

An AB Discovery Book

CHARLOTTE DOLLY



the
nursery
door

*becoming a
baby again*

The Nursery Door

by
Charlotte Dolly

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The Nursery Door

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Chapter 1 – Stains and Silence

The sheets were wet again.

Max didn't move at first. He lay still, letting the cold patch soak deeper into the back of his T-shirt. His jaw clenched. Maybe if he stayed like that—perfectly still—it would go away. Maybe the sour smell of urine wouldn't be crawling up his nose. Maybe the ache in his stomach wouldn't feel like shame, heavy and boiling behind his ribs. It was the same every bloody morning.

Shit! Why me? Why is life such a shitty deal?

He could hear movement downstairs, plates clinking, a chair scraping the linoleum. The house always felt loud in the morning, as if every sound was trying to wake the neighbours, but no one ever raised a voice to say, "Good morning." No mornings were ever 'good'. They were mostly tolerable... but not always.

With a groan, he sat up. The sheet clung to his skin as he peeled it off. The mattress protector—cheap, plastic and already yellowing—crackled beneath him. He had tried to hide it the first few times. Flipping the sheet, throwing his pyjama pants in the bottom of the laundry hamper, splashing water on the spot. But they always knew. Pee-wet sheets and pyjamas were hard to hide.

Mrs. Keller didn't knock.

"You done in there?" she called through the door.

Max didn't answer. He stripped the bed, clutching the wet linens in a bundle like they were full of secrets. When he opened the door, Mrs Keller took one look and sighed loud enough for the neighbours to hear.

"Again? Shit, Max. What are you, three?"

She didn't wait for a reply. She just stepped aside and pointed toward the laundry.

He trudged down the hallway, trying not to meet Mr. Keller's eyes as the man hunched over his morning paper. He didn't bother looking up at him.

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"Better not stink up the washer again," he muttered as if that was even a real thing.

The washing machine groaned as Max shoved the bedding in. He didn't bother sorting anything. What was the point? It would happen again tomorrow. It always did. And they would scold him, again. And nothing would change. Max sighed inwardly so no one could hear his despair. Nothing ever changed and every morning was wet or soaked. The only variation was the size of the patch, hardly a call for joy. He stared at the spinning drum for a moment, his reflection warping with every cycle. Then he turned away, stomach knotted, and went back upstairs to change.

It hadn't always been this bad but perhaps worse, maybe, in other ways.

He remembered another foster home with floral wallpaper and a woman who demanded he call her "Nana Rita," even though she was no one's grandmother and certainly not his. She kept the thermostat at 16 degrees and locked the fridge at night. When he wet the bed there, she made him hang his sheets out the front window with a sign that read, "Teenager Who Can't Hold It."

The neighbours didn't say anything. Not even when she made him wear a towel pinned between his legs as punishment. He'd had to walk around the house like that—eyes down, face burning, pretending he wasn't twelve, pretending it didn't matter.

After that, he stopped drinking water after 4 pm. It never helped. Nothing ever helped. As soon as he fell asleep, his bladder gave up and it had always been so.

Life is seriously fucked up!

School was a blur. Max drifted through the day like a ghost with a hoodie. He didn't speak much at all. He barely noticed the math quiz or the whispers behind him but he always heard them. Freak. Leaks. Pervert. His bedwetting was not a secret. His supposedly helpful foster parents and more than one place had 'helpfully' told pretty much everyone about it in the silly hope that a bit of

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embarrassment would end it. As if that was ever a plan and in the entire history of the universe had ever worked. He got teased.

But today... today he had a plan. A need.

The little chemist near the bus stop was quiet. It wasn't part of a chain, and the woman behind the counter had bad eyesight. He'd tested that once, asking if she sold "incontinence stuff." She'd blinked at him like he was speaking Martian, then pointed vaguely down aisle three. He waited until she went into the storeroom.

He moved quickly. His fingers shook, but he didn't let them slow him. One packet—Tena Slip Maxi, Medium. Another... Girls' Cotton Briefs, Size 10-12, soft pastel colours and tiny bows. The moment his hands touched them, something inside him loosened.

It wasn't sexual. It wasn't even about control. It was about something that felt like comfort. Like being held. He stuffed them deep in his backpack under a hoodie and turned for the door.

"Excuse me, young man?"

He froze. The woman had returned, squinting. "Can I see what's in your bag?"

"No," he said way too fast.

That's all it took. She stepped back and pressed something under the counter. A quiet buzz. The door behind him clicked shut.

Fuck! Not again! he swore inside his head.

The police officer's uniform didn't scare him anymore. What could they take that hadn't already been taken from him? He acted like he didn't give a shit and... that was pretty much the case.

The social worker arrived an hour later. It was the same one as last time, the last time he had been picked up for shoplifting or other anti-social actions. It was Ms. Tilly Dore, late 30s, with frown lines, a ponytail, and smelled like herbal tea and stress oozing out her pores.

She looked at the report, then at Max. Then back at the file.

"Foster disruption number five," she said softly. "Petty theft. Incontinence. Emotional withdrawal. And now... this."

She tapped the word "underwear" circled in the notes.

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“I didn’t... do anything to them,” he muttered.

“I know,” she said, surprisingly gently. “But no one else will see it that way.”

He looked at the table between them, as though it might offer an answer. Something sharp he could hold on to.

“You know the rules. You’re out of the Keller house. They won’t have a shoplifter in their place and well... you’ve got other issues they constantly complain about.”

“The bedwetting right?” Max spat out with more than a little anger.

“Yes, they rang to complain this morning before any of this. They were... if you can excuse the pun... pissed off.”

Max smiled thinly at the weak pun. At least she was trying to be pleasant.

“I can’t stop it. Never have and I do try you know,” he replied, the anger gone and replaced with a sense of defeat.

“I understand that, but it’s hard to place a 16-year-old heavy bedwetter with your history. You understand, right?”

“Yeah... I guess. So what now? Back on the street?”

“No, of course not. But we’ve run out of standard placements,” she said. “There’s one option left. It’s... a bit different. But there is one thing that might help.”

“Yeah? And what’s that?”

“She said she has no problem with bedwetting, even those of your age.”

“Shit!” he exclaimed. “Er... sorry about the language, but you mean she’s not gonna swear at me for wet sheets?”

Ms. Dore smiled. “I don’t think Mrs Thomas has ever sworn in her life. She’s like someone out of the 50s... but in a good way. What do you think?”

Max didn’t answer.

She sighed. “You’ll go there tomorrow. and I’ll be there for you.”

Still, he said nothing.

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He was good at that. Saying nothing. Being nothing. Just a body in a system, wetting sheets he didn't own and wondering why life was such a misery and why nothing ever felt right.

Chapter 2 – Marjorie's House

The car smelled like old paper and peppermint tea.

Ms Dore's stack of folders sat between them on the seat, a worn elastic band keeping them from spilling open. Max didn't ask what was in them. He knew already. It had his name, printed again and again on notes, summaries, photos and labels. He stared out the window instead, watching the suburbs change. He noticed there were fewer cracked sidewalks, and more flowers in front yards, a neatness that made him nervous. It was at least a nice neighbourhood. He had long since realised that a lot of foster parents did it for the money and came from the rougher part of town. He was a paycheck, not a person and it showed.

The silence dragged on as the trip continued.

Finally, she cleared her throat. "This home is... different," she said. He didn't even turn his head. "She's not a typical carer. It's not a group setting. It's just her. Marjorie Thomas. Lives alone. Late fifties and used to work in home nursing. Has a full clearance. She's... stable. Kind. She's someone you might actually like."

Max blinked. That word again. Different.

He wanted to ask: *Different how?* But he didn't. Because different could mean anything. It could mean worse. It usually did. For a brief moment, he imagined that 'different' could be a good thing. Maybe she would be nice to him and at least put on a façade of caring. That would be novel.

"She used to have a son," Ms. Dore added, more quietly now. "He died. A few years ago. It changed everything for her, but whatever you do, don't mention it, at least not at the beginning, okay? No one ever really gets over the grief of losing a child."

Max frowned. "So why's she taking foster kids then?"

"I think... maybe she's trying to help someone again. In her own way."

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That didn't help. The last thing Max wanted was someone trying to 'help'. All he asked for was a bit of respect and understanding and free use of the washing machine without criticism.

I wonder if the fridge is locked? Be nice to be able to get food when I want it for a change.

The rest of the drive passed in silence until the houses began to grow further apart and older, the trees thicker and yards wider. It felt like driving back in time. The car turned down a cul-de-sac and pulled into a gravel driveway lined with flowerpots and lavender bushes.

The house was a little weathered but tidy, with white shutters and blue trim. A wind chime tinkled in the breeze. On the porch was a wooden bench and a faded cushion with roses on it. It certainly looked like something out of the 1950s. It wasn't encouraging but Max had such low expectations, the fact it was neat and clean and tidy was better than any place he had been before. The Kellers were slobs and even when he tidied his own room, their mess seemed to just follow him inside.

Max stared at the front door like it might swing open and swallow him whole.

"This is her place," Ms. Dore said, forcing cheer. "She's expecting you." Max didn't move. "I know you're scared," she said gently. "I would be too. But she's not like the others. She's... more hands-on."

His stomach twisted. 'hands-on' was not what he wanted. He very much wanted hands-off, say very little and just feed him and not be angry. Low expectations.

"I'll walk you in," she offered.

He shook his head. "No."

"You sure?"

He nodded, heart pounding. She handed him his overnight bag, a cheap one the agency had given him two homes ago, and got out herself to open the passenger door.

"I'll come check in with both of you next week."

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He still didn't move until she gave him a faint, sad smile and walked back to the car.

Max stood on the porch, bag in hand, unsure whether he should knock or run, but the door opened before he could decide.

Marjorie stood there, framed by warm yellow light. She was shorter than he expected, with silver-streaked hair pulled back in a bun and a long pale cardigan over a navy dress. She had soft eyes and a face that seemed built for quiet rooms and warm blankets. More 1960s, he thought so... better.

"Hello, Max," she said like she already knew him.

He blinked.

"I'm Marjorie. You can call me that, or... whatever makes you comfortable. Come on in, sweetheart. It's cold out."

He stepped inside automatically, blinking at the sudden warmth. The house smelled like cinnamon and baby powder, a strange mix, but not unpleasant. The floors creaked softly, and everything felt quiet, like a waiting room between storms. He instantly noted that it was clean, tidy and uncluttered. A little old-fashioned but very welcoming. He almost felt his heart soften... almost.

She took his bag and placed it gently beside the coat rack.

"I made tea. And there's soup if you're hungry. It's all up to you."

Max didn't answer.

"That's alright," she said kindly. "You don't have to talk. Not today. Have a look around if you want."

He looked around.

The hallway was decorated with framed photos, not of the typical smiling families, but revealing candid shots. There was a baby in a pram, and a young boy in a bonnet, sitting on a picnic blanket. A photo of a large crib with stuffed animals perfectly arranged. All baby or toddler photos and then he remembered her dead son and he recoiled slightly thinking that by looking at them he was dishonouring the memory. It was a silly thought that he quickly

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ridiculed, but something spoke to him in the photos, and he was not sure what it was only that it disturbed him.

Then he saw it. A door at the far end of the hall. Pale blue. Locked with a small brass latch.

She noticed him looking. "That room was my son's. We'll leave it closed for now. I hope you understand"

He looked away quickly.

She led him to a small guest room with a plain bed, soft white sheets, and a folded pair of flannel pyjamas on the pillow. The curtains were pale pink, faded from the sun.

"I wasn't sure what you liked, but you can tell me if you'd prefer something different."

He shook his head.

"There's a clean bathroom next door. Extra towels in the cupboard when you need them."

Still, he said nothing.

Marjorie didn't press. She simply placed a hand gently on his shoulder and said, "I know this is a strange place and I know people have hurt you. But you're safe here. There are no punishments in this house. No yelling. Just care. That's all."

Something about the way she said *care* made his throat tighten.

She left him there, alone with the unusually comforting feel of his bedroom. And for the first time in years, Max didn't know whether to cry or crawl into bed and sleep forever.

Chapter 3 – Things Left Unsaid

The first time Max wet the bed at Marjorie's, he braced for the storm.

He lay frozen in the warm, soaked sheets, heart hammering, waiting for the creak of footsteps, for the sharp knock, for someone to yank the door open and fill the room with disappointment and disgust.

But none came.

Instead, there was only birdsong outside the window and the smell of baking bread drifting through the house.

Still half-shivering in his damp pyjamas, he tiptoed to the bathroom and stripped them off, stuffing them deep in the towel basket. When he returned, he found the bed already stripped, a clean fitted sheet pulled tight, and the blanket folded back. His old sheet and pyjamas were gone. A note on the pillow read simply: "Shower first. I'll make eggs. —M"

No lectures. No sighs. No questions.

It happened again two nights later. And then again, a day later.

Each time, Marjorie said nothing. He would shower in silence, and when he returned, the bed would be clean and remade. Sometimes there would be a cup of cocoa waiting on the nightstand. Sometimes not. But always warmth. Always calm.

Then one morning, something changed. There was something new on the bed.

Folded carefully on the corner was a pull-up. Not a nappy exactly but just one of those soft, disposable kinds, white with a faint pastel stripe, size "teen/junior" printed on the label.

Max froze in the doorway. The room felt smaller somehow.

He didn't touch it. Just stared at it like it might explode. He left it there all day, watching it from across the room like it had a voice whispering things he didn't want to hear. He couldn't say why, but it