

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

POPPY'S STORY



KRISTINA
MCMORRIS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

POPPY'S STORY

**KRISTINA
McMORRIS**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2023 by Villa Press, Inc.
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle
www.apub.com

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Amazon Original Stories are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781662512889 (digital)

Published in coordination with Plympton

Cover design by Shasti O'Leary Soudant
Cover image: ©Sarah Jarrett / ArcAngel; ©Scott Richardson / Shutterstock; ©Ortis / Shutterstock; ©Rich Black Illustration / Shutterstock; ©arigato / Shutterstock

*For all the extraordinary teachers,
who do so much more than teach*

Dear Reader,

Several months ago, at dinner with a group of my closest friends, I shared that I'd been invited to create a short story for a Mother's Day series, and since they're all moms themselves, I half-jokingly pressed them for "an absolutely brilliant idea" for me to write. That's when one of them wisely asked if there was a minor character in a novel of mine whom I loved and wished I could have explored further.

The answer came to me instantly: Poppy.

In *The Ways We Hide*, based on stunning true accounts, Fenna Vos is an illusionist whose unique skills lead to her recruitment by MI9, a highly classified section of British intelligence—or what I call the "go-go-gadget" team of WWII—to design escape-and-evade devices to thwart the Germans. But long before the war, during a traumatic period of her childhood, she found a much-needed friend in a child named Poppy, a snip of a girl with infectious energy and a tender heart.

Although Poppy appeared in the novel but briefly, her impact on Fenna's life was tremendous, as can often be the case with people who pass through our lives for even a short time. Later in adulthood, Fenna wonders about her long-lost friend and where the journey of life took her. Well, I'm delighted to say *Poppy's Story* is the answer to that question and was an utter joy to write.

Though set in 1962, her tale has no shortage of parallels to our current world, which at times can feel chaotic and overwhelming. But just as universal is the importance of strength found in hope, friendship, and the stories of our lives.

Happy reading and warm wishes,
Kristina McMorris

October 24, 1962

Brownsboro, Virginia

The air-raid siren wailed through the classroom, sending children scurrying like mice outrunning a broom. After more than a dozen years of teaching, Poppy Turner could guide her students in a disaster drill with no less ease than leading them in the daily Pledge of Allegiance.

This time, however, the alert quickened her pulse.

“That’s right, children. Duck and cover, precisely as you’ve all been trained.” She projected an assured tone while waving her second graders into position: each to kneel beneath their wooden desk, forehead pressed into one arm on the seat, free hand braced over the back of the neck. “It’s only practice, now. Nothing unusual.”

The last bit defied reality, of course. Nothing had been usual since President Kennedy’s grim television broadcast just two nights prior, when he revealed the discovery of Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba. With the push of a button, nuclear warheads could very well rain down across America.

Once more, Poppy fought off a shiver at the thought of the grade school’s location, in a suburban town a short bus ride from the heart of Washington, DC—a primary target. But then, which US city *would* be safe, with Cuba a mere ninety miles from Florida’s coast?

“Mrs. Turner . . .” The small, strained voice reached through the drone of the siren, underscored by a tug to Poppy’s belted dress. Framed by blonde braids, the girl’s face angled upward from her chair with a look of fear that drew Poppy to squat at her level.

“Yes, Claudia?”

“Will our desks really keep us safe? From all the bombs.” Her eyes, dark and doe-like—similar to Poppy’s—shone with desperation.

“Without a doubt.” Poppy smiled with confidence to further sell the fib; for that’s all it was. A clear distinction separated a fib and a lie, the intent of the former being to protect others from harm. Poppy was well versed in the difference, for reasons beyond the classroom.

Claudia nodded tightly and placed her head back between the vice of her arms.

Over the siren, Poppy called out to the rest, who were all in position, “Very good, everyone! It won’t be long now.” Till the end of the drill, she meant, though maybe as likely the world.

She was about to take cover under her desk, up at the front, per protocol, but given the shaking of Claudia’s slight frame, she instead knelt, embraced the girl, and hoped the tremble in her own limbs went undetected.

“Shhh,” she soothed. From this simple offering, one she’d often yearned for in her loneliest moments of childhood, she felt Claudia’s quaking lessen.

At last the siren stopped.

The quiet of the classroom was never more welcome to Poppy’s ears. She released a breath.

“Recess!” one of the boys yelled.

It took a moment for Poppy’s gaze to find the wall clock. “Uh, yes. Time to get your coats on!” Like bees to a hive, kids flew past the blackboard and swarmed the coat closet, abuzz with excitement. Or relief. Perhaps both.

Claudia scuttled off to join them, but not before tendering Poppy a grateful look. Then Poppy too climbed to her feet. She bent to swipe the dust from her stockings, and a small wave of nausea rolled through her. A stark reminder.

The students hurried into the hall, funneling toward the nearby door that emptied onto the playground.

Poppy held the corner of a desk and inhaled. Exhaled.

It was Wednesday, she recalled. Her day to supervise the second and third graders at morning recess. She’d enjoy the task if not for her woozy state, thankfully sure to pass with a little food. Until then, at least the distraction could ward off an assailing thought: this was no time at all to be pregnant.

A crisp autumn breeze set loose strands of Poppy’s black shoulder-length hair, bound hastily by a headscarf, as she registered the disadvantage looming above. The overcast sky might well cloak any warning of a Russian attack.

Bundled in her coat at the edge of the playground, she ate another cracker from her pocket and maintained deep, if subtle, breaths. The queasiness was just subsiding when one of her students dashed her way, gripping his elbow. Poppy willed herself to straighten. “A fall off the

teeter-totter?” She kindly omitted *yet again*.

Benny nodded, his freckled face pinched.

She checked his arm. “Can you move it up and down?” He did. “Side to side?” The same, without trouble. “Well, it appears you’ll be tip-top in no time.”

“But, Mrs. Turner,” he whimpered, “this is the arm I *write* with.”

She battled back a smile. “Fortunately, we won’t need to amputate anytime soon.” A glance past him supplied a diversion. “How about you help your little brother on the swings? Looks like he could use the remarkable strength of your one good arm.”

Ever eager to display his usefulness, Benny acquiesced with a nod and shuffled away. By the time he reached his brother, the injury appeared all but forgotten.

“Heavens to Betsy, my boy is nothing if not dramatic.”

Tinged with a Virginia accent, the approaching voice drew Poppy’s focus to Marjorie Vlastelicia, better known as Mrs. V. Bonus points were always offered on her fifth graders’ spelling tests for writing her name correctly—save for both her daughters years earlier, given their unfair advantage.

“For the record, he inherited the theatrics from his father’s side.” She flitted her hand toward the older of her two sons.

“Obviously.”

A glint flashed in Marjorie’s hazel eyes. Despite her somewhat edgy exterior, reinforced by an updo as taut as her features, her affection for her family went without saying. In her late thirties like Poppy, she was the first teacher Poppy had befriended at this school. The gal had since become her trusted confidante—for most things.

“My students are off in music class, screeching on their recorders.” Marjorie exaggerated a wince. “I can take this shift for you.”

It was a generous offer, and particularly tempting today, yet Poppy couldn’t risk raising suspicions. “Thanks a million, but I’m fine.”

“Oh, go on, take a load off.”

“Honestly, I don’t mind. The fresh air is nice.”

“True. Though resting would be better”—Marjorie finished in a murmur—“considering your condition.”

Poppy’s eyes snapped toward her friend, a reflex she swiftly padded with casualness. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Marjorie arched a brow, accentuating a confession-inducing gaze honed from years of teaching, further mastered from mothering teenage daughters. A CIA agent couldn’t be more skilled.

As if on cue, happy shrieks intervened. Poppy redirected her attention to the playground, clinging to the slimmest chance that Marjorie would be deterred. A fruitless hope.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come clean—with great restraint, I might add. But seeing as you’re being stubborn, shall we start with . . . your brief bouts of looking out of sorts? Or how you’ve become averse to the scent of coffee in the teachers’ lounge? To be fair, it was never all that pleasant anyhow. But now, you’ve even gained a seemingly inadvertent habit of touching your stomach.”

With a downward glimpse, Poppy discovered her hand doing just that. She pulled it to her side, stiff and straight as a yardstick. Sensing the heat of a telling flush scaling her neck, she lowered her chin and worried just how many folks were aware.

Quietly, she dared ask, “Has it been that noticeable?”

“To others? Not likely. Remember, I have a herd of four; I’ve developed a built-in radar.” Marjorie’s lips slid into a grin. “Gracious, your darling Everett must be over the moon. How long—” She broke off. “One sec.” Glancing away, she hollered at Kyle Severson, a softhearted rascal, about taking turns on the monkey bars, allowing Poppy to gather her bearings. The rumored fact that she and Everett had been patiently trying for years to start a family had largely kept inquiries on the topic at bay, including through countless pinochle nights with Marjorie and her husband, both long privy to a doctor’s promise to Poppy that it was just a matter of time.

When Marjorie turned back, Poppy pleaded in an undertone, “Please don’t say anything, to anyone.”

Marjorie’s levity transformed into confusion for only a moment. Then she flicked her chin toward the school. “You know, for all Mr. Ritter’s quirks, he really is a rare gem about these things.”

The principal, unlike many, had an established record of permitting pregnant teachers to maintain employment, at least until the last month or two.

“Oh, I know. It’s . . . not him. I just haven’t . . .”

As Poppy fumbled to explain, Marjorie came to a realization. “You’ve not told Everett.”

Albeit after a pause, Poppy confirmed with a shake of her head, quick to add, “I’ll be telling him. Soon. The few times we’d suspected it happened, he was just so delighted I’ve been cautious of raising his hopes.” While only half the story, the reason was genuine. Still, Marjorie’s look of compassion swelled Poppy’s accumulating shame.

“Of course.” Marjorie nodded before tentatively asking, “How far along?”

A history of irregular monthly cycles, paired with wariness of the truth, had delayed Poppy from seeking confirmation until just two weeks ago. “So far as the doctor could tell . . . a little over four months.”

“Four months? Gee, that’s marvelous!”

Poppy brought a discreet finger to her lips. They were surrounded by little bodies with big ears.

Though beaming, Marjorie reined in her volume. “Well, trust me, if you think Everett will be tickled, wait until you tell your class. Their squeals will be earsplitting.” She gripped Poppy’s sleeve. “And be prepared: their questions will be endless, lasting all the way to the delivery. Which, incidentally, they’ll ask relentlessly to be present for.”

“I appreciate the warnings.” Poppy tacked on a small laugh, though in the beat that followed, Marjorie studied her as if puzzling over her class’s papier-mâché projects.

Marjorie leaned in with a conspiratorial voice. “Rest assured, if you’re fretting about your age, you most certainly shouldn’t. You’re already past the first trimester. And anyway, scores of women are having children far older than you these days. It’s becoming all the rage.” She winked, and Poppy managed a smile.

There was accuracy in the assurance but merely to an extent; most of those women were on their third or fourth, even sixth, child by then. Not their first.

And yet, more concerning than that was how the doctor’s proclamation—“the grandest of news”—had triggered within Poppy an undeniable surge of dread.

What woman wouldn’t feel joy at the news of becoming a mother?

Aside from herself, she could think of only one.

Poppy was three, from what she’d been told, when she was found in the alley beside an orphanage. Four years later, at the weekly Saturday showcase run by the orphanage director—when the Great Depression caused an influx of abandoned children—Poppy had been washed and shined up for couples to peruse as if choosing the perfect kitten from a litter of a hundred.

A brief smile her way had too often spiked her hopes, only for the couple to vanish, more enticed by the infant floor upstairs. So that by the time Mama and Father—as she would come to call them—knelt before her