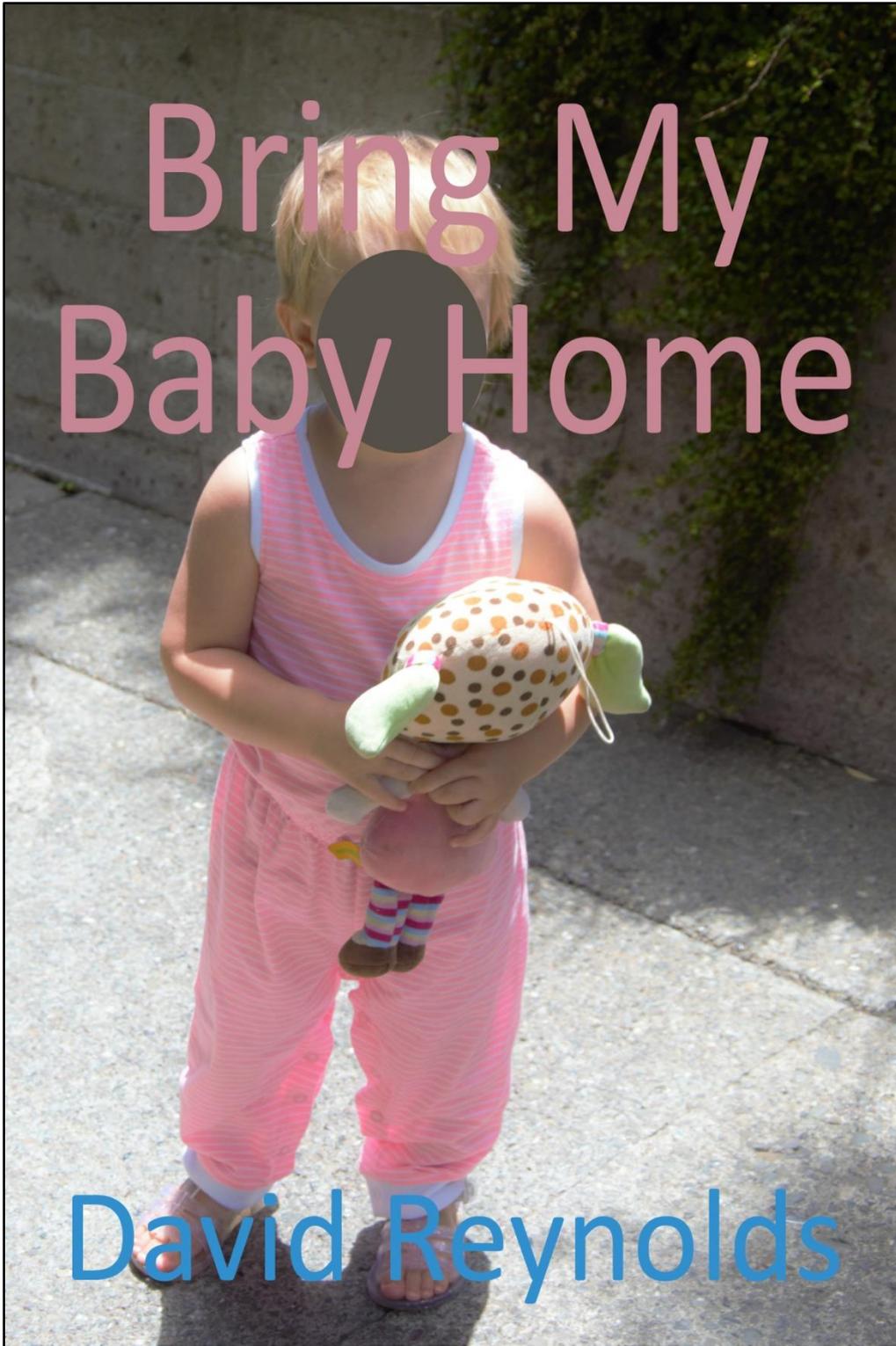


Bring My Baby Home

David Reynolds



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Bring My Baby Home

Chapter One

“Mike, can I ask a favor?” Mary, an aide at the Mid-Mountain Veterinary Clinic, requested early one Saturday afternoon.

“Sure,” he replied in a lousy imitation of a Southern drawl. “What I can do fer ya?”

“I noticed you driving a pick-up truck,” Mary explained. “I need to buy some firewood but the guy I’m getting it from charges a fortune to deliver it. I was hoping I could pay you to pick up the wood for me and bring it to my house. The weather is supposed to start getting cold soon and the snow can’t be too far behind.”

Stormy, Mike’s black and white Chihuahua mix was pulling on his leash, trying to get Mary’s attention. It worked: she reached down and petted him. “Good boy,” Mary told the dog.

“You have a way of soothing savage beasts, mainly dogs and the occasional upset owner, like me,” Mike told her. “I’m impressed and I’m grateful for all of the care you give my four-legged family members, so count me in. I’ll be glad to move the wood for you and if I have time, I’ll even help you folks stack it,” Mike told her, seeing a wedding ring on her finger.

“When are you getting the wood?” he asked.

“That’s part of the problem,” Mary added, glancing at her watch. “I need to go pick up my kids as soon as I get done here. I was supposed to meet my ex at this guy’s yard, but he flaked out on me yet again.” She made the last statement with a disgusted snort at the end.

“Mary,” Mike said, looking her straight in the eyes, “don’t worry about it. I’ll take Stormy home and feed him. After that I’m yours as long as you need me. Just call me and give me the wood seller’s address.”

“I’m not sure what the address is,” she admitted. “He only gave me some directions. Would you mind following me from here?”

“Sure, I’ll be glad to,” Mike replied while paying his vet bill. “I’ll be back here when, about four?”

“It might be earlier. Can I call you a little later?” Mary pleaded. “I need to go pick up my kids from the sitters and get going to this guy’s yard. I really need this wood and don’t want him to sell it to someone else.” She wrote her cellphone number down on the back of a clinic card and waited as Mike did the same.

The tall willowy brunette took Mike’s hand and shook it for the first time since they had know each other, and that was more than six years—and one childless divorce for Mike—ago.

He hopped in his older Chevy three-quarter ton diesel fume-spewing monster after ensuring Stormy’s collar was fastened to the seatbelt with a clip. Arriving home on a late Saturday afternoon often meant watching television, playing with his dog and two cats and doing his best to stave off boredom.

Mike went home, feeding Stormy and the two cats, giving the pooch a long walk down a deserted backcountry road as well. In addition, he tossed a handsaw, chainsaw, sledge hammer, a few wedges for splitting wood and some other tools, gloves and a back brace in the truck. He also cast an eye on his small pumpkin patch. Knowing Mary had kids—she occasionally mentioned a boy and girl on Mike’s infrequent office visits—he added a few small and medium pumpkins from the garden. “What do you say Stormy? Shall we give Mary’s kids something to carve into Jack-O-Lanterns since Halloween is rapidly approaching?” Mike asked his dog.

Stormy replied with a “woof” and wagging tail.

A few minutes after having his truck loaded and ready, Mike’s cell rang and Mary asked him to meet her at a spot most locals knew: Burt’s Bar and Belch, a restaurant with a reputation for cheap food and rotgut beer. Mike avoided the place, preferring a different source for his indigestion, like his ex-wife’s cooking.

The first person Mike saw while pulling into the parking lot was Mary standing outside a green Subaru station wagon that had seen better days.

Mary spotted Mike, waving at him before hopping back into her car and driving off, Mike trailing behind.

A few minutes later they arrived at an older industrial area where a sign said, “Cheap Wood.”

Spending a few minutes putting on his gloves and brace, Mike saw Mary was furious at the wood seller as he got closer to her. He could tell because her arms were flying all over the place and he could hear her yelling from more than twenty yards away. The older guy, who was wearing torn, stained overalls and a baseball cap, acted like he could care less.

“Listen lady, the price I quoted you was for the rounds, not split wood,” he explained. “If you want it split, it’s going to cost more and you’ll just have to wait. I’ve got other customers willing to pay a premium for my wood.”

Mike came up and lightly placed his hand on Mary’s shoulder just to let her know he was there. She glanced backward and up at Mike’s six-foot frame but didn’t shrug his hand off.

“Is there a problem here?” Mike asked.

“There sure is,” Mary said to Mike, spitting out each word. “This thief quoted me one price when I was shopping around for wood. I understood about the delivery fee but now he’s telling me that price is just for the raw round pieces. I have to split it myself. I might as well call someone else and get it from them even though I can’t afford it. At least this way the wood will be usable. Right now it’s not.”

Mike pulled Mary aside and motioned to the seller to wait. The man selling the wood acted like he had a long line of customers, though only Mary and Mike were in the lot.

“Is there a big price difference?” Mike asked.

“It’s about one hundred dollars more to have the wood broken into chunks I can use. I can’t afford that,” she admitted. “I’m having a hard time paying for this wood as it is. But without the wood, we’ll freeze. Our wood stove is our only source of heat.”

“In that case, don’t sweat it,” Mike told her. “You pay for the wood and I’ll split it for you whenever you want it done. I’ve got a splitting maul and some wedges with me so I’ve got the gear.” Looking down at his middle, which while not fat, wasn’t as thin as he would have liked like it either. “Besides,” he added, looking back at Mary, “I can use the exercise.”

“Are you sure about this?” Mary asked in surprise. “I feel like I’m imposing too much as it is just asking you to cart the wood to my house.”

Mike took one of Mary's unresisting hands and held it between his gloved paws. "I wouldn't make the offer if I had no intention of following through. Let's get the wood loaded into my truck and I'll follow you home. If you like I can split some of it tonight and the rest tomorrow," he offered.

"Let me think about that," Mary countered. "I had plans to go to a pumpkin patch with the kids tomorrow."

Mike kept his mouth shut and just stood there smiling. Mary had kids but given the roughly eight to ten year difference in their ages, she was a "kid," albeit a very nice looking one, in his gray eyes.

"Are you taking this load or not, lady?" the wood guy asked impatiently. "I've got someone else who wants it and is willing to pay me to split it."

Mike turned to him and replied sternly, "She'll take it so long as you can help load it into my truck."

The woodcutter had a nasty attitude, one Mike would never use toward a woman when calm. His ex, though, rightfully claimed he directed abusive language her way when angry.

The woodcutter turned to Mary and held out his hand palm up, making a scratching motion: the universal sign for "pay me." Mary pulled her large shoulder purse around, opened it and carefully counted out the cash. The cutter had Mike drive his truck back a little bit farther while he jumped into a small tractor with a scoop on the front, loaded the scoop with wood from a pile, shaking it and getting out to make sure the scoop was level, even removing a few smaller branches to make she was getting the bare minimum, before unceremoniously dumping the load into Mike's truck. "You're ready to go," he told Mike with a smirk.

The guy turned to Mary and added with a scowl on his face, "and lady, don't come back."

Mary got in her car and began pulling out of the lot. Just as her car got to the street, Mary's left hand came shooting out her open window, one digit raised in the air. She wasn't saying, "We're number one" based on the finger held in the air, Mike saw, causing him to smile.

“What goes around comes around, you jerk,” Mike yelled at the man when he passed by. The older guy returned Mary’s salute.

Not knowing where Mary lived, Mike followed her for the good half hour it took to drive from the woodcutter’s yard to her home. The first part was a drive from the valley where the tiny town of about twelve thousand people lived on up into the mountains to about the three thousand foot elevation. An altimeter on a suction cup stuck to Mike’s dash gave him the height.

Turning off the main road made Mike very glad his truck was a four-wheel-drive. After driving even higher along a roughly-graveled—and barely passable—road, they hit a dirt path. After that it was another five minutes up that rutted monstrosity, one to Mike’s eyes looked like a nearly vertical washboard and felt like it, too. “Good Shelby the Chevy,” he said to his truck. “At least you are still in decent shape.”

The light was already beginning to fade and there was a nip in the air as they pulled up near her home at what Mike figured was about 4,000 feet above sea level.

“No wonder you need wood,” he told Mary after they parked. “You must get a lot of snow.”

“I do and getting in and out of here to go to work is a real pain when that happens,” she admitted.

Mary’s house turned out to be a small, double-wide, three bedroom mobile home, about 1,000-1,200 square feet, standing underneath a stand of old, tall pines. Mike saw that though he’d complained to himself about the bumpy drive up, he could see why she was here.

“It seems like you can just about see heaven from here,” he told her, admiring the view looking west. The house was sitting in a low hollow on a ridge line with unobstructed views to the northeast and southwest.

After finding out where she wanted the wood stacked, Mike began backing up his truck. He saw through his rearview mirror that three things were missing: any other vehicles, stacks of firewood and a large propane tank.

There was a group of several smaller propane tanks—like the kind you would use for a gas barbecue grill—but none of the larger models common in remote rural areas to run heating or cooking stoves. He did see an electrical utility line coming in, though, so at

least Mary and her kids would have power ...except when the worst storms hit and the lines went down.

After parking the truck, he told Mary he was surprised she didn't have a propane tank and propane stove. "You must really get cold without it," he said in admiration.

"We freeze, which is why this wood is so important," she admitted while staring at her feet. "Between the cold and the damp, it's tough. We have a small electric water heater and the usual appliances, but making ends meet on my wages is tough. It would be better if the ex-asshole would pay his child support, but he seldom does."

Hearing that gave Mike the impression she was single, causing him to smile.

"Let me get the kids inside so I can change out of my work clothes and give you a hand," Mary said, Mike noting she was still in her dog-themed scrubs with a light green background.

He shook his head, telling her no. "I've got this," Mike said, standing in the truck bed. Making sure Mary was standing far to one side, he opened the tailgate and rolled the heavy, as in one hundred-plus pounds each, rounds of dry pine out of the truck onto the ground. Concentrating on what he was doing, Mike failed to see Mary lead her children inside.

Once he had the wood out of the truck, he started moving the rounds a little bit, setting some of them upright, making them easier to split.

Mary and her kids came out just as he finished unloading the bed of the truck, but not the cab.

"This is Adam," Mary told Mike by way of introduction, her hand on her son's shoulder, "and this is his sister Gwen. Adam is ten and Gwen is six."

Mike held out his hand to Adam and after he looked at his mom and Mary nodded, Adam shook it. Gwen came up and looked up at Mike. "Do you have any kids?" she asked, cutting to the chase.

Mike looked at Mary before replying, "Not really. My main kids are my doggie and my kitties, which your mommy helps take care of."

"Can I meet your doggie?" Gwen asked with the kind of innocence only a child can bring.

Again Mike looked at Mary, waiting until she nodded before speaking to her daughter. He may have met Mary six years before but this was the first time they had ever spoken to each other outside of the vet's. "You can meet my doggie but only if your mommy says it's OK," Mike told her.

"Kids it's getting cold," Mary told her children, pushing them gently toward the door. "Adam, why don't you go inside with Gwen? I need to talk to Mike for a minute."

Mary was now dressed in jeans and a baggy flannel shirt, which just like her scrubs, mostly hid her figure. What Mike could see was an exhausted woman based on the black circles under her eyes. She was slightly above medium height, medium build with dark brown hair tightly tied in a ponytail hanging down below her shoulders.

Mary still had her purse slung over her shoulder. "I promised to pay you to deliver the wood, so I'm going to deliver," she asked. "Is twenty dollars enough? That's all I can afford."

Mike waved her money away. "Mary, you've got some precious kids here. Keep your money. I'm doing this because you and your office have helped me out many times. Without your work, my dogs and cats wouldn't be healthy. In this case, all I'm doing is paying back a small amount of your kindness."

"Are you sure?" she repeated, though a smile appeared on her face. "I don't want any charity and you are helping me out more than I can say."

"I'm positive," Mike shot back, seeing relief come to Mary's face before he patted his middle again for emphasis. "Besides, like I said earlier, I need the exercise."

He turned his back and opened the passenger door of his truck. "And by the way, I said your kids might like these," he offered. Mary stood next to him and saw two medium and two small pumpkins sitting on the seat and the floor.

"They'll love them," she exclaimed, a smile appearing on her face. "Would you mind helping me bring them inside?"

Mike picked up the heaviest pumpkin and Mary got the next largest before they went up a short flight of steps to her front door.

Mary turned to Mike, saying, "I'm not the best housekeeper but I do what I can with what I have. You've been warned." With that, she opened the door.

Mike could tell they depended on wood for heat because the inside was about as cold as the outdoors, in the upper 40s to maybe low 50-degree range. There was a wood burning stove off to one side but it was empty as was a box for wood near it.

He still didn't know for certain if Mary was single, but it sure looked like it despite the plain gold band that he had seen earlier on her finger, a band that was not there now, he noticed.

"Kids, look what Mike brought for you," Mary shouted as they came in with the pumpkins. "What do you say when someone gives you something?"

"Thank-you," they said together. Gwen came up and gave Mike's legs a hug. Adam was more reserved, standing near his mom, acting as the protector, Mike saw.

"Adam," Mary said to her son, "Mike has two more small pumpkins in his truck. Would mind helping him bring them in, please?"

"Sure, mom," he replied. Adam followed Mike out to the truck and they grabbed the little round orange pumpkins.

"These are good for making pumpkin pie," he explained. That got a grin from Adam, Mike saw, "when you're done carving them that is. Let me know if you want more because I have another half-dozen waiting to be picked."

"Mary, can I borrow your son for a moment?" Mike asked when he and Adam got back indoors. "I'd like him to help me find some smaller chunks of wood. This place is too cold for me, and as far as I'm concerned, it's way too cold for any of you."

Mary gave Mike a shocked look followed by a smile. "Pardon my manners," she said staring at him, a questioning look on her face. "It's been a long time since any man was kind to the three of us."

Looking at Adam and Mike, she added, "Don't take too long and don't go very far. It's dark out there and I don't want you getting lost."

Adam and Mike went back to his truck where Mike pulled out a large flashlight. "Are there any downed limbs near here?" the man asked the boy.

Adam led Mike to some pine branches that were dry but too big and heavy for the boy to carry, but not too heavy for the adult. Breaking some of them into smaller chunks by leaning them against a rock or a tree trunk and kicking them, Mike had Adam hold the flashlight while he carried the smaller pieces back to the house.

The two males made several trips, one of which was used to gather pine needles and twigs to start a fire in the stove. They also stopped at Mike's truck while he pulled out a hand saw with big teeth and a curved handle. Looking at Adam, he explained this type of saw is used to cut smaller tree limbs.

After Mike dragged several more large limbs to the small but growing woodpile, he showed Adam how to get a good cut started. After that it was showing Adam that if he measured about the length of his hand and forearm, he could cut the larger branches down to a size that would fit into his mom's stove.

As Adam began cutting, Mike saw even more downed wood, including one large log, that he was going to attempt to drag back to her house in the dark.

It took a few minutes to rig up some open-ended eye hooks and a piece of chain from his truck, but Mike finally had a way of pulling the log. Gritting his teeth and being glad that distance running was his favorite way to relax, he took the chain in both hands and started pushing, trying to drag the old tree trunk. By putting his strong runner's legs into it, Mike was able to start moving the old tree trunk. "That thing must weigh a good five hundred pounds, maybe more," Adam said from nearby.

"Hey, free firewood is free firewood. At least Mr. Klutz here didn't stumble and hurt himself in the process of moving it to Mary's place," Mike told him.

Mike was sweating—he knew "perspiring" was the proper word, but when you are working like a pack mule, you stink like one—up a storm by the time he got the log back to Mary's mobile.

Adam was able to cut most of the stuff Mike had carried back, but left it on the ground. When Mike got back, he and Adam carried several armloads inside and neatly stacked the rest on a deck near the front door.

Following Adam back inside, Mike waited while Mary loaded the stove and started it using the pine needles and kindling.

"Mike, you didn't have to do this," she said in front of her kids while she was doing it. "We've survived for several years without any help. I appreciate it, but I don't want you to feel like you have to do it."

She wasn't giving Mike the brush off, but he had the feeling she was used to being rejected. "I'm sorry, but after the way that jerk at the wood lot treated you earlier, I can't stand idly by and let you freeze," Mike told them.

Putting a smile on his face, he added, "Don't worry about it. Everyone deserves a helping hand at times. You've helped me often enough at the vet's. Consider this a down payment on the payback. Now what time can I come back Sunday and split your wood?"

They settled on a time and Mary walked him out to his truck, her purse held protectively in her hand. It looked to Mike like she was going to try to pay him again.

He saw the worried look in her eyes and decided to beat her to it. "Don't worry," he stated, putting his hand softly on top of hers.

"I'm not going to ask you for anything, especially money," he explained. "I don't want anything you aren't ready to give ... and I'm not ready to take."

Mary stood there silently, her eyes downcast and her face, obviously sad.

He bent down and looked her in the eyes. "I'll be back tomorrow with my splitting gear. After that you won't see me until I come back to the vet's," he told her. "Is that acceptable? I don't want to intrude on your private life."

Mary nodded, turning her back. Mike moved away and started walking to his truck before feeling a hand on his arm. He turned around and Mary came into his arms. She buried her head into his shoulder and neck. Her shoulders barely touched his own chest but the rest of her stood away, avoiding contact. Mike wrapped his arms around her and held her, like a father would hold a child, while she cried silently.

"Thank-you," she explained through her tears. "Thank-you for being so understanding. I'm just not in a place where I can give much right now, either financially or emotionally. I hope you'll understand. My ex-husband hurt me, he hurt us, badly. And he continues to hurt us every chance he gets."

"Believe me," Mike replied, "If anyone can understand where you're at, I can. I'm in the same boat after my nasty divorce several years ago. I'm sure your heart and mine have the same types of scars on them."

Quoting a line from an old TV show he had happened across, Mike said, "When she said why she was leaving, it felt like she ripped out my heart, sliced it, diced it and set it

on fire. If you went through something remotely like that I can understand where you are coming from.”

Mary just nodded, though Mike sensed relief in the way she was holding herself.

He got into his truck and waved to her. “Until tomorrow morning then,” driving off.

And if Mary had been mistreated like that, then goddamn it, Mike vowed, he was going to do whatever he could to show her there were still some decent people left on the planet.

“It seems that Mary and I are both at the point where we could use a friend, one willing to give each other space and time to heal. So while romance may be out of the question, friendship is not,” he muttered under his breath while driving away.

Looking at the empty seat next to him as if Mary was sitting there instead of in her now warmer home, Mike made a promise. “I will be a friend to you and your kids as long as you let me. And if your ex is as violent as you said, I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe, no matter the cost to me.”

Later on Mike discovered it would have been a lot less painful if he hadn’t made that vow.

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About the Author

David B. Reynolds lives and works in California where many of his stories are set. A former weekly newspaper reporter and editor, he now works as a Certified Technical Writer.

In addition to spending much of his free time writing, the author is a frequent reader of action and science-fiction novels and short stories. Many of his stories pay homage to extraordinary works he read in the past.

If you enjoyed *Bring My Baby Home*, please leave a review on Reynolds' Amazon.com page. You can also download (in PDF format only) free sample first chapters—and some complete stories—at <https://storiesbydavereyn.wordpress.com>.