



Due Date

A Shelby McDougall Mystery

Nancy Wood

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Author's Note

This is a work of fiction. Although Santa Cruz, California, is a real place, all the names, characters, and events are figments of my imagination. Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is coincidental.

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Dedication

For Hans, Sophie, and Augie

Chapter One

The Beemer driver, right on our tail, tapped his horn a few times, and sat on it. My brother Dexter swerved the SUV toward the dented guard rail separating the gravel shoulder from a steep drop into the Santa Cruz mountain valley below. But the BMW driver didn't take the hint. He just edged closer, veering in and out of the lane, still trying to pass.

"What the...?" shouted Dexter as the Beemer's right front fender hooked our left rear with an explosive crunch.

Suddenly we were sliding out of control, skidding across the narrow road as if it were black ice. Dexter fought the wheel and pumped the brakes, but the pedal plunged to the floor. Yelling "Hold on," he yanked the parking brake.

Metal screeched and our CRV fishtailed to the right, jerking to a halt inches from the cliff. Dexter turned the ignition off and there was welcome silence.

He whacked the steering wheel with the palm of his hand.

"I am so dead," he groaned. "Jessica is going to kill me."

He reached over to unclip my seatbelt then looked at me, horrified. "Jesus, Shelby, we need to get you to a doctor."

"I'm fine," I said, cradling my substantial belly with both hands. "Thank God the airbag didn't go off."

"If I ever catch that asshole..." Dexter tried to start the car but the engine just whirred, clicked, and died. He swore, wiggled his phone out of his pocket, pressed the on button, and swore again. He shook it, as if that would help. "Can I try yours?"

"If you can find it," I said.

I gestured behind me, where my entire life was crammed into boxes, suitcases, and duffel bags.

"Don't have that much time. Gotta get you and those babies to a doctor."

He opened the car door. "I'll be back in a half-hour, tops," he said. "Don't go anywhere."

He grinned at me. We both knew I wouldn't.

I watched his bright red t-shirt disappear through the redwood grove up the twisting road, under the blue California sky. He'd be at least an hour. Dexter never could tell time.

I angled the seat back and was rewarded with the familiar poke of a baby foot between my lower ribs, then another on my left side. *See?* I wanted to tell Dexter, *we're all fine. All three of us. And just because you're my big brother, you can't always tell me what to do.*

I reserved that privilege for Jackson and Diane Entwistle, the intended parents of my unborn twins. Although we didn't know each other that well yet, Diane insisted on taking me in now that Jessica, Dexter's pushy wife, had kicked me out. So instead of being shoe-horned into an all-purpose office-guest-craft room, I'd have my own cottage. Six hundred square feet all to myself on their expansive Santa Cruz mountain ridge-top estate. Even though the arrangement would only last a few months, until the babies were born, I was looking forward to quiet country living.

I locked the doors, twisted around in the seat for my purse, and busied myself in a fit of organization. I excavated gum wrappers, used movie tickets, wadded up tissues, balls of hair

from my brush, bits of broken shells I'd collected on my morning beach walks, keys to Dexter's house that I wouldn't be needing anymore, and a dangly red and white African beaded earring I'd assumed was long lost. The trash went in one pile, the earring in my coin purse, and I stashed the keys to my former life in the glove box.

I'd just have to remember to tell Dexter they were there.

* * * *

Forty-five minutes later, I was flipping through the *Sunset* magazine I'd found under the passenger seat when I smelled smoke.

Campfires weren't unusual up here in the hills, where there were at least three state parks, and at first the tendril of what looked like mist winding through the upper redwood canopy didn't worry me. I was reading about kitchen makeovers, something I couldn't yet imagine at twenty-three, but maybe someday, after the babies were born, after I finished graduate school, after I found that perfect guy.

Then I started coughing. And I looked up again. The smoke was as dense as beach fog on a summer morning. This was no campfire.

I felt a sudden surge in my throat: on the side of the road, near the hairpin curve where Dexter had disappeared, licks of red and orange flame were traveling lazily up the trunk of a spindly shrub. I jumped as it ignited with a crack, sparking in fiery traces like a welding torch.

As quickly as I could, I unlocked the door and eased out, trying not to look down. A slope as steep as a ski jump yawed beneath my feet. Only an inch of slippery gravel lay between the toes of my flip-flops and the lip. I baby-stepped around the car, taking peeks up the hill, hoping I'd see Dexter running toward me, arms outspread in a victory lap.

If you wanted something enough, the universe would provide, right? But only a backdrop of flames glowed through the swirling smoke.

Now whole trees were hissing in the distance as they burned. A power line sparked in a deafening pop. I looked around for my best escape route. I couldn't follow Dexter. No one could navigate that path, not even a fully-suited firefighter with an oxygen tank. I knew Dexter was somewhere safe by now. Probably as worried about me as I was.

I waddled fast downhill, and ten minutes later, I was in almost-clear air again, the blaze just a memory clinging in sooty, sweaty rivulets to my hair and clothes. My eyes still burned and my tongue felt singed, but a familiar blue sky arched above and the feathery ash only floated down occasionally, gentle as mist.

I knew it would be just a matter of time before the fire caught up to me, though, and I couldn't walk forever.

As if my prayer had been answered, the faint whine of an engine percolated the still afternoon. Gears ground as the vehicle labored up the grade. I dodged off the road and crouched behind a tree. Maybe it was the hormones, but paranoia had been a constant companion since I signed my surrogacy papers. Nobody liked surrogates, I'd learned, especially once they realized the amounts of money involved.

But I needed a lift. Shaking off my worries, I straightened up, ready to flag down the vehicle. "Shelby Emma Stearns McDougall," I said. "Get a grip."

Above me, a pair of crows squawked, raspy and piercing. I adjusted my huge belly, leaned back against the tree trunk, and waited.

Chapter Two

The approaching vehicle sounded like an earth-mover, gears biting as the driver shifted around the tight turns. Something red moved through the trees and for an instant I thought it was Dexter, waving his t-shirt to catch my attention. Instead, a full-sized fire truck rumbled into view, driver and passenger invisible behind glinting glass.

Gold embossed lettering on the paint read *Felton Fire. Paramedic Unit.*

“Hey,” I yelled, “over here.”

I lumbered into the road, waving my arms, but I was too late. The fire engine careened around the next curve and disappeared.

I knew the fire engine would stop, eventually. Even if the fire had burned itself out, surely the driver would notice the abandoned CRV and start looking for someone. I turned to walk back up the road.

It was steep going. The smoke was much thicker now, and I started to cough in a persistent sharp bark, like I’d been a smoker for thirty years. Soon, I saw the fire engine, its doors hanging open, parked by Dexter’s car. Surprisingly, the fire had not consumed the SUV. Instead, it had jumped the road, burning across the hillside, leaving a calling card of skeletal bushes and scorched tree trunks. The place looked like a Biblical hell, the charred ground smoking, shafts of soot hanging in the air like dust motes. Blackened, twisted branches littered the road and the air stunk like campfire coals chased by a kerosene back.

A figure, the silhouette as fuzzy and blurry as if I were looking under water, emerged from that devastation. I rubbed my eyes then leaned over to put my hands on my knees, suddenly dizzy.

“Shel-by! Shel-by?” A woman was calling my name over and over, and she sure sounded like Diane Entwistle. Diane was the only person I knew who said my name that way, with the emphasis on the second syllable, not the first. As if she was British. Besides, who else would know that I’d been in that SUV?

But that was wishful thinking. Diane had appointments in San Jose all day.

The voice ricocheted through the burned-out vegetation as clear as a loud parent on a softball field. I tried to yell back, but my own voice failed me, leaking out in small frog-like croaks. And my legs were so tired. Carrying all those babies was hard work. I chose a less sooty spot and sank to the ground, closing my eyes. Just for a minute.

I only wanted a tiny nap, but the person frantically jiggling my shoulder and tapping my cheeks disagreed. Again, that “Shel-by!” But this time, followed by a plea, and then, an order: “Shelby, please wake up! Wake up! Wake up. Now.”

I forced my eyes open and saw Diane’s face, inches from mine. A wave of relief washed over me. Everything would be fine. Diane was here and I was saved.

When I tried to sit, a hand as big and bulky as a catcher’s mitt pinned me to the ground. Diane inched to the left and the face belonging to the owner of that hand loomed above.

“Miss, don’t move,” a man’s voice snapped.

I heard a click. A sharp beam of light traveled across my line of sight.

“Follow the light with your eyes,” the man ordered. “Don’t move your head.”

He waved the flashlight from left to right, then up and down. Without warning, meaty fingers spread open my eyelid and the white beam shone directly into my pupil, igniting a fiery pain. I moaned and tried to push his hand away, but he swatted me off as if I were as insubstantial as a mosquito.

“One more second,” he said, keeping the flashlight focused against my eye. By the time he was done, a small white circle of heat was seared into my retina, stabbing my skull like a spear.

“I need to look in your other eye.”

His thumb flattened my cheek and his index finger pressed against my eyelid.

“This will only take a second.”

That white heat grew closer and closer, obliterating the smoky sky above, then the pink flesh of his face. My brain was going to explode. I had to save myself.

I curled my right hand into a fist and tensed my arm, from fingertips to shoulder.

And I swung.

The punch landed on the corner of his jaw with a satisfying crunch, like the sound of a wooden bat on a ball.

Thankfully, the light disappeared. I slumped back into restful oblivion.

Chapter Three

Pregnant women have a close relationship with bathrooms. Way too soon, the familiar call of nature woke me. Blankets cocooned me burrito-style. I was in a clean hospital room, connected to an IV drip by a tube that snaked from the back of my hand.

I scooted to the side of the bed, unwrapping myself, and dragged the IV—pole, bag, and all—to the john. No easy feat.

Settling back into bed was even harder. Somehow I managed to tangle the tube around my midsection, as if it were a ball of yarn.

A smothered giggle interrupted my battle. Dexter?

My brother was sitting in a chair at the end of the bed, tucked in shadow.

“I was about to call in the cavalry.”

“I’m stuck,” I muttered.

“Just lift the tube over your head and slide in under it.”

His cell phone chirped a cheery digital rendition of the *Sesame Street* jingle. Ashley’s favorite show. Dexter flipped the phone open.

“Thirty minutes,” he promised. “I know it’s late, but Shelby just woke up. I need to talk to her.” He listened, scowling. “I’ll meet you out front in thirty.”

Dexter snapped the phone shut and shook his head. “Sorry. She’s tired.”

I shrugged. Three-year-old Ashley I loved, but there was no love lost between Jessica and me.

Dexter leaned forward, placing his phone on the edge of the bed. Dark smudges circled his eyes and his right cheek looked bruised. His short hair was matted down, pressed against his skull like hat hair. But Dexter never wore a hat. Ever.

“You look worse than I do,” I said.

“I should have run down the hill, not up,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “I ran right into the fire. I didn’t notice it until it was almost too late.”

I remembered Dexter sprinting up the hill, holding his phone in front of him, watching the bars like the guy in the TV advertisement.

“Then these trees around me started to explode in flames. This falling branch missed me by inches.”

“Wow,” I said.

“Yeah. And you won’t believe what saved me. Remember earlier in the summer when I took that class in local geology?”

I shook my head. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“The field part of the class was up there, right where we got hit,” Dexter explained. “Remember I told you about the springs and the caves?”

This sparked a memory. Dexter had returned from that class, all excited, saying how much fun it would be take Ashley caving. But Jessica nixed that with a curt and abrupt, “Take her into a cave, with spiders? I don’t think so.”

“I just happened to find the entrance to one of the biggest caves we’d been to. I was so lucky.” He shivered and his voice trailed off. “I had a front-row seat to a pretty scary show. The

fire moved so fast, obliterating everything...I don't want to think about what would've happened if I hadn't found that cave."

I didn't either. "Are you okay now?" I asked. "Did they check you out?"

"Just some burns."

His left foot, resting on the bed rail, was bound in white gauze up to his ankle. I sucked in my breath.

"Jesus, Dexter. What happened?"

"The bottom of my shoe melted. Lucky for me that I was wearing my wool socks, so the rubber didn't stick to my skin. A second degree burn instead of a third." He grinned, faintly proud.

"Do they know how the fire started?"

"Diane said it was a Beemer, a black convertible that pulled off the road and left its engine on. The catalytic converter caught the grass on fire." He shook his head. "The guy must've seen the fire start and took off anyway."

I looked at Dexter, who nodded.

"Had to have been the same guy who clipped us. He must have stopped to look at the damage without turning off his engine."

"That jerk," I growled. "Stupid tourists don't know shit about the hills and fire danger. If we ever catch that guy..."

Dexter interrupted, "We won't. There's no trace of him. And nothing remarkable either: the guy was wearing an olive baseball cap, sunglasses, and a black t-shirt. Same outfit as everyone else in Santa Cruz."

We sat in silence for a minute. I looked around the tiny room.

"How long am I here for?"

Suddenly, I noticed the enormous bouquet of flowers set on the small table across the room.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing.

"Diane got those for you. I take back all the bad stuff I said."

I looked at Dexter in surprise. He nodded.

"Diane's an all-star. She talked to the doctors, handled your insurance, made sure I was OK, and took care of the car. Plus, she got all your stuff out of the backseat before it got towed."

I smiled. "Don't want to say I told you so..."

"I know." He smiled in return. "Car's going to be totaled, by the way. Jessica is so pissed. Didn't even have five hundred miles on it."

He rubbed his hands against his thighs and stared at his pants.

"There's something else," he said, glancing up at me. "I called Mom and Dad."

If I hadn't been flat on my back in bed, I would have smacked my brother.

He saw my glare. "I had to. You're in the hospital. They need to know."

I stared at the ceiling.

"Right?" he persisted.

"You promised," I said flatly. "What about that?"

"I didn't tell them anything specific. I just said we were out for a drive."

"You promised," I said again.

"I did."

We didn't say anything else. There wasn't much to say.

After a few minutes, Dexter pushed himself up. “I better go. It’s going to take me at least fifteen minutes to hobble to the lobby. Don’t want to keep my princess waiting.”

He grabbed a pair of crutches that were propped against the wall by my hospital bed.

“I can’t lean over and give you a hug. I’d fall down.”

I was just as glad.

He waved one of the crutches toward me, an oversized bug waving an antenna.

“I’ll come see you as soon as I can drive. Call me when you get settled in.” He stared down at me.

“I’m really glad you’re okay, Shel.”

“Me too,” I said.

I watched my brother slowly hobble off.