

# Daughter of Mine

A Stolen at Birth Novel

By Angie Stanton

## Chapter 1

Cheryl

The nursing smock pulled across my middle. I'd lost much of my belly since giving birth two days ago, but I was nowhere near back to my normal size. Still, the top was clean, professional, and anonymous. I found it in a lost and found bin as I checked out of All Saint's Hospital. The universe providing what I needed.

Or maybe I was so far gone that stealing clothes from charity felt like fate instead of desperation.

The afternoon sun slanted through the windows of Mercy Hospital's third floor, creating geometric patterns on the polished linoleum. The halls were quieter now, that lull between lunch trays and dinner rounds.

I had stood outside the building for the past ten minutes, my heart a trapped bird hammering against my ribs. I didn't know what I was doing here. Didn't know what I was looking for.

That was a lie. I knew exactly what I had come for.

The maternity ward.

A baby.

To replace the baby I lost.

The thought crystallized with such sudden clarity that I stopped walking, one hand braced against the wall. Was that what I was doing? Was that why I hadn't been able to get into my car this morning and drive home? Why I checked out of the hospital where my life altered forever, but then just... drove here instead? To this hospital on the other side of Kansas City from where my daughter died?

No. No. I wasn't thinking straight. Grief did strange things to people. I read that somewhere. The five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

I was somewhere between denial and completely out of my mind insane.

Adjusting my large handbag on my shoulder, I entered the hospital and took the elevator to the maternity floor.

A nurse passed me, pushing a cart full of supplies, and didn't even glance my way. Why would she? I wore medical attire. Pausing at a room, I pulled a chart from the rack on the door. Even though my hands wouldn't stop shaking and there was a ringing in my ears that wouldn't go away, I looked as if I had every right to be walking these halls,

Room 347's door stood open.

Through the doorway, I could see her.

Young. Maybe twenty-five. Dark blonde hair pulled back from a face that was tired but glowing with that particular radiance of new motherhood.

She sat up in bed, cradling a bundle wrapped in a pink blanket, gazing down with such tenderness that I had to grip the doorframe to keep from staggering.

That's what I looked like mere days ago. For exactly two hours, that was my face, my joy, my daughter in my arms.

Before she stopped breathing.

Before the doctor said that there was nothing more they could do and then, worse, that I wouldn't be able to have more children.

I didn't plan to stop. Didn't plan to look inside. **My hand was already on the doorframe.**

The woman in the bed shifted, adjusting her hold, and talked softly to her infant. The baby, I could see a tiny fist, a shock of dark hair, made a small noise in response.

Alive! That baby was alive.

Mine wasn't.

The grief rose like a wave, threatening to pull me under, and I must have made a sound because the woman looked up, her eyes finding mine.

"Oh!" She startled, but then smiled, warm and unsuspecting. "Hi."

I should have left. Mumbled an apology about the wrong room and walked away. Should have gotten in my car and driven home to Rochester and figured out how to tell my two-year-old son that his baby sister was never coming home.

Maybe I should have called my husband in Afghanistan, if I could have even reached him through military channels, and shattered his heart with the news that our daughter died and there would never be another. His job was top secret, which meant dangerous. I couldn't do that to him and risk his safety.

I should have done anything except what I was doing, which was stepping into this stranger's hospital room as if I had every right to be here.

"Hello." My voice came out steady and cheerful. Normal. Like I was actually a healthcare worker making rounds instead of a woman whose mind broke somewhere between the morgue and here. "I'm a CNA. I'm checking to see if you needed anything."

"Oh." Her smile widened.

She looked young. Happy. Completely unaware that she was speaking to someone who was coming apart at the seams.

"That's kind, thank you. I'm okay, I think. Just tired."

I moved closer, my body on autopilot while my brain screamed, ‘What are you doing!’ I lifted her plastic water pitcher and gave it a shake. “Let me refill your water pitcher.”

“That would be great. The nurse was here a few minutes ago, but I forgot to ask.”

My hands knew what to do even if my mind didn't. I took the pitcher to the small bathroom and filled it from the tap. These were normal actions. Helpful actions. Things a real CNA would do.

When I returned, the baby had started to fuss. The woman, I didn't even know, was soothing her while simultaneously looking exhausted.

“Would you like me to order you a snack from the kitchen?” I offered as I organized things on her tray. “Is your family coming back soon?”

“My husband went home to get our other kids—they're dying to meet their baby sister.” She laughed, but there's an edge of weariness to it. “He texted twenty minutes ago, so probably 40 minutes. And honestly, a snack sounds amazing before they get here.

I should have left then. Should have made some excuse and gone before I did something I couldn't take back. But instead, I straightened her sheets, adjusted her pillows, playing this role like I was born to it.

The baby quieted and appeared to be dozing.

“She's been like this on and off since her last feeding,” the woman said, swaying gently. “I think she just wants to be held, but I really need a shower before the kids get here.”

“That's understandable. You've been through a lot today,” I said.

My mind reeled. This could be my chance. She had other children, even a daughter.

“I'll watch her,” I said. As if it were the most natural thing in the world. “While you shower. If you'd like.”

Would she say yes?

Could I actually take this baby?

The woman's face transformed with relief. “Oh my god, you're an angel. Are you sure? I feel bad asking.”

“It's no trouble at all.” My voice remained steady, and I smiled, even though my heart was trying to beat its way out of my chest. “It's one of my duties. And I love holding these tiny newborns.”

I had a baby two days ago. She died in my arms.

“Thank you. I can't wait to stand in a hot shower.” She laughed and gently handed the baby to me; this precious weight settled into my arms with such devastating familiarity. “Her name is Greta,” she added.

The universe was either remarkably cruel or offering me a second chance. I couldn't tell which.

“She's beautiful,” I managed, and it was not a lie. She was pink-cheeked and perfect and very alive.

The woman, wincing slightly, moved toward the bathroom. “I'll be quick. Ten minutes, tops.” She paused at the bathroom door and turned to me.

“Oh, I didn't catch your name?”

“I'm sorry.” I looked down at my uniform where a name tag should have been. “Darn if I haven't lost my name tag again. I'm Gina,” I lied.

“Nice to meet you. I'm Melissa.” She disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door, leaving her newborn daughter with a complete stranger, who showed up unannounced wearing stolen medical attire.

The sound of the shower running came through the door.

I looked down at baby Greta.

She' wasn't fussing; her dark eyes seemed to gaze at me, her tiny mouth working in that unconscious sucking motion newborns make. She weighed almost nothing in my arms. A handful of life. A miracle.

*This one is right here. This one is alive,* whispered a dark voice in my desperate mind.

My handbag sat on the floor behind the door, where I left it. The large leather tote Brad gave me this past Mother's Day before he deployed. “For all the baby stuff you'll need to carry,” he'd said, grinning, his hand on my pregnant belly. “Only the best for my girls.”

I could still see his face when he said it. Still feel the weight of his excitement, his absolute certainty that he was coming home to meet his daughter.

How did I tell him he wasn't? How did I go home and face the empty nursery, the unworn baby clothes, the dreams that died with our daughter?

You don't have to.

The thought slid through my mind like poison, like salvation.

You don't have to tell him anything. You could just go home.

With a baby.

With this baby.

He never needs to know what happened.

The shower ran. I could hear Melissa humming something soft and off-key.

My feet moved before I made a conscious decision.

Crossing to the door with this tiny bundle of joy, I picked up my handbag. The expensive leather was soft, loved. Brad's gift. Brad's trust.

It slipped from my hand and fell onto the tile floor.

I was about to betray both. I should put the baby in her bassinet and leave while I still could.

But Baby Greta made a small coo as if a sign. Before I could change my mind, I picked up the bag, shook it open and settled the swaddled baby into the bag. She fit perfectly, as if were made for her.

My hands trembled so badly that I could barely drape my scarf over the opening, hiding her from view. She didn't cry. Don't protest. Just settled into sleep as if she trusted me.

She shouldn't.

The shower was still running.

I had maybe five minutes before Melissa finished. Maybe less.

My body moved on its own, propelled by something beyond thought, beyond reason. Shock, maybe. Or survival instinct. Or a complete psychotic break dressed up as maternal desperation.

I stepped to the door. My legs felt disconnected from my body, as if I were watching someone else. Someone who looked like me but couldn't possibly be, because I was a good person. I was a good mother. I would never.

But I was. I was doing this right now.

The corridor stretched ahead, impossibly long. A nurse stood at the station, her back to me, reviewing a chart. An orderly pushed a wheelchair past, not even glancing my way. A man carried flowers toward a room down the hall, whistling.

Normal people doing normal things while I stole past carrying a newborn in my handbag.

Every step felt like a mile. My pulse pounded loudly in my ears. *They know*, my brain screamed. *They can tell. They're going to stop you.*

The alarms are going to go off. Someone was going to grab my arm and say, 'what do you think you're doing?'

But no one did.

No one even looked at me.

I reached the stairwell door—couldn't risk the elevator, too enclosed, too slow, too many chances for someone to see—and pushed through. The metal door closed behind me with a soft click that sounded like a gunshot in my heightened state.

My breath came in gasps. The bag pulled heavy against my shoulder. Heavy with another woman's child. Heavy with my crime. Heavy with something that felt like both damnation and deliverance.

Three floors down. My footsteps echoed on the concrete steps. The air was cool, and yet I was sweating. At any moment I expected to hear shouting above me, feet thundering down the stairs, baby Greta's mother screaming.

But there was only silence except for my ragged breathing and shoes scuffing against the steps.

Ground floor. I paused at the door, hand on the handle, terror flooding through me. *This is it. This is where I get caught.*

I pushed through anyway because I couldn't stop now. Couldn't go back. Could only go forward into whatever hell I was creating.

The lobby bustled with activity. Afternoon visiting hours meant families everywhere. Children holding balloons, teenagers texting, elderly couples moving slowly toward the exit. An information desk. A gift shop. A coffee stand.

Security guard by the door.

My heart stopped. He was going to know.

He held the automatic door open for me with a smile. "Have a good day, ma'am."

"Thank you," I whispered, and then I was outside in the humid August air with the sun beating down and traffic flowing past.

No alarms blaring.

No one chasing me.

I just... walked out.

My car was parked three blocks away on a side street. A deliberate choice to avoid parking garage cameras, attendants, and records of when I arrived and left.

I walked fast, but not too fast, trying to look normal even though normal people don't carry stolen babies in leather totes.

Every sound made me flinch. Every person who glanced my way felt like an informer.

But I made it. Three blocks that felt like three miles, and then I was at my car, the blue Honda Accord with Minnesota plates, and my hands were shaking so badly I dropped the keys twice before I managed to unlock the door.

I slid into the driver's seat, placed the bag carefully in the passenger seat, and just sat for a moment, gasping, my whole body trembling.

Oh god, what did I do?

I should go back. Put her in her bassinet and pretend this never happened and check myself into psychiatric care because clearly I'd lost my mind.

I couldn't let myself think that way.

Because I couldn't face going home with empty-arms, couldn't tell my husband our daughter died, and couldn't survive another loss.

"Piper," I whispered, my vision blurred with tears, my chest so tight I could barely breathe. "Your name is Piper Ann now. You're coming home with Momma."

Piper stirred and made a small sound. Not crying. Just... existing. My heart filled with contentment and love.

I smiled at my new daughter and then started the car, checked my mirrors, and merged into traffic.

I didn't look back.