Another woman CARRIED MY BABY

Sally Williams speaks to two mothers who used surrogates to realise their dreams

'We were there at the birth – my husband cut the cord'

The four of us: Alice and Stephen with son Thomas and Hope, now three

Alice Jolly, 48, is a writer and lives in Stroud, Gloucestershire, with her husband, Stephen Kinsella, 54, a lawyer, and their son, Thomas, 12. Their daughter Hope, three, was born with a surrogate in America.

I'd always wanted children and Thomas was born not long after our first wedding anniversary, when I was 35. However, there was a problem during labour. The placenta started to detach, which is very dangerous because if the placenta pulls away completely, the oxygen supply is cut off from the baby. Fortunately the gynaecologist was able to speed up labour and get Thomas out quickly.

We wanted another baby and I was really pleased when I finally got pregnant three years later. But at four months I started bleeding with a detached placenta again. The hospital said the baby may live or die; there was nothing they could do. I was told to lie on my back and rest, but the bleeding got more and more serious and after two months, I went into hospital.

Laura was born two weeks later at a little over six months gestation. My waters broke and she was too small to survive the labour. They couldn't give me an epidural because of other drugs I was taking; they could only give me morphine. The labour was very painful, which is often the way with a stillbirth. After Laura was born I held her and she was so complete and warm, we couldn't believe she was dead. The worst thing was the silence. Awful. We were devastated.

Over the next few years, I had three miscarriages, two failed attempts at IVF, and struggled with the loss of Laura. It was a terrible time. On the fifth anniversary of Laura's death, I was feeling really low and I said to my husband, "This hasn't really got any better has it?" I expected him to say, "Oh come on, we're doing fine." But he just looked at me and said, "No." That was the moment when we thought, okay, we're going to try surrogacy.

> I was worried surrogacy would be a legal mess

I'd heard about it before and thought it was a terrible idea that would land us in a legal mess. I also had trouble with it being exploitative. But the more I talked to agencies and read about the experiences of surrogate mothers, the more it became clear these women are not oppressed or exploited, they do it because they want to help.

We chose America because there's a defined legal structure so it tends to work very well. Surrogacy agreements are binding in the States, whereas in England it's possible for a surrogate to change her mind and the law may be on her side. We chose my husband's sperm and donor eggs because by then I was in my mid-forties, and I thought if we have an egg donor who's a young, healthy woman and a surrogate who is young and healthy, we should have a good chance of it working. Also, that way, the surrogate is not handing over her flesh and blood. She is like an incubator, carrying a child for you, and that is a big emotional difference.

IARC, the agency in Minnesota, sent us a database of around 150 egg donors; each is paid several thousand pounds. It is very weird because you think, what am I meant to be looking for? They don't give you their names or IQ details, but there was a lot on the donor's health background, like if a sibling had asthma or cancer, and their occupation.

> The birth was hugely emotional. Hope was born healthy – we were all in tears

Our main concern was to find someone around the same weight, height and colouring as me. I spotted this woman and she wasn't amazingly beautiful, but she had a very friendly face. She was a nurse who'd married young and had problems conceiving. She went on to have fertility treatment and give birth to triplets, but said she'd never forgotten being told she might never have children.

My husband and I never felt the need to meet the egg donor, but we know her name and address because we agreed that if the child wanted to contact her in the future, that would be fine. I think it's very hard to say to a child, "Yes, you were conceived by a donor, and no, we don't know anything about her," so we wanted to find someone who was willing to be known.

Surrogates are in shorter supply than donors but we were lucky because the surrogate the agency suggested was amazing. We spoke to Amanda and found out she has a daughter of her own and is in a same-sex relationship. She'd read about surrogacy when she was young and had thought it was something she might like to do. She said, "I'm not that good at many things" – which actually isn't true – "but I'm very good at having babies."

In January 2011, my husband flew to the clinic where our donor's eggs were fertilised with his sperm. He came home after 48 hours and the embryos were later transferred into Amanda.

One evening about four weeks later, my husband's mobile rang. It was Amanda saying, "Congratulations, I'm pregnant." I said, "No, congratulations to you." We weren't sure who we were meant to be congratulating. We emailed each other throughout the pregnancy, and the agency remained very involved and dealt with all the payments that are made in instalments throughout the pregnancy.

We had discussions about whether Thomas, who was nine then, was going to come out with us when the baby was due. I'd thought he'd maybe stay with my mother but he said, "No, I need to come to America, because how will I know if my sister is alright, if I'm not there?"

For the last two months of Amanda's pregnancy, we were walking around with our passports in case the baby came early. In fact she went the full term. We knew Amanda was going to be induced and flew out a few days ahead.

The actual birth was hugely emotional. My husband and I were waiting outside the delivery suite and the nurses came out and said, "I think the baby is coming now, would you like to come in?" We went in and my husband cut the cord, as agreed beforehand. However, being back in the delivery suite brought back everything that had happened with Laura. I was terrified that something was going to go wrong. The nurses sat me on a chair because I suddenly couldn't stand up. But it was fantastic because Hope was born screaming and was so obviously strong and healthy. We were all in floods of tears.

Amanda was very clear: she wanted to see Hope but not hold her. The hospital set it up so she was in one room and we were with Hope in another. Amanda also expressed some milk and continued to do for ten days, dropping it off at the hospital where we stayed for three days, and then at the apartment we rented. We stayed for three weeks, to sort out the paperwork and then flew back as a family of four.

My mother, who's 76, was amazing from the very beginning. The idea of surrogacy was very strange to her, but she said that if this works, then do it. My in-laws are staunchly Catholic, so I was worried about their reaction, but they've been really supportive. To them, Hope is absolutely their granddaughter.

Thomas understands the idea of surrogacy, but he's also slightly forgotten about how Hope arrived. She's his sister, and that's it, and he thinks she's wonderful.

I'm still in touch with Amanda and she's gone on to have a baby for another couple. I think our egg donor has continued to donate eggs. Both feel happy and proud of what they've done. So in our case there isn't a downside. It was hugely complicated and surrogacy in the States is expensive, between $50,000 and $100,000 – we used our savings – but we will never regret it because we have a fantastic daughter.

Alice's memoir, Dead Babies and Seaside Towns *(Unbound) is out now. Half the profits will be donated to Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity.*

Turn the page for another mother's story ➤