

by Cecilia Bennet

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Chapter One: No Place for Children

Katie stretched out her legs beneath the café table, the sun warm on her skin. "Remind me why we wouldn't live anywhere else?"

Meika smirked over her iced latte. "Because the rest of the country is full of screaming toddlers and school zones. Who'd want that?"

They both laughed at the same joke and shared their same smug satisfaction. It had become a part of their identity: the proud child-free couple. They'd been together nearly ten years, and the quietness was one of their greatest shared values. Their friends had slowly morphed into parents with strollers and phone calendars filled with school concerts and lice outbreaks, but not them. Brunch, markets, and spontaneous weekend getaways... that was the life that appealed to them, and there was nothing that was ever going to change that.

They strolled through the Sunday market in their matching sunnies, arm in arm, lazily moving from handmade candles to vegan dumplings. It was one of their favourite things to do, to find small markets in tiny towns and see what they could find that was different. Their home had a number of eclectic items that didn't quite match but set a harmony in the house that was all them, all about their style.

Meika was mid-sentence about booking a spring wine tour they had been considering when she paused.

"Katie," she said under her breath, nudging her elbow. "Look."

Across the park lawn, under a large jacaranda, sat a middleaged woman on a picnic blanket. She was spoon-feeding someone. At

first glance, it looked like a child, until the size made it clear. This was no child.

The person being fed was clearly an adult male, though his hair was long and tied with pink ribbons. He wore a frilly white bonnet, a baby-style romper with puffed sleeves, and thick, unmistakable nappies under the pastel ruffles. His legs were shaved, his cheeks rosy. He sat with a soft bunny plush in his lap, sucking on a dummy between spoonfuls of mashed banana.

People were staring. Whispers and snickers passed through the crowd like electricity.

"Is that... is that real?" Meika murmured.

Katie nodded slowly. "I think so."

A passing man muttered, "Sick freaks," loud enough for them to hear.

The woman—Bronwyn, they would later learn—turned to him with calm dignity. "He's not hurting anyone. He's just living as himself."

The man rolled his eyes and walked on, but Katie and Meika stood still, caught between discomfort, surprise and... something else.

They watched as Bronwyn gently wiped the corner of the young man's mouth and whispered something inaudible. The baby—Julie, though they didn't know it yet—clapped softly and let out a babbled giggle. His joy was so sincere it bordered on disarming.

Katie blinked. "What exactly are we looking at?"

"I don't know," Meika said slowly as she tried to digest the scene, "but it doesn't feel like a performance. It feels... real, I suppose."

They stood in silence a little longer as people passed by, some mocking, some confused, a few disgusted, but Bronwyn didn't waver. She stayed focused on her baby, adjusting his bonnet, humming softly, and shielding him gently from the noise.

Something twisted inside Katie, something quiet and thoroughly unfamiliar.

"I kind of want to say hi," she said suddenly.

Meika raised an eyebrow. "You do?"

"I think I do."

They looked at each other, then back at the scene.

"Alright," Meika said, curiosity outweighing reluctance. "Let's go and say hi."

They approached cautiously. Bronwyn noticed them and gave a small, warm smile, like she'd been expecting them.

"Good morning," Katie said, her voice slightly higher than usual. "We... saw you from over there."

Bronwyn's smile didn't falter. "I know. Most people do."

"I'm sorry if we're being nosy," Meika added. "We just... wanted to say you seem very... er... brave."

The older woman chuckled. "I don't know about brave. Mostly tired, perhaps. But thank you just the same."

Julie peeked out from behind Bronwyn, then popped his dummy back in and hugged his bunny.

"I'm Katie. This is Meika."

"I'm Bronwyn," she replied. "And this is my little girl, Julie."

Neither woman corrected the pronoun. There was a pause, and Katie felt oddly tongue-tied.

"I'm not asking you to understand," Bronwyn said gently. "But if you want to know the story, I'd be happy to share it. We've had enough gawkers for one day."

Meika glanced at Katie. They were on the hunt that day for something special and unique, and while this wasn't remotely like what they expected, it was still special and unique.

Katie nodded. "We'd like that."

"Alright then," Bronwyn said, patting the picnic rug. "Come sit down. I'll tell you how I ended up raising a baby who never grew up."

They sat, and the world, so full of clean lines and categories, quietly began to shift.

Chapter Two: Her Name Is Julie

Bronwyn poured warm tea from a thermos into paper cups as the sun filtered down through the jacaranda blossoms. Julie lay on the blanket beside her, dummy bobbing gently in his mouth, a soft bunny pressed tightly against his chest. He'd already begun to drift into his early afternoon nap.

Katie and Meika sat cross-legged on the rug, trying not to stare. They didn't want to offend, but their curiosity pulsed louder than politeness.

"I don't often get asked about us with kindness," Bronwyn began. Her voice was low and composed, like someone used to explaining the impossible.

"We're not sure what to say," Katie admitted. "We've never seen... anything like this. We aren't trying to pry. That's not us anyhow."

Bronwyn nodded. "Most people haven't seen it before, but that doesn't mean it isn't real, or true, or truly needed."

She sipped her tea.

"I was twenty-five when I had him. It was a difficult birth. He didn't cry at first, just blinked. He was quiet right from the start, almost solemn. But as the months went on... I noticed something different. He didn't want to walk. He didn't babble much. He didn't crawl toward toys or other babies."

Meika tilted her head gently. "Was it developmental delays?"

"That's what the doctors said. But it was more than that. He *could* do things. He just... didn't *want* to. He would cry and cry if I sat him in a toddler chair. He'd scream if I dressed him in regular clothes. But give him a onesie, a bottle, and a soft toy, and he'd melt into peace

again. It's not hard to imagine the option I chose! Screaming babies are the last thing you want to listen to for days on end."

Julie gave a tiny snore from his rug nest. Bronwyn reached over to adjust the blanket over his legs.

"He never outgrew it. By four, he was still in nappies. At five, I tried school. We lasted two weeks before he had a full-on breakdown in front of twenty kids. He wasn't being difficult. He was scared and lost. He wet himself constantly. He'd scream until he passed out. And all the while he kept asking me, 'Can't I just stay your baby? Please, Mummy?"

Katie's throat caught. Despite her best efforts to keep it silent, the call of 'please mummy' tugged at her heart.

"I tried to force him forward. Tried to get him into therapy, but nothing helped. And when I finally stopped pushing and let him... stay little... everything changed. He was happy. Not just quiet... but genuinely *happy*. Giggly and relaxed. He started humming again. He ate properly. He let me cuddle him."

Meika was silent, absorbing every word.

"Did he ever want to try again? Growing up, I mean?"

Bronwyn shook her head. "Not once. At twelve, we moved towns. I told people he had special needs and kept to myself. I homeschooled, although most of what he needed wasn't reading or maths. It was naptime, lullabies, and the comfort of being exactly who he is."

She looked at the women now.

"He never potty trained, never learned to make adult decisions, and never asked for independence. He just didn't *want* it. He's my baby girl. And I do mean *girl*. He told me at fifteen that baby girls are softer, gentler, and that's what he felt like inside."

Katie took a slow breath. "And now?"

"I still change him, bathe him, feed him, hold him through tantrums, which he *does* still have, though less now thankfully. He gets overwhelmed easily. He can't use a phone. He doesn't understand money. He's twenty-two now, but he's about nine

months old emotionally. I dress him this way because this is how he feels safe."

"And you're doing this alone?" Meika asked curiously.

"Yes." Bronwyn looked out over the grass. "His father couldn't handle it. We separated years ago. And now... well, I won't be around much longer."

The words dropped like pebbles in water.

"I've been diagnosed with late-stage lymphoma. It's aggressive. I've got maybe two years. A year of mobility. Six months of real independence, if I'm lucky."

Silence again.

"That's why we're out in the open now. No more hiding, no more pretending. I want him to experience the world with its wonderful places and kind people... while I'm still here. So that when I'm gone... he's not completely alone."

Julie stirred in his sleep and let out a soft, slurred, "Mmm... Mummy..."

Bronwyn stroked his hair. "I'll have to place him somewhere eventually. A group home, maybe, but the thought of it terrifies me. He wouldn't survive it. They wouldn't understand. I don't think anyone could understand."

Meika suddenly felt tears behind her eyes.

"He deserves love," Bronwyn whispered. "Not scorn. Not laughter. Just love. And a safe place to call home."

Katie reached out and touched Bronwyn's hand gently. Her inner 'mummy' spoke. "We're not laughing. We see you. And... we want to help, if we can."

Bronwyn looked up in surprise.

"We don't know what that means yet," Meika added, already feeling the same vibe a Katie. "But... something about you two... It's real. And he's truly beautiful. Or do I say 'she'? Sorry, you'd think we of all people would be up on things like that!"

The older woman smiled a deep, tired, grateful smile.

"I don't expect you to become part of our world. But thank you for listening, and for not running away."