



NANCY WOOD

THE FOUND  
CHILD

*A Shelby McDougall Mystery*



**The Found Child**  
*A Shelby McDougall Mystery*

Nancy Wood

copyright © 2020 by Nancy Wood

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, except for the purpose of review and/or reference, without explicit permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover design copyright © 2020 by Niki Lenhart  
*nikilen-designs.com*

Published by Paper Angel Press  
*paperangelpress.com*

SAMPLE CHAPTER

# 1

**T**HE PUNCHING BAG FLEW AT MY FACE. I swung, but not in time. It grazed the top of my head, throwing me off balance. By some miracle, I was able to catch my footing, bounce up, and smash the bag on the rebound, pummeling the teardrop sphere with quick jabs. My shoulders and arms burned. Sweat leaked into my eyes and I grunted each time my glove connected with the target. If I hadn't been wearing a mouth guard, I would have howled instead. My therapist promised it would help.

What helped even more was imagining that the punching bag was Dr. Helen Brannon; the woman who'd ruined my life, the woman I blamed for everything. She was responsible for my multiple miscarriages. The miscarriages that, in turn, had caused my marriage to disintegrate and my financial future to veer off into a chasm.

A piercing whistle signaled the end of the session. I took two more jabs, a right followed by a left, with each swing seeing the woman's arrogant expression and smug smile crumple into a jumble of blood and broken teeth.

Better than therapy any day.

## *The Found Child*

“Take a seat,” yelled Tatiana, the instructor. She pointed to the rickety metal bench opposite the boxing ring. “Remember, keep your distance.”

I jogged over, wishing I could wipe my face on a towel, but my hands, trapped in the heavily padded boxing gloves, were useless. I found an open spot six feet away from anyone else, leaned over, and rubbed my face on the hem of my baggy shorts. Then I sprawled back against the wall with my legs straight out in front of me. As Tatiana demonstrated the intricacies of a right uppercut followed by a left, exhaustion overcame me and I closed my eyes. Last night’s phone call instantly started replaying in my mind. Once again, I’d called my ex. Once again, he’d been polite, but distant. My separation from Cody was going on seven months now. I wanted to get back together. He didn’t. My pleading wasn’t helping anyone, but I couldn’t stop myself.

We’d separated just before the semi-draconian, but absolutely necessary, shelter-in-place order forced all non-essential workers to stay at home to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. With that edict, I lost half my business, all of my already limited social life, my gym outings, and my coffee shop pick-me-ups. Casual friendships tanked and Netflix binge-watching became my new best friend. It had been a long spring and summer, and now, in mid-September of 2020, the nation was still figuring out how to adjust.

Santa Cruz County, where I lived, teetered on and off California’s coronavirus watch list. Masks were mandatory. School remained online. Restaurants and cafes were limited to takeout orders or widely spaced outdoor seating. Grocery stores regulated the number of people allowed inside at a time, while retail businesses could conduct only limited service. When on the watchlist, the county’s places of worship, movie theaters, bars, wineries, hair and nail salons, and gyms were shuttered. Now that the county’s numbers were trending down, all those non-essential, but absolutely necessary services, like my boxing gym, could open again.

My pandemic normal was lonelier than before. And each time Cody brushed me off, like last night, my rage against Helen Brannon intensified. But for her I’d be pregnant. But for her, Cody and I would be living in our sweet home, refinishing it room by room, starting with the baby’s room. But for her, I’d still be with Cody, the love of my life.

Back in the locker room, after Tatiana untied my gloves, I unwound the tape from my hands and assessed the damage. Reddened knuckles. Bruising on my right index finger. A purple shadow on my left thumb. Nothing that a bit of CBD oil wouldn't fix.

"Hey, Shelby, how's it going?" asked Bailey, an occasional sparring partner, as she sat on the bench opposite me, wrapped in a towel.

"I used to think I was in shape," I smiled. "I thought I was fit." My daily workouts hadn't prepared me at all for this class. I shook my head. "This is punishing."

Bailey laughed. As she stood to head to the shower, she said, "Julie and I are going over to The Buttery to get a cup of coffee and gawk at the pastries. Want to join us?"

Visions of the tastiest croissants and muffins in Santa Cruz danced through my mind, but I shook my head. "I'd love to, but I have to get to work."

"Too bad. Maybe next time?" Bailey's smile was bright. She was at least ten years younger than me, enthusiastic, optimistic, guileless.

I returned her smile with one of my own. Even though I craved social contact, work always came first. As a sole proprietor and small business owner, there were never enough hours in the day. Between the mountains of paperwork, client meetings, phone calls, court appearances, reports, surveillance, and required continuing education, I always felt pressed for time. Private investigations never stopped. Not even for the coronavirus. Luckily, during the shelter-in-place order, I was able to keep working because my business, Shelby McDougall Investigations, was considered an essential service related to "legally mandated activities." My bread-and-butter contract for background checks for a local tech company continued. Warrants, surveillance for two separate slip-and-fall cases, as well as a worker's comp case, barely kept me above water. In July, an insurance fraud case had occupied most of my time.

I stripped out of my sweaty clothes and left them on the floor as I swaddled myself in a towel. I wasn't shy, but at age thirty-six, with most of the other women in the class in their twenties, I felt a tiny bit self-conscious. Even though I was too thin, gravity was not my friend. My stomach pooched. No matter how many crunches I did, I couldn't get rid of the roll. My hips looked like I wore permanent jodhpurs.

## *The Found Child*

Worst of all, the pandemic had shuttered my hairdresser and my recent cut at the local one-size-fits-all salon made my hair resemble a steel wool scouring pad.

After showering and changing, I shoved my soaking clothes into my gym bag, along with my gear. I walked through the quiet, darkened gym and paused at the office to say goodbye. Outside, squinting in the bright light, I extracted my key fob from the side pocket of my gym bag and clicked open my five-year-old silver Prius. Deep in my bag, my phone chimed. The ringtone, the signature theme from the Harry Potter movies, served as my hopeful reminder of magic, possibility, and miracles. I dug out the phone and glanced at the screen, happy to see that Dexter, my brother, was calling. Dexter and his family had been my lifeline last winter as Cody and I yo-yoed about whether to stay together, separate, keep the house and rent it, or sell it and move on.

And last March, just before the pandemic ravaged our world, when Cody and I decided to split up for good, I parked myself at Dexter's, imposing on him, his wife Megan, and their children. I'd crammed myself into a small utility room on a makeshift cot, trying not to remember how I'd lived with Dexter and his first wife thirteen years earlier; another period in my life when I'd been lost. This time, I had the good sense not to overstay my welcome, moving out after less than a month.

The third time Dexter had rescued me was four weeks ago, in the middle of August, when I had to evacuate because of the CZU Lightning Complex fire that chewed through more than eighty-five thousand acres of Santa Cruz County and neighboring San Mateo County. My neighborhood in the Santa Cruz mountains had suffered multiple structural losses, but where I lived remained standing. Somehow, during the evacuation order, I managed to work, even though I was spending at least six hours a day on Twitter, tracking the fire and the response; staying in touch with my housemate, Erica; and keeping abreast of the neighborhood through our shared email list. Our evacuation order had been lifted only a few weeks ago. The smoky smell still lingered; the meadow and surrounding forest were covered in grainy, black soot; and every morning my car was dusted with ash.

"Hey, Dexter," I said, stabbing the speaker icon and holding up the phone, "how's it going?"

“Good,” he replied. “Busy, as usual. School started. Finally. What with the delay because of the fire, we were starting to wonder.” I mentally kicked myself. Between the pandemic, the fire, and my own personal problems, I’d forgotten to call.

“Annie’s in seventh grade, and Ashley is a sophomore?” I asked. Annie, Megan’s daughter, was now twelve, and had been born long before Dexter and Megan had met. Ashley, Dexter’s daughter from his previous marriage, was fifteen going on twenty-five.

“Yup. Back to school night is in a couple of weeks, so we’ll find out everything. All on Zoom.”

“How’s Max?”

“As fun as ever. He gets to go to preschool. We’re all happy about that.” Max, Dexter and Megan’s son, was an energetic four-year-old. Dexter laughed and continued. “We have a tutor-slash-nanny who comes at noon and works with Annie for two hours after her Zoom classes are over for the day. Then, she picks up Max. Ashley is on her own.”

I was so wrapped up in my own world that I hadn’t considered the logistics of school life with COVID. Sounded complicated.

“So, what are you up to today?” Dexter continued.

I hesitated, surprised. Dexter never asked me what I was up to on a workday. When we met for lunch, his schedule was always the one that needed working around. He’d been the Director of the Santa Cruz Parks & Recreation Department for two years now. His job was a desk job, with hours of daily meetings.

“Why, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Something’s come up and I need to talk to you.” His voice was quiet.

“Is Megan okay? Mom?”

“Yes, they’re fine,” he said, but something in his voice made it sound like nothing was fine. “Are you free for lunch?” he continued.

“Yes. I’m in the office all day.”

“Great, I’ll pick up some sandwiches. I’ll be over around noon.”

“What’s going on, Dexter?” I asked again.

“I’ll tell you when I see you. Not over the phone.”

As I slipped my phone in my bag, I wondered what was up with Dexter. He was never so secretive.



## 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, India, and Vietnam. 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).

# ALSO BY NANCY WOOD

## DUE DATE

*A Shelby McDougall Mystery*

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.*



## THE STORK

*A Shelby McDougall Mystery*

by Nancy Wood

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



## THE FOUND CHILD

*A Shelby McDougall Mystery*

by Nancy Wood

*Shelby McDougall is out for revenge.*



Available from Paper Angel Press in  
hardcover, trade paperback, and digital editions  
[paperangelpress.com](http://paperangelpress.com)