

The Amazing Maven

By

Mariella Starr

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Chapter One

July 1938, Carnival Grounds of Downer's Grove on the outskirts of Naperville, Illinois

Professor Maven Brookwood spent the better part of the early morning setting up her vendor booth. She unpacked crates of books and hung her pitch sign that stated clearly:

Professor Maven Brookwood — The Divining Rod of Knowledge!
Challenge the Amazing Knowledge of Professor Brookwood
The woman with the Encyclopedic Memory
[\$1.00 Paid to Anyone Who Can Successfully Challenge the Mind of the Professor]

She caught the attention of many a man on the fairground but paid them scant attention. Most vendors on the traveling circuit were men who considered a statuesque blonde woman, with a slim, well-built figure, worth a whistle. That was before they realized she was not interested in them personally. She was competing for their sales.

Maven Brookwood was a woman with a job to do. Times were tough, and much of the country still had not recovered from the stock market crash of '29 nearly a decade earlier. She had found a way to beat the system stacked against her for being smart and a woman. Maven had discovered how to use her photographic memory to her advantage.

She had been dismissed from three jobs in less than two years. The first time it happened, she had felt betrayed and rightfully so. Nevertheless, she had put it behind her. The second time made her angry. The third time she was just plain pissed off! She set out to prove that whatever she did, she would do it better than most men!

Maven was weary of constantly being told she should find herself a good man, get married, and have babies. She was tired of being told she had to relinquish her job because too many men were out of work, and all available jobs were for men who had to support families. She responded to such statements by asking, "What about women who needed to support themselves? Why should a woman have to attach herself to a man for support? Men were having trouble finding work, too."

She was not like most women, and she never would be. Most of Maven's employers disliked being challenged by a woman. It mattered little to them that she was more qualified and often a hell of a lot smarter than the men who replaced her. The reason for her chronic unemployment was always the same—she did not wear pants.

Well, now, she did wear pants—pants, trousers, slacks, or knickers. Whatever label they carried, she had them and wore them every day. Maven styled herself after Katherine Hepburn and Marlena Dietrich, wearing what the *National Bellas Hess Catalog* called 'mannish-styled suit jackets with padded shoulders and wide-legged sailor pants.' If people were shocked, so be it. It was 1938, people! Get over it! Women did not have vague limbs or appendages; they had legs!

Her current job was hustling encyclopedias. Maven Brookwood was one of the top salespeople for the *Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Encyclopedia*, especially the *Funk & Wagnalls Condensed Edition*. She was making a decent living and considered her Jenson-Ford Woodie her home. After a while, hotel rooms blended into a monotonous sameness, as did the

towns and events. Even so, Maven was happy traveling around the Midwest and selling her books to the public, as long as her sales were good.

Someday, she might want a home to call her own. She was saving for it and had a sizeable nest egg that would surprise most people. Sometime in the future, she might have the courage to try for a happy-ever-after ending. Meanwhile, she was not looking for it and, truthfully, did not expect to find it. She was doing okay on her own and liked it that way. She made a good living while doing as she pleased. Eventually, she might decide to take a job not requiring travel, but not today.

Maven was a great saleswoman who knew how to catch the attention of a crowd. If it required a little flirting, she could handle it. If her trousers shocked the local women, so what? They excited the men, and the men controlled the money in most households. Maven had her limits of how far she would go, but an occasional smile and wink hurt no one.

She never stayed in any town or city longer than a week. Her needs were simple: enough money for three square meals a day, decent clothes, and an occasional trip to the horse track. At the track, she used her skills in mathematical statistics and, without fail, increased her growing bank account.

Maven was an unusual woman for her time, and she knew it. She was unbothered about pushing the limits of what was considered normal and acceptable. Why not? What she did was no one's business except hers. Women had won the right to vote two decades earlier. Maven was an emancipated woman, free to do as she pleased, and accountable only to herself.

Her father had been a college professor who ultimately climbed to the position of president of Tufts College in Medford, Massachusetts. Her mother had been a high school teacher. In the midst of such scholastic achievements, they were not unduly surprised when their only child, Maven, excelled at academics. After her mother had died when Maven was ten, her father had become obsessed with his daughter exceeding all expectations for a girl her age. When she had transformed from a cute, bookish little girl into a beautiful young woman, he had kept her away from boys, demanding she downplay her looks and focus on her studies.

Maven was by nature a kind woman, which showed in her pale and sometimes sympathetic blue eyes. She treated most people with respect and had a soft spot for strays and the homeless. She liked men, although she distrusted most of them. She turned a jaundiced eye toward most of their advances. Besides, even if she was interested, her current work typically had her moving on before a chance meeting could blossom into anything deeper. In general, Maven considered most men trouble or likely to evolve into trouble. She enjoyed having no strings attached and no responsibilities except to herself and her company sales.

The early morning sounds of the carnival were growing hectic and loud. Soon it would be time to start hawking her books. Jangling the change in her pocket, Maven decided to walk to the Methodist food stand to buy breakfast. She liked to begin her day with a good meal. She pulled together her booth flaps and nodded to the pretty woman displaying homemade crocheted pillows and shawls next to her booth. Maven was pleased, the craft display would draw in women, and women were always concerned about their children's schooling.

With a light touch, Maven placed the tip of a fingernail on her chin, tapping her chin twice before snapping her fingers and approaching the woman at the next booth.

"Professor Maven Brookwood, madam," she greeted. "I'm going to the church food tent for a bite of breakfast. If you would be so kind as to watch over my merchandise, I would be more than happy to watch yours while you go for breakfast or, if you wish, I could bring back something for you."

The woman read the sign in front of Maven's booth and smiled. "The Divining Rod of Knowledge?"

"At your service, ma'am," Maven exclaimed with a friendly smile.

The woman grinned as her eyes flicked over the young woman in front of her. "Professor Brookwood, I will watch your booth, but we brought any food we need from home. You should join us later for a slice of apple pie."

"I would be forever grateful. Traveling as I do, I miss baking, Miss—" Maven prompted the woman. She knew how to work people.

"It's Mrs.," the woman replied. "It's nice to meet you, Professor. I'm Mrs. Sally Harris. Are you traveling with your husband?"

"No, I lost him a few years back," Maven, said moving forward and shaking the woman's hand.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," responded Mrs. Harris. "You are young to be a widow!"

Maven did not bother correcting the woman, letting her make the wrong assumption. It was of no consequence. After the carnival moved on, she would never see Sally Harris again. "Well, I had better be off if I want time to eat. Thank you for your assistance. Sometimes it's difficult without help."

Thirty minutes later, Maven wove her way back through the swelling crowd. She waved at Mrs. Harris next door before carelessly tossing her male-styled Fedora hat onto a pile of books. The fedora had a sassy dip to the brim, and was embellished with small lavender flowers attached to the hatband. She flipped back the booth flaps and finished unloading a box of books onto a table. She checked her pockets for small bills, counting out several ones and fives along with a ten-dollar bill for customer change, which she placed in her cash box that stayed with her at all times. She was unable to keep track of much beyond the displays, invoices, and making change while talking to customers at the same time.

Maven reviewed her display table and noticed a skinny little boy reading her sign. He was a dirty, unkempt child who was mouthing each word as he read.

"Hey, lady, what's an En-sik-o-pedia?" the boy asked.

"Run along, kid," Maven said, dismissing the little boy with a wave of her hand.

The boy stood his ground.

"Well?" he demanded, pushing his long dirty blond hair out of his eyes. "Ain't you gonna tell me?"

"Hey, kid," yelled Maven, taking a book out of the boy's dirty hands. "Don't touch!"

"I ain't hurtin it!" the boy snarled.

"Customers will not buy dirty books," Maven replied. "Go home, kid. Go tell your momma you need washing!"

The boy looked down at his hands, inspecting them. When he saw the grime, he shifted his hands to his back pockets.

"Why won't you tell me?" he demanded.

Maven leaned down to look at the boy. "How old are you?"

"Old enough," the boy hedged, looking away.

"Nine or ten?" Maven guessed.

"I ain't either," the boy bristled. "I'm almost twelve!"

"Okay. If you're almost twelve, by now you should be familiar with an encyclopedia," Maven insisted. "Don't you have an encyclopedia in your school library?"

“I ain’t heard of it if they do,” the boy declared. “We ain’t got no library in my school. What is a de-vening rod of coolege?”

Maven gave in to the boy’s persistence. “This,” she held up a book in her hand, “is the *Funk & Wagnalls Condensed Encyclopedia*. In it are most of the facts and figures about the world, as we know it. I have read this book and many more. I remember everything I read, which is what makes me The Divining Rod of Knowledge.”

“You can remember the whole book?” the boy asked.

“Yes, and a great many more. Now get lost, kid. Question time is over!”

The boy moved back a little way, looking at the sign and reading it once more. “Are you really gonna give someone a whole dollar if they can ask you a question and you don’t know the answer?”

“That’s what the sign says,” Maven growled. “Now, go away. You smell, and you are scaring away the customers.” She stepped up onto a bench and began her pitch to the crowd.

“Here ye! Here ye! I am Professor Maven Brookwood, The Divining Rod of Knowledge, The Woman Who Reads Everything, The Woman Who Remembers Everything. Now, you ask yourself, what is a Divining Rod of Knowledge? Well, I am The Divining Rod of Knowledge. If I read it, I remember it. Ask me any question, and I will give you the right answer. I have an answer to everything you wish to know. If I can’t give you an answer, you will be richer by one dollar. If I can give you the right answer, it will cost you nothing except the time to listen and learn how you too can become the owner of an immeasurable fountain of information!”

Maven held the *Funk & Wagnalls Condensed Encyclopedia* in her hand and waved it at the crowd. “Ask away, folks. Who has a question?”

An old man in overalls stepped forward. “What makes a cow give milk?”

“Aw,” Professor Brookwood brought her fingernail to her chin, tapped it, and snapped her fingers. “The cow. They are a prominent modern member of the subfamily Bovinae. They are the most widespread species of the genus, *Bos*, and are most commonly classified collectively as *Bos Taurus*. To produce milk, a cow must first give birth. Cows produce the greatest amount of milk immediately after they give birth. The hormones released at birth and the suckling of the calf stimulates the cow to lactate or produce milk for her calf. Continued stimulation of the udders keeps the production of milk flowing.

“The food cows eat provides them with protein, energy, vitamins, minerals, and bulk. This is also the raw material used to produce milk. Cows have four compartments to their stomachs. Food goes into the first chamber of its four-part stomach, named the rumen. The food is broken down and processed in the rumen before it goes into the next chamber, called the reticulum. It passes through the final two chambers, the abomasum, and omasum, where bacteria and stomach acids finish the process. If you, the consumer, keep milking a cow, she will continue to provide a supply. If you don’t milk her, she will go dry. If that is not enough of a clinical explanation, I can continue, but I would not want to ruin your taste for the subject at hand.”

The crowd laughed, but they were impressed.

“She knows more about cows than I do, and I’ve been milking my ol’ Bess for fourteen years,” the farmer exclaimed.

The crowd laughed again.

“What makes hydrangeas change colors?” called out a woman.

Professor Brookwood brought her finger to her chin and repeated her habitual gesture of tapping and snapping. “The *macrophylla* and *serrata* cultivars or the *quercifolia*? I assure you, madam, it does not matter. The color is largely dependent on the availability of the element

aluminum in the soil. If the soil is acidic, the flowers will be blue. If not, and the soil contains more alkaline, they will be pink. White hydrangeas rarely change color until they age when they turn shades of green. Will that suffice as an answer, madam?"

The crowd was duly impressed.

The dirty little boy had been carefully watching and listening.

"What does God look like?" he asked loudly.

"What's that?" Maven exclaimed as the crowd frowned at the boy's question.

"I said, what does God look like," the kid repeated.

"No one knows what God looks like," answered Maven, annoyed at the boy for interrupting her pitch, yet smiling at her audience.

"Gimme my dollar," the boy demanded, grinning widely.

"It's an impossible question to answer," Maven claimed.

"The sign don't say nothing about impossible questions," the boy persisted. "The sign says if you don't answer right, I get a dollar."

Maven opened her mouth to protest until she noticed the nodding of heads and whispering, and she could see the crowd was siding with the little boy. She did not want to antagonize the crowd.

"Okay," agreed Maven, smiling through gritted teeth. "Here's your dollar. Run along."

The boy took the silver dollar, bit it, and inspected it before putting it in his trouser pocket. He did not go away.

Maven answered a question on lightning from the crowd and then winced when she heard the high, squeaky voice ask, "How many times does a butterfly flap its wings in a minute?"

The crowd and Maven both turned toward the little boy, who stood grinning expectantly. The crowd turned back to Maven.

"A butterfly's flight is a combination of wing movement and gliding. It is statistically impossible to determine or predict what a butterfly would do during any particular portion of its flight. Therefore, by deductive reasoning, it is impossible to know how many times a butterfly would flap its wings."

"You don't know," challenged the boy.

"Do you?" Maven demanded.

"I don't have to," the boy fired back.

The crowd laughed, and Maven gave the boy a look that should have scared him to death. It did not faze him, and he simply held out his hand. She slapped another silver dollar into it.

"How far is up?" the kid demanded quickly.

"Look, kid, another peep out of you—" Maven had no time to finish her threat.

"She's a fake," someone yelled from the crowd.

"Yeah, either answer or pay him!" someone else shouted.

Maven pulled a third silver dollar out of her pocket, and before she had a chance to hand it over, the kid snatched it and ran.

"Well, folks, he stumped me," Maven exclaimed with a smile and a wave to the crowd. "I still maintain I can answer any question on any subject identified and written about in the *Funk & Wagnalls Condensed* or the *Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Encyclopedia*."

She answered another question when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a policeman wandering through the crowd. She glanced back to where the boy had been standing and put the puzzle together quite easily.

Despite her mangled pitch, Maven sold a fair amount of books. With a pen, she modified her sign to read: One dollar to anyone who can ask a question about material found in the *Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia*.

“The kid cost you a bundle this morning,” Sally Harris observed, entering Maven’s tent with a covered pie plate.

“Once in a while, I run into someone who queers my pitch. It happens.”

“I was wondering if you could return the favor now and watch my booth for a little while?” Sally asked. “I told my husband I would pick up some brochures on new tractors, not that we can afford one.”

“Sure, no problem,” Maven agreed. “Thanks for the pie.” She set the pie on a table behind her and dropped the two side panels of her tent. Her front tables would be visible from Sally’s booth. She took her payment journal with her to make invoice entries.

“I heard you had some trouble this morning?”

Maven turned around and faced Sam Daniels. He was a new man on the summer show circuit, and he had been in nearly every town or venue where she was booked for the last several months. “What are you doing here? I have never known of anyone buying a car from a carnival ground.”

“Before I met you, I wouldn’t have believed encyclopedias would sell at a carnival, but you do it. Our next stop is the Kingston Auto Show in Peoria. We had a little dead time between shows, so we thought we could hand out brochures here. If we receive credit for even one car sale, it’s worth the effort.”

“I’m booked at Kingston, too.”

“Following me?” Sam teased. “Good, maybe we can get together, tonight if you are available?” Sam suggested easily.

“I’ll be dead on my feet tonight,” Maven warned.

“That’s the wrong answer, babe. You can’t avoid the inevitable forever,” he claimed. “We have been down this road before. Even though you pretend otherwise, it doesn’t change the facts.”

“You are the definition of delusional,” Maven snapped back, feeling Sam’s eyes examining her. When he looked at her, she always felt as if he could see through her clothing. The problem was, it only raised her interest in him.

“You are a pretty little girl in denial,” Sam declared, stepping into her space and putting his hand casually on her bottom. She retreated a step back, not in fear, but in annoyance. He dropped his mouth close to her ear. “I like the feel of my hands on you, my fingers playing with your bits and pieces.”

She caught her breath at his words, and he smiled. “It’s worth the wait, and I’m a patient man, to a point. Right now, I have to go.”

Maven watched Sam Daniels stroll off with a cocky smile. He set her on edge. Sure, he was good-looking. There was nothing not to like. He was more than six feet tall, well-developed, and handsome as all get out. He also had an ego the size of Mt. Everest.

Sam knew he drew women like bees to pollen and he had been buzzing around her for weeks. Why he kept trying was a mystery as Maven consistently kept shutting him down. She had gone out with him once, thinking to show him how tough she was by trying to outdrink him. She realized too late, how her strategy was a big mistake. She had awakened in his motel bed, naked, with slightly fuzzy memories of a night of almost endless sex. He had been flirting and coming on to her ever since.

“Now there goes a fellow who is easy on the eyes,” Sally Harris observed, returning to her booth.

“He knows it, too,” Maven grumbled, while she admired Sam’s backside as he walked away.

She returned to her tent, reopened the side panels, and uncovered the pie tin in anticipation. It was empty. Maven looked at the pan and frowned. Sally had not seemed to be the type of woman who would pull a trick like this. She looked wistfully at the empty pie tin because apple was her favorite.

Professor Brookwood’s pitch played out uncontested for the rest of the day. Maven had booked into the carnival for three days, and when the carnival moved on, so would she, in a different direction. She was closing for the night when she heard shouts and yelps of pain coming from behind her tent. Running around to the back, she saw two older boys holding a smaller boy on the ground, punching, and kicking him.

“Hey!” Maven shouted.

Suddenly Sam was running toward the boys.

One of the boys shouted, “I’ve got it!” as he kicked the smaller boy once more. The teenage boys ran away with Sam on their heels.

When Maven reached the little boy, he was getting to his feet unsteadily, and his nose was bleeding.

“Come on, kid,” Maven exclaimed, pulling the boy around to the front of her tent and seating him on a crate. She dunked a dusting cloth into a bucket of water and held it to the youngster’s nose.

“Aw, leave me alone, lady,” the boy protested.

“They got away,” announced Sam, his chest heaving as he came into the tent and squatted in front of the boy. “Is he hurt?”

“Only a bloody nose, as far as I can tell!” Maven replied, holding the boy’s head down and pinching his nose together on the bridge.

“What the hell were you doing trying to break up a fight?” Sam demanded angrily. “They could have attacked you!”

“They didn’t,” Maven answered calmly, surprised at Sam’s concern.

When the nosebleed stopped spurting, she removed the cloth. It was then she realized the little boy was the same one who had fouled her pitch earlier. She glared angrily at her young nemesis and then grimaced at the boy’s face. Between dirt, snot, and blood, he was a nasty little fellow. She dipped the cloth in the water bucket again and forcibly washed the boy’s face.

“What’s the matter with you, lady?” the boy yelled, fighting her. Sam had a grip on the boy’s arms and held him in place when he made a swipe at Maven.

“Hey, none of that!” Sam snapped.

“I wanted to see what you looked like under all the filth,” Maven told the youngster.

“What’s it to you?” the boy snarled.

“Well,” Maven answered. “I figure sooner or later someone will ask me if I’ve seen a runaway boy, short and skinny.” She scrutinized the boy and finished her description. “A very dirty boy, all hair, and attitude. I want to be able to identify you properly when I tell them I have seen you.”

“I ain’t a runaway,” the boy denied.

“Well, if you ain’t a runaway,” Maven quoted back to him. “Why don’t you go home where you can brag to your family how you beat The Divining Rod of Knowledge?”

“Are you mad ‘cause I took your three dollars?” the boy demanded.

Maven shook her head. “No. I learned a valuable lesson from you today. Be clear and precise, or someone will beat you at your own game. Why did you keep at it when you knew it was making me angry?”

“I needed the money,” the boy answered honestly.

“Well, you got it,” Maven declared.

“Not anymore,” the boy complained. “Those big guys stole it. You wait until I see them again. I’ll bust their heads wide open!”

“Violence begets violence,” Sam said with a huff.

“Huh?”

“They hurt you, you hurt them, they hurt you back worse,” Sam warned. “It doesn’t end until someone is hurt really bad or even loses their life.”

“Well, I ain’t letting them get away with it,” the boy snarled. “They stole my three dollars! I’m gonna get them back for taking my money!”

“Why do you need the three dollars so badly?” Maven asked. As soon as the words left her lips, she knew it was a stupid question. The boy was obviously destitute.

“To buy the book,” the boy exclaimed, pointing at Maven’s copies of the *Funk & Wagnalls Condensed Encyclopedia*.

Maven frowned in surprise. “Why?”

“‘Cause you’re the smartest lady in the whole world,” the boy exclaimed. “I want to buy the book, so I can be smart too. You know everything!”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret, kid,” Maven offered, picking up one of the books. “There is much more to learn than what is contained in this single book. Look, if you want it so badly, here, you can have it.”

“For keeps?” the boy breathed deeply as he reverently took the book in astonishment. He acted as if he had never been given anything in his whole life.

“For keeps,” Maven snapped, telling herself she was a sucker to be taken in by a fresh kid with a needy look. “Now get lost and don’t queer my pitch tomorrow!”

They watched as the kid ran off with a huge smile on his face.

“That was nice,” Sam observed, pulling Maven close and kissing her on the forehead. Then he pulled back his hand and smacked her hard across the ass.

“Ouch! What the hell was that for?”

“It was stupid of you to jump into the middle of a fight!” Sam asserted, frowning at her. “You could have been hurt!”

“I can handle myself,” Maven exclaimed, scowling at Sam. She stepped away from him and rubbed her stinging backside. “Besides, I’m a sucker for kids. That particular one has cost me almost six bucks today. Sadly, he will probably grow up to be another stupid man!”