eat the bunnies for lunch! She pushed Maggie closer to the bushes where blackberries from the basket dotted the thick grass. "Start puttin' the berries back in the basket. I'll be right back." She snatched up a dead tree branch and darted after the snake, whacking the ground as she went.

The snake eased one way and then another, but it persisted in moving toward the burrow. Hazel skirted slightly ahead of it and waved the branch. It paused for a moment, its tongue flicking in and out and its bright eyes seeming to stare directly at her. She smacked the grass hard. "Get outta here, you dumb snake! You go on!"

The snake lowered its head and slithered away from her. She chased after it, yelling and swatting, until she was certain she'd frightened it into the woods. She swiped her brow and blew out a breath of relief. The bunnies were safe. She tossed the stick aside and hurried back to the thicket. Triumphant, she burst through the bushes.

"I did it, Maggie! I scared it off!" She stopped short. Maggie's doll lay in the grass near the overturned basket, but her sister wasn't there. She sent a frowning look right and left. "Maggie?"

Hazel inched forward, searching the area with her gaze. Squashed berries littered the area, proof that her sister had trampled through them. Had Maggie decided to play hide-and-seek? She singsonged, “Ma-a-aggie, where a-a-are you?” She listened for a telltale giggle. Only the whisper of wind replied. She didn’t have time for games. She balled her hands on her hips. “Margaret Rose Blackwell, I’m not playin’. You better come out right now if you know what’s good for you!”

A pair of bluebirds swooped from a scraggly oak, but Maggie didn’t step out from the bushes. A chill wiggled down Hazel’s spine despite the heat making her flesh sticky. “C’mon, Maggie, this isn’t funny.” She turned a slow circle, repeatedly calling her sister’s name. Maggie still didn’t answer. The stillness unnerved her. No squirrels chattering, no birds singing, not even a rabbit nibbling at the tender grass under the trees.

Worry churning in her gut, she searched the thicket. Then the surrounding area. Her heart gave a leap when she found Maggie’s limp hair ribbon caught on a shoulder-high tree branch. She jerked it free and stared at it. Maggie had gone at least a hundred feet from the thicket. How had she wandered so far in such a short time?

Hazel shoved the ribbon into her pocket and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Maggie, wherever you are, you better stop right now an’ let me catch up or you’re gonna be in big trouble!” She waited several seconds, waiting, listening. More silence.

She hugged herself, battling tears. Why didn’t Maggie answer? Maybe she’d curled up somewhere, like a bunny, and fallen asleep. She began hunting again, moving slow, peeking into bushes and under the thick branches of pine trees.

Minutes slipped by with no sign of her sister, and Hazel’s fear grew so intense a bitter taste flooded her mouth. She broke into a run. She zigzagged through the woods, forming a rough circle around the blackberry bramble, always calling. Sometimes she cajoled, sometimes she threatened. Sometimes

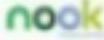
she choked back sobs and other times angry growls. She searched and called until her throat was too dry to make a sound and her leg muscles quivered.

She stopped, leaning forward and resting her hands on her knees. Her breath heaved. Her chest ached. Sweat dribbled down her face and mixed with her tears. Daddy and Mama would be so disappointed in her for losing Maggie in the woods, but she'd have to face them. She needed help. Sucking in a big breath, she gathered her bearings and then took off toward home.

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