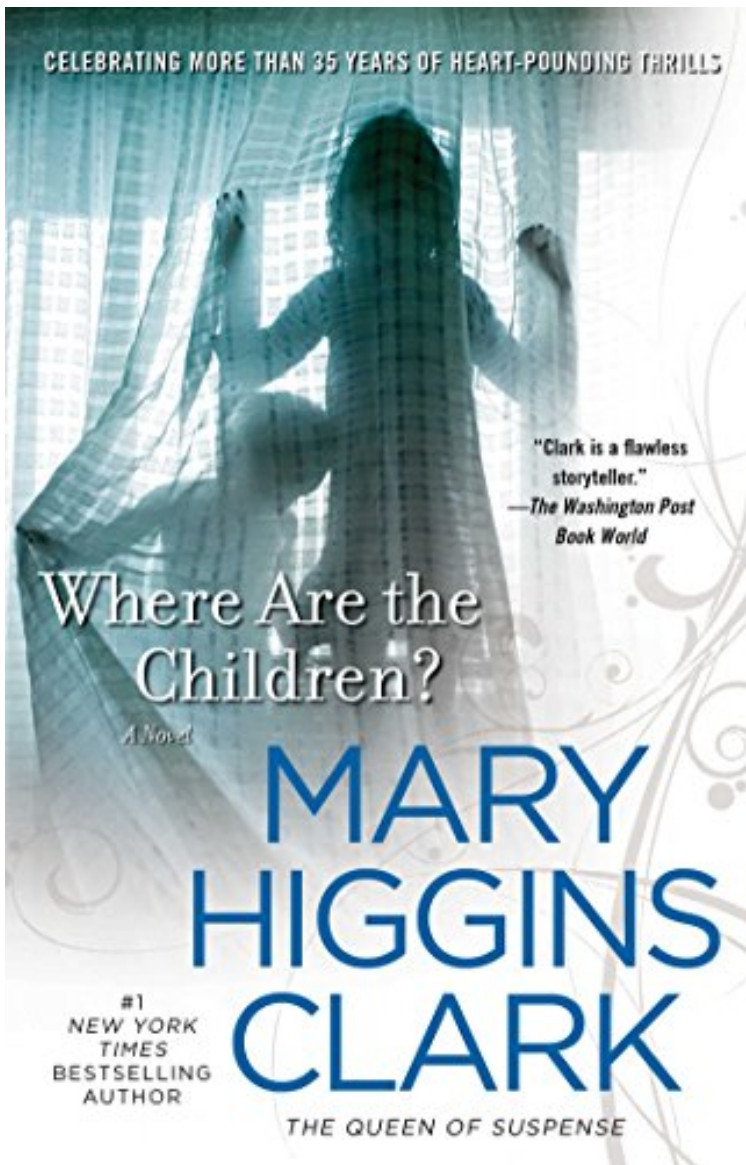


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Where Are The Children? (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNew York Times bestselling author Mary Higgins Clark, America's Queen of Suspense, launched her career with the publication of Where Are the Children?, her debut suspense thriller about a woman whose past holds a terrible secret.Nancy Harmon had been found guilty in a California court of murdering her two young children, but she was released from prison on a legal technicality. Deciding to make a fresh start, to change her identity, she left San Francisco and sought tranquillity on Cape Cod. Seven years later, Nancy is remarried and has two small children: five-year-old Michael and three-year-old Missy. Finally she feels that she has been able to reclaim all that she had lost. Then the nightmare begins again. One day a local Cape Cod paper runs an article about a famous California murder trial involving a mother

accused of killing her two children. Along with the article is a photo of Nancy. On that same morning, Michael and Missy disappear. They had been playing in the yard, but when she looked for them, they were gone...all that remained was Missy's red mitten. While Nancy becomes the prime suspect in the disappearance of her children, no one in the small Cape Cod town is aware of a stranger in their midst -- someone whose plans for revenge have been festering for seven long years.

Chapter One

Ray came down the stairs pulling the knot closed on his tie. Nancy was sitting at the table with a still-sleepy Missy on her lap. Michael was eating his breakfast in his poised, reflective way. Ray tousled Mike's head and leaned over to kiss Missy. Nancy smiled up at him. She was so darn pretty. There were fine lines around those blue eyes, but you'd still never take her for thirty-two. Ray was only a few years older himself, but always felt infinitely her senior. Maybe it was that awful vulnerability. He noticed the traces of red at the roots of her dark hair. A dozen times in the last year he'd wanted to ask her to let it grow out, but hadn't dared. "Happy birthday, honey," he said quietly. He watched as the color drained from her face. Michael looked surprised. "Is it Mommy's birthday? You didn't tell me that." Missy sat upright. "Mommy's birthday?" She sounded pleased. "Yes," Ray told them. Nancy was staring down at the table. "And tonight we're going to celebrate. Tonight I'm going to bring home a big birthday cake and a present, and we'll have Aunt Dorothy come to dinner. Right, Mommy?" "Ray...no." Nancy's voice was low and pleading. "Yes. Remember, last year you promised that this year we'd..." Celebrate was the wrong word. He couldn't say it. But for a long time he'd known that they would someday have to start changing the pattern of her birthdays. At first she'd withdrawn completely from him and gone around the house or walked the beach like a silent ghost in a world of her own. But last year she'd finally begun to talk about them...the two other children. She'd said, "They'd be so big now...ten and eleven. I try to think how they would look now, but can't seem to even imagine.... Everything about that time is so blurred. Like a nightmare that I only dreamed." "It's supposed to be like that," Ray told her. "Put it all behind you, honey. Don't even wonder what happened anymore." The memory strengthened his decision. He bent over Nancy and patted her hair with a gesture that was at once protective and gentle. Nancy looked up at him. The appeal on her face changed to uncertainty. "I don't think --" Michael interrupted her. "How old are you, Mommy?" he asked practically. Nancy smiled -- a real smile that miraculously eased the tension. "None of your business," she told him. Ray took a quick gulp of her coffee. "Good girl," he said. "Tell you what, Mike. I'll pick you up after school this afternoon and we'll go get a present for Mommy. Now I'd better get out of here. Some guy is coming up to see the Hunt place. I want to get the file together." "Isn't it rented?" Nancy asked. "Yes. That Parrish fellow who's taken the apartment on and off has it again. But he knows we have the right to show it anytime. It's a great spot for a restaurant and wouldn't take much to convert. It'll make a nice commission if I sell it." Nancy put Missy down and walked with him to the door. He kissed her lightly and felt her lips tremble under his. How much had he upset her by starting this birthday talk? Some instinct made him want to say, Let's not wait for tonight. I'll stay home and we'll take the kids and go to Boston for the day. Instead he got into his car, waved, backed up and drove onto the narrow dirt lane that wound through an acre of woods until it terminated on the cross-Cape road that led to the center of Adams Port and his office. Ray was right, Nancy thought as she walked slowly back to the table. There was a time to stop following the patterns of yesterday -- a time to stop remembering and look only to the future. She knew that a part of her was still frozen. She knew that the mind dropped a protective curtain over painful memories -- but it was more than that. It was as though her life with Carl were a blur...the entire time. It was hard to remember the faculty house on the campus, Carl's modulated voice...Peter and Lisa. What had they looked like? Dark hair, both of them, like Carl's, and too quiet...too subdued...affected by her uncertainty...and then lost -- both of them. "Mommy, why do you look so sad?" Michael gazed at her with Ray's candid expression, spoke with Ray's directness. Seven years, Nancy thought. Life was a series of seven-year cycles. Carl used to say that your whole body changed in that time. Every cell renewed itself. It was time for her to really look ahead...to forget. She glanced around the large, cheerful kitchen with the old brick fireplace, the wide oak floors, the red curtains and valances that didn't obstruct the view over the harbor. And then she looked at Michael and Missy.... "I'm not sad, darling," she said. "I'm really not." She scooped Missy up in her arms, feeling the warmth and sweet stickiness of her. "I've been thinking about your present," Missy said. Her long strawberry-blond hair curled around her ears and forehead. People sometimes asked where she got that beautiful hair -- who had been the redhead in the family? "Great," Nancy told her. "But think about it outside. You'd better get some fresh air soon. It's supposed to rain later and get very cold." After the children were dressed, she helped them on with their windbreakers and hats. "There's my dollar," Michael said with satisfaction as he reached into the breast

pocket of his jacket. "I was sure I left it here. Now I can buy you a present." "Me has money too." Missy proudly held up a handful of pennies. "Oh, now, you two shouldn't be carrying your money out," Nancy told them. "You'll only lose it. Let me hold it for you." Michael shook his head. "If I give it to you, I might forget it when I go shopping with Daddy." "I promise I won't let you forget it." "My pocket has a zipper. See? I'll keep it in that, and I'll hold Missy's for her." "Well..." Nancy shrugged and gave up the discussion. She knew perfectly well that Michael wouldn't lose the dollar. He was like Ray, well organized. "Now, Mike, I'm going to straighten up. You be sure to stay with Missy." "Okay," Michael said cheerfully. "Come on, Missy. I'll push you on the swing first." Ray had built a swing for the children. It was suspended from a branch of the massive oak tree at the edge of the woods behind their house. Nancy pulled Missy's mittens over her hands. They were bright red; fuzzy angora stitching formed a smile face on their backs. "Leave these on," she told her; "otherwise your hands will get cold. It's really getting raw. I'm not even sure you should go out at all." "Oh, please!" Missy's lip began to quiver. "All right, all right, don't go into the act," Nancy said hastily. "But not more than half an hour." She opened the back door and let them out, then shivered as the chilling breeze enveloped her. She closed the door quickly and started up the staircase. The house was an authentic old Cape, and the stairway was almost totally vertical. Ray said that the old settlers must have had a bit of mountain goat in them the way they built their staircases. But Nancy loved everything about this place. She could still remember the feeling of peace and welcome it had given her when she'd first seen it, over six years ago. She'd come to the Cape after the conviction had been set aside. The District Attorney hadn't pressed for a new trial because Rob Legler, his vital prosecution witness, had disappeared. She'd fled here, completely across the continent -- as far away from California as she could get; as far away from the people she'd known and the place she'd lived and the college and the whole academic community there. She never wanted to see them again -- the friends who had turned out not to be friends but hostile strangers who spoke of "poor Carl" because they blamed his suicide on her too. She'd come to Cape Cod because she'd always heard that New Englanders and Cape people were reticent and reserved and wanted nothing to do with strangers, and that was good. She needed a place to hide, to find herself, to sort it all out, to try to think through what had happened, to try to come back to life. She'd cut her hair and dyed it sable brown, and that was enough to make her look completely different from the pictures that had front-paged newspapers all over the country during the trial. She guessed that only fate could have prompted her to select Ray's real estate office when she went looking for a house to rent. She'd actually made an appointment with another realtor, but on impulse she'd gone in to see him first because she liked his hand-lettered sign and the window boxes that were filled with yellow and champagne mums. She had waited until he finished with another client -- a leathery-faced old man with thick, curling hair -- and admired the way Ray advised him to hang on to his property, that he'd find a tenant for the apartment in the house to help carry expenses. After the old man left she said, "Maybe I'm here at the right time. I want to rent a house." But he wouldn't even show her the old Hunt place. "The Lookout is too big, too lonesome and too drafty for you," he said. "But I just got in a rental on an authentic Cape in excellent condition that's fully furnished. It can even be bought eventually, if you like it. How much room do you need, Miss...Mrs....?" "Miss Kiernan," she told him. "Nancy Kiernan." Instinctively she used her mother's maiden name. "Not much, really. I won't be having company or visitors." She liked the fact that he didn't pry or even look curious. "The Cape is a good place to come when you want to be by yourself," he said. "You can't be lonesome walking on the beach or watching the sunset or just looking out the window in the morning." Then Ray had brought her up here, and immediately she knew that she would stay. The combination family and dining room had been fashioned from the old keeping room that had once been the heart of the house. She loved the rocking chair in front of the fireplace and the way the table was in front of the windows so that it was possible to eat and look down over the harbor and the bay. She was able to move in right away, and if Ray wondered why she had absolutely nothing except the two suitcases she'd taken off the bus, he didn't show it. She said that her mother had died and she had sold their home in Ohio and decided to come East. She simply omitted talking about the six years that had lapsed in between. That night, for the first time in months, she slept through the night -- a deep, dreamless sleep in which she didn't hear Peter and Lisa calling her; wasn't in the courtroom listening to Carl condemn her. That first morning here, she'd made coffee and sat by the window. It had been a clear, brilliant day -- the cloudless sky purple-blue; the bay tranquil and still; the only movement the arc of sea gulls hovering near the fishing boats. With her fingers wrapped around the coffee cup, she'd sipped and watched. The warmth of the coffee had flowed through her body. The sunbeams had warmed her face. The tranquillity of the scene enhanced the calming sense of peace that the long, dreamless sleep had begun. Peace...give me peace. That

had been her prayer during the trial; in prison. Let me learn to accept. Seven years ago...Nancy sighed, realizing that she was still standing by the bottom step of the staircase. It was so easy to get lost in remembering. That was why she tried so hard to live each day...not look back or into the future. She began to go upstairs slowly. How could there ever be peace for her, knowing that if Rob Legler ever showed up they'd try her again for murder; take her away from Ray and Missy and Michael? For an instant, she dropped her face into her hands. Don't think about it, she told herself. It's no use. At the head of the stairs she shook her head determinedly and walked quickly into the master bedroom. She threw open the windows and shivered as the wind blew the curtains back against her. Clouds were starting to form, and the water in the bay had begun to churn with whitecaps. The temperature was dropping rapidly. Nancy was enough of a Cape person now to know that a cold wind like this usually blew in a storm. But it really was still clear enough to have the children out. She liked them to have as much fresh air as possible in the morning. After lunch, Missy napped and Michael went to kindergarten. She started to pull the sheets from the big double bed and hesitated. Missy had been sniffing yesterday. Should she go down and warn her not to unzip the neck of her jacket? It was one of her favorite tricks. Missy always complained that all her clothes felt too tight at the neck. Nancy deliberated an instant, then pulled the sheets completely back and off the bed. Missy had on a turtleneck shirt. Her throat would be covered even if she undid the button. Besides, it would take only ten or fifteen minutes to strip and change the beds and turn on a wash. Ten minutes at the most, Nancy promised herself, to quiet the nagging feeling of worry that was insistently telling her to go out to the children now. Copyright 1975 by Mary Higgins Clark. Revue de presse "Indescribably suspenseful...a special kind of terror." -- San Francisco Chronicle