

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK



Nights At Aunt Rina's

CHRISTINE TEDDY

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Christine Teddy

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Contents

Chapter One: The Move.....	6
Chapter Two: First Night, First Fear	8
Chapter Three: Porridge and Permission	11
Chapter Four: The Laundry Ritual.....	13
Chapter Five: Sleepover Invitations.....	15
Chapter Six: Garden Camp and Midnight Talk.....	18
Chapter Seven: A Talk with Mum.....	21
Chapter Eight: Jamie's Room, Remade	23
Chapter Nine: Maisie's Secret	25
Chapter Ten: A Rainy Day and a New Word	27
Chapter Eleven: One Accident, No Apologies	29
Chapter Twelve: Sleepover with Maisie	31
Chapter Thirteen: The Box in the Cupboard.....	34
Chapter Fourteen: The Changing Table	36
Chapter Fifteen: A Letter to Mum	38
Chapter Sixteen: The Day Jamie Called Himself a Baby.....	40
Chapter Seventeen: Wet Sheets and a Smile.....	42
Chapter Eighteen: A Visitor in the Nursery.....	46
Chapter Nineteen: Rina's Rules for Baby Days	49
Chapter Twenty: Letters to Mum.....	52
Chapter Twenty-One: Aunt Rina's Little School.....	54
Chapter Twenty-Two: The Picnic That Changed Everything.....	57
Chapter Twenty-Three: A Visitor in the Night.....	60
Chapter Twenty-Four: A Nursery of Their Own	62

Nights at Aunt Rina's

Chapter Twenty-Five: When Mummies Come Calling	65
Chapter Twenty-Six: Baby Patrick's First Words	68
Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Registry Book	70
Chapter Twenty-Eight: A Visit from the Outside World ...	72
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Afternoon in the Garden	75
Chapter Thirty: The Crib Next Door	77
Chapter Thirty-One: The Boy in the Hallway	80
Chapter Thirty-Two: Dress-Up Afternoon	83
Chapter Thirty-Three: Maisie's Visit	86
Chapter Thirty-Four: A Day in the Village	89

Chapter One: The Move

Jamie sat stiffly in the backseat of the taxi, arms folded tightly around his backpack. The driver hummed to the radio, oblivious to the storm inside the seventeen-year-old boy. Outside, the countryside rolled past, fields and fences blurred by the motion and by the thoughts Jamie couldn't stop spinning.

He hadn't cried when his mum and dad told him they were divorcing, not even when the yelling stopped or when his father left with half of the living room furniture. But when they told him he'd be living with his aunt, "just for a while, until we sort things out" he'd felt something crumble. This sounded like the worst thing possible to happen.

Aunt Rina was the sort of relative you sent postcards to but never actually visited. She lived in the middle of nowhere, grew her own herbs, and signed birthday cards with stickers of bees and smiling moons. Jamie barely knew her and like so many relatives in their far-flung family, he had no particular desire to do so either.

Finally, her house loomed at the end of a gravel driveway. White wood, blue shutters, and a riot of purple flowers along the fence line. A warm light glowed from the windows like the whole house had been waiting for him. So far, so good.

At least it isn't a dump! he thought to himself sullenly.

He stepped out of the cab, clutching his duffel bag. The air smelled like flowers and wood smoke, but before he could knock, the front door swung open.

"Well, there you are," Rina said as if he were five years old and late for tea. She wore an oversized cardigan, a paint-streaked apron, and a bun that had mostly fallen down. It wasn't a great first impression.

Jamie managed a nod. She didn't hug him but just reached out, took his bag like it weighed nothing, and stepped aside.

"Shoes off, please. I just mopped the floor."

The first impressions weren't improving.

Nights at Aunt Rina's

He obeyed, padding across the cool tiles in his socks. The house was strange, and old-fashioned but calm and gentle in a way his parents' place never was. Handmade things everywhere. Quilts on the back of chairs. Tiny birds carved into window frames. The smell of cinnamon and something warm baking in the oven.

First impressions were suddenly improving somewhat.

His room was upstairs, small but tidy with a sloped ceiling, a wooden bed with a blue-checkered quilt, and a big window with a view of the garden.

"I put fresh sheets on this morning," Rina said, setting down his bag. "Bathroom's next door. You'll figure things out. If you need anything, just ask."

Jamie stared at the bed. His stomach tightened. Fresh sheets.

He turned toward her. "Thanks," he said, too quietly. His fear was rising and while some things about his new abode were good, there were other things that were not.

Rina just smiled and nodded. "Sleep well tonight, dear heart. You're safe now."

Then she left, humming softly as she walked downstairs.

Chapter Two: First Night, First Fear

Jamie stood in the centre of the room for a long time after Rina left, unsure what to do. The house was quiet, unusually quiet compared to his old house. There was no television murmuring in another room, no angry voices, no tension humming under the floorboards. Just the gentle tick of a clock in the hallway and a distant rustle of wind through trees. He breathed slowly feeling some of the tension dissipate. But not all of it.

He changed into his pyjamas quickly, his heart pounding. The bottoms were soft cotton, and light grey, chosen carefully to look normal. His secret wasn't something he could afford to let slip, not here, not ever.

He hadn't had a dry night in over a year. And before that, there was only the occasional dry night.

His parents never really talked about it, except to say he needed to "grow out of it" or that he should "take more responsibility." They bought plastic bed protectors that crinkled under the sheets and gave him guilt with their silence. They had cared enough for some protection, but not enough to truly understand or care for him in a way that would explain why a seventeen-year-old was still wetting the bed every night.

Jamie had gotten good at cleaning up before anyone noticed. He had his systems, his routines. Towels under the blanket. An alarm on his phone, not to wake up dry, but to wake early enough to hide it. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the quilt back cautiously. Crisp sheets. No plastic sound underneath. No visible protector. His stomach flipped.

I'll just stay awake, he thought. I'll wait until morning. Then there's no chance of it happening.

He lay back, stiff and watchful. The bed creaked gently beneath him. He could hear an owl outside, and the occasional distant thump from the pipes in the walls. They were oddly calming

Nights at Aunt Rina's

to him. Time passed. He scrolled through his phone until the battery warned him, then lay in the dark with his thoughts.

Eventually, his eyelids grew heavy. His body didn't care about plans. It was tired, tired from the move, tired from the years of holding everything in. And he was deeply stressed and anxious. Jamie slipped under, unaware that the moment he stopped trying to stay dry was the moment he finally slept deeply.

He woke before dawn, throat dry and body clammy. The familiar dread hit instantly. He didn't even have to check. He lay there frozen, blinking at the pale light beginning to peek through the curtains. The sheets were warm, wet, and heavy around his legs. His heart pounded in his ears.

No. Not the first night. She'll throw me out before I'm even here a week!

He sat up and began his usual damage control. He pulled off the quilt and peeled back the soaked fitted sheet with shaky hands. Thankfully, there was a thin waterproof pad underneath, barely noticeable, not crinkly like the old ones. But still, it had done service... barely. He noticed with a start that his wet sheet patch had reached the edge of the protector. Any wetter... and the mattress would have taken the brunt of his nightly humiliation.

He bundled the sheets into a tight wad and crept out into the hallway. The laundry was downstairs, tucked behind the kitchen. The floorboards creaked under his weight.

Jamie found the laundry basket and shoved everything to the bottom. He tiptoed back upstairs, wiped the mattress pad with a cloth he found in the bathroom, and remade the bed with a spare set of sheets from the closet. By the time the sun had risen, he was dressed and sitting on the windowsill with a book he wasn't really reading. It was only the first night of what he assumed was going to be a few months of staying with his Aunt.

When Rina came upstairs, she gave his bed a quick glance. "Sleep alright?"

Nights at Aunt Rina's

Jamie nodded too quickly. "Yeah. Fine."

She didn't say anything. Didn't comment on the slightly uneven bedding or the soft scent of laundry detergent wafting through the room.

She just smiled at him, then added, "I made porridge. I think you'll like it. Come on down and join me. It's a lovely day outside."

Then she walked back down the stairs.

Chapter Three: Porridge and Permission

The kitchen was warm with morning light when Jamie came downstairs, the walls painted soft, yellow and cluttered with shelves of spices, plants in teacups, and old postcards. The smell of oats and honey wrapped around him like a blanket. It was the classic 'old aunt' look but as he walked in, he felt a degree of comfort he had never felt in his own place with its ultra-modern kitchen, all the gadgets anyone would want but with an undercurrent of perpetual tension.

Rina was at the stove, stirring porridge in a deep pot with a wooden spoon that looked older than Jamie. She glanced over her shoulder as he came in but didn't say anything right away. He sat at the table, which was covered in a floral oilcloth and held a basket of apples, an open jar of jam, and two bowls, one empty, one waiting.

"I didn't know if you liked it thick or thin," Rina said, spooning steaming porridge into the bowl in front of him. "But I made it the way I like it. Which is practically glue."

Jamie gave a faint smile. "Glue's okay. I kinda like it all sticky and stuff."

Rina sat across from him with her own bowl, plopping a large spoonful of stewed apples on top. She pushed the jar of honey toward him. "Use as much as you want. It's local. Tastes better than anything in stores."

They ate in a comfortable silence for a few minutes. Jamie was grateful for that. The porridge was rich and warm, and something about it made his shoulders relax. And as he relaxed he realised just how long it had been since he'd been that way. He thought maybe she'd say something about the laundry. Or ask if everything was alright. Or worse, pretend not to know. But instead, halfway through her bowl, Rina said in the same tone someone might use to comment on the weather, "You know... I used to wet the bed too. Well past seventeen."

Nights at Aunt Rina's

Jamie's spoon froze halfway to his mouth.

She didn't look at him. She didn't try to make eye contact. She just took another bite, chewed thoughtfully, and then added, "I was a sleepwalker too. Walked straight out the front door once. Ended up in the neighbour's doghouse. Didn't even wake up. At least you don't sleepwalk!"

Jamie blinked at her, the porridge going cold in his mouth. He swallowed and stared at his bowl. "Did... did anyone find out?"

Rina grinned a little. "Of course. My mum. She made me tea when I got back inside. We had a good laugh. The dog wasn't thrilled, though."

Jamie didn't speak. His throat felt tight.

"But I did wet the bed, yes," she continued, more gently. "For years. Some nights worse than others. I remember the shame like it had teeth. It went on a lot older than you are now."

Jamie looked down, face hot.

Rina's voice softened even more. "You don't have to hide anything here. Not from me. I noticed the sheets this morning. I took care of it. It's no big deal."

He looked up at her, eyes wide. "You didn't have to—"

"I wanted to," she interrupted. "Because you're my nephew. And because I love you already." Jamie stared at her, completely still. "You are not a problem to fix, Jamie," she said. "You're just someone who sometimes needs help with the laundry. And I've got plenty of soap and a half-decent washing machine. I keep planning on getting a new one... but you know... some things just take time and you never get around to it."

He didn't know what to say. His chest felt tight. A lump rose in his throat. He fought it back. Rina reached across the table and gently tapped his bowl with her spoon. "Eat up. It's terrible when it's cold. Hot glue is great. Cold glue is... well, you don't want to find out."

Jamie gave a shaky little laugh and nodded. He took another bite and for the first time in a long while, it tasted like home.

Chapter Four: The Laundry Ritual

Jamie didn't know when it all started to feel normal. Maybe it was the third morning. Or maybe the fourth, when he didn't even flinch as he pulled his wet sheets into a bundle and walked them down the stairs like it was an everyday event... which it was for him at least.

The first few times had still felt like a failure, the quiet, sour humiliation he carried on his shoulders like a heavy blanket, but Rina never commented, never teased. She only smiled if she passed him in the hallway and sometimes handed him a new dryer ball or a silly clothespin shaped like a duck. One morning, he found a small wooden sign on the laundry shelf that read, "*Mistakes welcome here.*" It hadn't been there before. He smiled at the thought. On the sixth morning, she surprised him.

"You know," she said, sipping tea at the kitchen table while he padded by with his bundle, "I've been thinking we should make mornings a ritual."

Jamie stopped mid-step. "A what?"

"A ritual," she said, with a twinkle in her eye. "Something sacred. You bring me the bundle of wet sheets, I make tea, and then we fold the clean sheets together. Like a dance. With soap and grace."

He laughed despite himself. "That's... weird."

Rina raised an eyebrow. "Weird is where the good stuff lives. Besides, laundry is one of the few truly forgiving things in life. You make a mess. It cleans up. No lectures. No judgment."

Jamie looked at the bundle in his arms. "I guess that's true. Maybe weird *is* good!"

"Of course it is." She stood, took the sheets from him, and tossed them into the washer. "Let me teach you the secret family recipe."

He raised an eyebrow. "For detergent?"

"For resilience," she said. "You pour the soap and I'll tell you the rest."

Nights at Aunt Rina's

He turned the cap in his hand as she added, "Step one: Admit the mess. Step two: Add love and water. Step three: Tumble until soft."

Jamie laughed again, but there was something real in it now, something lighter.

"Step four?" he asked.

Rina grinned. "Fold with someone who gets it. And trust me, I really get it!"

That afternoon, they hung the sheets on the line instead of using the dryer. The sun was warm and the breeze gentle, making the white fabric dance like sails on a still sea. Jamie clipped the corners while Rina handed him pins and told stories. She talked about being his age. About forgetting her books on purpose just to spend the day in the school library. About writing poems in the margins of her math homework. About how her mother always folded her pyjamas with a kiss tucked inside. The wind made the sheets flap against Jamie's face, and he let them.

There was no hiding here. No secret anymore. Just the smell of soap, the creak of clothespins, and the quiet sound of someone being fully seen and still fully safe. He didn't know if he was healing or just finally breathing. But as the sun dropped low and the sheets grew dry and warm and soft, Jamie knew one thing for sure: There was something sacred in this little laundry ritual. And it had nothing to do with stains.

Chapter Five: Sleepover Invitations

The first time Jamie saw the girl with the notebooks, she was sitting cross-legged in the town library, surrounded by books she clearly hadn't borrowed yet.

Rina had suggested he get out for a bit and explore the local area at least. "Go on," she'd said that morning, packing a tote bag with snacks and a water bottle. "There's more to life than laundry and porridge. The library's quiet and warm. My favourite combination. You like books too, so there's lots to be found."

He walked the winding road into the town centre, feeling both self-conscious and curious. It had been weeks since he'd tried to spend time in public. Since the move, his world had shrunk to Aunt Rina's gentle orbit. Now the town square, with its sleepy shopfronts and old stone fountain, felt enormous.

The library was small but tall, filled with uneven floors, dusty sunbeams, and more windows than seemed necessary. He wandered past the shelves for a while before collapsing into a beanbag in the back corner. That's when he noticed her.

A girl about his age with long braids, a hoodie two sizes too big and socks with pink whales on them. She was sketching something on the back of a paper bag, surrounded by open books about mushrooms and birds. She didn't notice him at first. She was mouthing words to herself like she was reciting a spell.

Jamie tried to look away, but she glanced up suddenly, blinked, and then smiled like she'd been expecting him.

"Are you Rina's nephew?" she asked unexpectedly.

He blinked. "Uh. Yeah."

"I thought so. You've got the same look. Like you've seen the inside of a wind chime."

"...Thanks... I think?"

"I mean it nicely," she said. "She talks about you. Says you're settling in. That your heart is soft and you're learning to let it stay that way."

Nights at Aunt Rina's

Jamie stared, unsure whether to feel flattered or exposed.

"Yikes!" he exclaimed. "What's that mean? Sounds like bad poetry to me!"

"I'm Maisie," she continued. "I live just past the bakery. My mum sells beeswax wraps and weird soaps at the Saturday market. She knows your Aunt. They're like both a bit weird but still pretty nice."

He nodded slowly. "I'm Jamie."

"Hi, Jamie." She offered him a paper bag with a sketch of a turtle on it. "Want to help me write a fake school newsletter about imaginary birds?"

He blinked again. "That's... er... specific."

She shrugged. "Sometimes the real world's too loud. You can hide in made-up ones until you're strong enough to come back. My mum tells me that all the time."

Jamie hesitated, then took the bag. "I guess so... alright."

Over the next week, they met again—twice at the library, once at the bakery (where she insisted he try the apricot slice), and once at Aunt Rina's kitchen table, where Maisie burst in without knocking and handed Jamie a newsletter titled "The Fluff-Foot Gazette."

Rina just smiled. "Maisie's always welcome. She knows where the biscuits live. Heart of gold and very quiet feet! I never know she's here until I trip over her!"

Maisie didn't say much about herself, but Jamie got the feeling she understood things without needing them explained. She didn't ask why he avoided sleepovers, didn't press when he looked tired in the morning. She just made up stories and doodled things and occasionally bumped her socked foot against his under the table like a cat testing affection. It was the kind of friendship that made him smile inside and once again, he realised how long it had been since he had smiled... inside.

One afternoon, as the sky turned pink and soft, she looked up from her notebook and said, "Do you want to have a sleepover sometime?"

Nights at Aunt Rina's

Jamie froze.

She noticed. "It's okay if you don't want to."

"I—" He swallowed. "I haven't... done that in a while."

Maisie nodded. "It doesn't have to be anything. We could camp out in Rina's garden. Make hot chocolate. Fall asleep telling stories. You can bring your own blanket fort if you want. No pressure. No rules. Unless you think we're too old for sleepovers?"

"Er... no. They are great..."

Jamie stared at her. She wasn't teasing. She wasn't even really asking. She was just offering, like someone handing over a flower with no expectation it be kept. And slowly, something in him loosened.

"...Maybe," he said. "Yeah. Maybe I'd like that. And no... we're not too old."

Maisie smiled wide, her braids bouncing. "Good. I already made us matching name tags."