

NANCY WOOD



THE STORK

*A Shelby McDougall Mystery*



# The Stork

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Nancy Wood

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

# 1

**T**HE CALL CAME AT TWO IN THE MORNING, the shrill ring startling me from a deep sleep. I bolted upright, grabbed the cell off the bedside table, and flipped it open.

A woman's voice, high-pitched, insistent, and on the edge of hysteria blasted from the speaker, cutting off my greeting mid-sentence.

"Hello? Hello? Is this the P.I. agency? I need to leave a message for Shelby. For Shelby McDougall."

I replied cautiously, "This is Shelby."

The woman drew a long, shaky breath and started to cry. "You answered," she said. "You're there." Another breath. "You have to help me. You're the only one who can. Please, help me." Her voice cracked in anguished, ragged sobs, and she

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breathed heavily, as if trying to get a grip. As if steeling herself so she could continue.

She started and stopped, started and stopped again. Then, in a low almost inaudible moan, she said, “My baby. He’s gone. Someone took him. He’s been kidnapped.”

Blood roared in my ears. Sweat dotted my forehead and fear, as bright and sharp as the honed edge of a razor, parked itself low in my belly.

“Who is this?” I asked as I swung my legs to the floor and fumbled for the light, trying to catch my breath, trying to remember how to breathe.

The woman’s moans ratcheted to a shrill, inhuman wail.

“Who is this?” I repeated; my voice now loud, sharp, demanding.

“L ... L ... L ...,” the woman managed, before dissolving into frantic weeping.

“Please,” I said, trying to soften my tone. “Talk to me. Who are you? Where are you?”

But her sobs grew distant, as if she’d put down the phone, and a cascade of notes signaled the end of the call. I listened to empty air, imagining a woman in a darkened room, curled in a fetal position, weeping for her lost child. I’d received calls like this before, but it had been years. Calls from grief-stricken women teetering on the edge of sanity, hoping I could help. Thinking that because I’d tricked fate, because I’d been able to save my babies, I’d magically be able to do the same for theirs.

I never could.

The number was local, from the 831 area code. That didn’t help — 831 covered three counties. The woman could be anywhere, from right next door, here in Santa Cruz, California, to Gorda, on the Big Sur coast at the southern edge of

Monterey County. I called back, but the phone on the other end rang and rang, the sound tinkling into emptiness. No greeting, no voicemail.

I dropped the cell on the bed and massaged my temples where the headache lurked, wishing I hadn't had those beers earlier in the evening. I picked up the phone and redialed. Again, no answer.

I hopped out of bed, rifled through the clothes piled on the floor, found the sweatshirt I'd peeled off a few hours earlier, and pulled it over my head. Two Advil and a glass of water later, I was back in my room. Calling, letting it ring ten times, disconnecting, calling again. Turning the small flip phone over and over in my hands, willing it to ring.

The Amber Alert system was enabled on the phone, but nothing had come across in the last few days. If I was in the office, I could use the scanner to listen in on the police frequencies. At the very least, I should be able to find the address through reverse lookup.

But the cell rang before I could get started.

"Shelby?" This time, a man spoke; his voice a low and gravelly rumble.

"Who are you?" I asked in return.

A slight pause, followed by: "Ryan Boyd."

Boyd? Ryan Boyd? I felt like the air had been knocked out of me. I doubled over, muffling the gasp that threatened to spill out, giving me away.

But he wasn't fooled. "You okay?" he asked.

I slowly sat back up, feeling the headache now. The Advil hadn't touched it; it felt like a six-inch-wide steel band was wrapped around my skull radiating a pulsing, punishing pain.

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I didn't answer. Instead, I asked a question in return, my voice small and disbelieving. "One of the twins was taken?"

Taken. Why had I used that particular word? Not kidnapped or abducted or snatched, but taken. As if something had been taken from me. As if the twins I'd given up for adoption five and a half years ago were still cleaved to me, still part of my life.

"Yes," Ryan replied. "Justin was kidnapped."

Justin. My son.

"It happened sometime Saturday night. Lisa checks on the kids every morning when she gets up around six. Justin's bed was empty. He wasn't in the house. His sister had no idea he was even gone." Lisa, I knew, was Ryan's wife. The twins' real mother.

Ryan's voice caught and he blew out his breath in a sigh, a sorrowful rattle that made me shiver. "Lisa's hysterical. Beside herself."

Completely understandable, I thought, and then asked, "What are the police doing?"

"They were here all day Sunday. All day yesterday. And will come back today. Interviewing me, Lisa, the neighbors, Justine."

Justine. My daughter.

After a beat, I asked, "Is she safe?"

"Yes," Ryan replied. "I just checked on her. She's fine."

"Why didn't I see this in the paper?"

"The police wanted to wait. To see if we'd get a ransom call." He paused. "We haven't."

"How come there was no Amber Alert?" I persisted.

"There was no information to post," Ryan replied. "We don't have anything to look for."



“But why call me?” I asked.

“Lisa thinks the world of you. She showed me the article that ran in the paper last month, about you taking down the baby trafficking ring and what you’ve been doing since then.

“She was so proud, she wanted to cut it out and put it on the fridge. Then, when this happened, we decided to contact you.”

My jaw dropped in surprise and I snapped it shut, feeling like it’d been opened and closed by some external force. As if I were the dummy and the universe was the ventriloquist.

Ryan’s voice dropped a register as he added, “We thought we’d be calling an answering service or a machine, and you’d get the message in the morning. I’m sorry to have woken you.”

“It’s okay. I have the backup work phone this week,” I said. “I’m the answering service.

“But why me?” I repeated. “What can I do that the police can’t?”

“Please,” he replied, his voice pleading. “Lisa insists that you’re the only one who can help us.”

One of Grandpa Stearns’ sayings popped into my head and I could hear his measured voice: “No good will come of this, Shelby. No good.”

A warning? Or just the jumbled thoughts of someone yanked from sleep in the middle of the night?

But, unable to refuse, I said, “I can come in the morning. Early, before work, say, around seven-thirty?”

“Thank you,” Ryan replied. “Thank you.”

## 2

**L**ONG AFTER WE'D HUNG UP, I stared at the flip phone, the after-hours backup for the P.I. firm where I was working. I was thinking about how easy it had been for them to find me.

As an aspiring P.I., I was hired to find people. And once I found someone, it was my job to discover everything there was to know. I knew how to tunnel into a life and excavate details, the daily routine that cascaded into a full-blown existence — family and friends, jobs, income, addresses, cell numbers, social media accounts, vehicles, credit score, purchasing preferences, workout schedules, eating habits, medical history. To dig even deeper and ferret out the intangibles that created an inner life

— the joys and sorrows, loves and lovers, disappointments and dreams.

I'd done some research when I'd moved back to Santa Cruz, California three years ago; wanting to find out as much as possible about the couple who'd adopted my twins. But once I'd unearthed the basics — names, ages, employment history, income, and address — I'd stopped. Much more would be stalking. So I'd written it all down and had forced myself to forget. Though I hadn't been one hundred percent successful. Right away, when Ryan Boyd had said his name, I'd known who he was.

I used to think about the babies all the time. At one time, I even considered them my babies. Even though I wasn't the one waking up in the middle of the night to feed them or change their diapers. I wasn't the one wrestling them into car seats and taking them to play dates and doctor appointments. I wasn't reading to them or restricting their screen time.

In the last year, the twins had finally fallen from my consciousness, pushed to the back of my mind by more immediate concerns. School, work, friends, family. It was as if that chapter in my life no longer belonged to me. As if it had happened to someone I'd read about in the paper. Or in a book. But not to me.

It had happened to me, though. A younger me. A much more naïve me. A much more trusting me. The phone call brought it all back — a roaring, thundering mess of fear and panic, mingled with still-fresh disbelief and a small nut of pride.

Too jittery to sleep, I grabbed my laptop off the desk and opened it as I sank into bed. I studied the ad that had caught my attention earlier in the evening, the one I'd found on a message board called *Surrogate Moms Classifieds*.

The ad read:

## *The Stork*

Gestational surrogate wanted. First time moms encouraged.  
You will be well rewarded.

I'd seen this exact phrase just once before, years ago.

The sum of it held an implicit promise. If you answered this ad, something besides money waited for you. Something exceptional. Life-changing, even. I'd fallen for it — hook, line, and sinker. And my life had changed, in more ways than I could have possibly imagined. Not all of those changes were good. Most of them were downright terrifying, plunging me into a world of evil I'd only seen in the movies or on TV.

I angled the screen back and read it again:

Gestational surrogate wanted. First time moms encouraged.  
You will be well rewarded.

You: Willing to relocate. Have a healthy BMI. Don't use drugs, meds, alcohol. Don't smoke.

Us: A happily married traditional couple living in northern California.

All expenses associated with the pregnancy and delivery will be covered. You will be well compensated for your time and efforts. Please email. We'd love to hear from you.

Gestational surrogate. Such a clinical, sterile term. I'd been a straight-up surrogate mom. My eggs were used, making me both the biological mother and the birth mother. A gestational surrogate was a step further down the technological path. Eggs were taken from either the intended mother or another woman and fertilized in a lab. Embryos were then inserted into the uterus of the gestational surrogate, the woman who would

carry the babies to term. The surrogate had no biological link with the fetus. She was just the incubator. The carrier.

No fee was given in this listing. Often, payment for services was announced first thing: twenty-eight thousand, thirty thousand, forty thousand. The most I'd seen was a cool fifty grand. Don't let anyone say money wasn't a factor. It was. It always was. The typical couple, usually in their mid-to-late thirties or early forties, were lawyers, doctors, engineers, executives. Couples who'd married late, focused on their careers, and had forgotten what later became their urgent biological imperative.

The surrogates, of course, were always younger. Often broke. Surrogacy offered a year's salary or a down payment on a house. In my case, I was looking for a quick fix to crushing college debt.

I read the ad again, chilled by the phrase, First time moms encouraged. This was unusual. With the wisdom of hindsight, I could see why agencies and legitimate intended parents wanted a surrogate with a previous full-term pregnancy. The woman would know what she was getting into. There would be no messy emotional ties. Less chance the surrogate would balk. After I'd uncovered what was planned for my babies, I'd briefly flirted with raising the twins. Even though I had no money, no job, and no place to live, I'd wanted them. I'd yearned for them, ached for them with every cell of my being.

But I'd done what was right for me.

I copied the data from the ad and pasted it into my Stork spreadsheet, my private and obsessive catalog of the hundreds of ads for surrogate moms I'd discovered since my babies were born. I still believed that the intended parents I'd contracted with, Jackson and Diane Entwistle, along with their delivery

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man, Frankie Browning, hadn't acted alone. In my gut, I knew there was someone else. A mastermind. A boss. A mythical Mafia-like overlord, who I'd nicknamed The Stork. The person who orchestrated baby trafficking in central and northern California.

The Stork theory held traction, at first. Diane had insisted that The Stork existed, but claimed she'd never met him or her. She'd maintained that all communication was by old-fashioned letters, delivered to a PO box and burned after reading. The investigators had pegged Frankie for a time, but that never panned out. As the leads thinned and the investigation stalled, the detectives had concluded that Jackson, Diane, and Frankie were operating completely on their own. My brother, Dexter, agreed with this theory; as did my best friend, Megan Fitzgerald; my parents; the district attorney; and my lawyer. But I'd never given up. I was sure The Stork was still at work. An ad for a surrogate mom might take me to a set of intended parents just like Jackson and Diane — intended parents who had no intention of keeping the baby. Intended parents who were frauds, driven by greed. Intended parents who would adopt a baby in a closed adoption, send the birth mother on her way, and deliver the baby elsewhere. All details arranged by The Stork.

Just like I always did, I shot off an email from the bogus email account I'd created just for this purpose.

Long after I shut down the laptop, I lay in bed, awake. Remembering —

*The gun. The bite of the rope against my ankles and wrists. The duct tape covering my mouth. And the infant squalling: a relentless, frantic mewling.*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy Wood grew up in various locations on the East Coast and now calls Central California home. Recently retired, she spent thirty-five years as a technical writer, translating engineer-speak into words and sentences. She likens it to translating ancient Greek — when you're not too familiar with the Greek part.

Since retiring, she and her husband have been travelling the world. So far, they've visited France, Spain, England, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Belgium, the Netherlands, and India. They are not anywhere close to done and have many more trips planned. Nancy is also a passionate photographer, focusing on macro photography and blur.

For more information about the world and works of Nancy Wood, visit [nancywoodbooks.wordpress.com](http://nancywoodbooks.wordpress.com).

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by Nancy Wood

*Surrogate mother Shelby McDougall just fell for the biggest con of all: a scam that risks her life ... and the lives of her unborn twins.*



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*Shelby McDougall's past is behind her. Almost.*

It's been five and a half years since Shelby put her infant twins up for adoption, and she's finally on track. Back in Santa Cruz, California, she's sharing an apartment with her brother, Dexter, and in her second year of criminal justice studies. She's landed her dream job as an intern to local P.I. Kathleen Bennett. And her stone-cold love life is heating up.

Then a late-night phone call puts  
Shelby's perfectly ordered life into a tailspin.

One of the twins has been kidnapped, snatched from home in the middle of the night. There are no witnesses — no clues, no trails to follow. After meeting the family, Shelby knows something is off. The adoptive parents tell her the children don't sleep, they eat constantly, and their IQs are off the charts. Against her better judgment, Shelby agrees to help.

By the time she realizes she's up against something powerful, something evil, it's almost too late. As Shelby fights for her life, and that of the kidnapped child, she discovers shocking truths about herself and the children.

Nancy Wood grew up in various locations on the East Coast and now calls Central California home. Recently retired, she spent 35 years as a technical writer, translating engineer-speak into words and sentences. Since retiring, she and her husband have been travelling the world. So far, they've visited France, Spain, England, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Belgium, the Netherlands and India. Nancy is also a passionate photographer, focusing on macro photography.