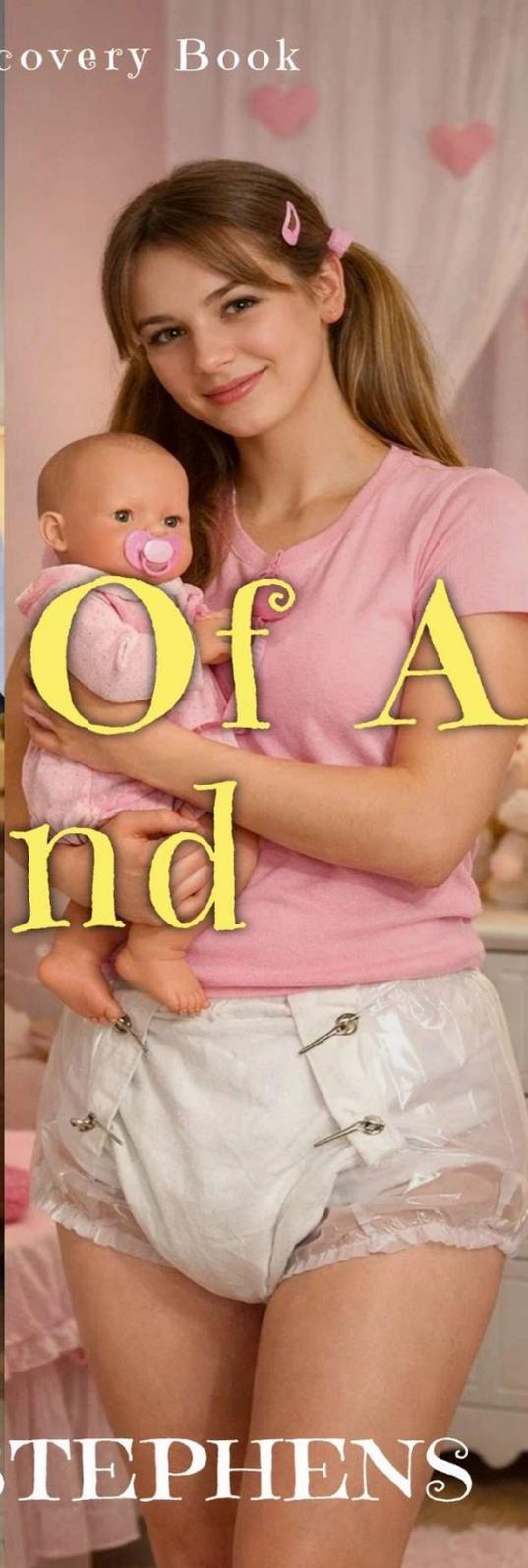


An AB Discovery Book



Two Of A Kind

ANDREW STEPHENS

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by
Andrew Stephens

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Prologue

There is a particular kind of childhood that happens in the small hours. While the rest of the house sleeps, while the neighbourhood is dark and the street outside is quiet, there are children who wake into a different world, warm, private, already known. They do not feel shame in this world. They feel, if anything, something that resembles peace.

This is a story about two of those children. They did not know each other then. They were growing up in different towns, in different houses, with different wallpaper and different kitchen smells and different views from their bedroom windows. But in the things that mattered most quietly, they were, from the very beginning, the same.

Chapter One: Pin and Tuck (His Story)

Thomas Alderton's bedroom was at the back of the house, overlooking a strip of garden that his father kept neat on weekends. There was a nightlight on the windowsill, a small ceramic lighthouse that cast a warm amber stripe up the wall, and on the shelf above his bed, there lived a population of soft things. There was a rabbit with a worn left ear, a bear called Gerald who had been repaired twice at the neck, a giraffe whose neck Thomas himself had extended with felt and a rubber band when he was five, convinced the original had been too short. He was seven now. He knew the giraffe's neck was silly, but he no longer cared. Gerald the bear was the one he slept with. The others were company.

His mother, Margaret, came in every night at half past eight. This was the ritual, and Thomas knew its every step. The soft click of the door, the small creak of the third floorboard, the rustle of her kneeling beside the bed where his nightclothes were laid out. First, the vest. Then the nappy of thick white cotton, folded into the shape she had perfected over the years, the shape that his grandmother had shown her and her grandmother had shown her before that. Margaret would lift Thomas and slide the nappy beneath him, pull it up between his legs and pin each side with the large flat-headed pins she kept in a small tin on his dresser. The pins were yellow. Thomas had chosen the colour himself from a card at the haberdashery. Then the plastic pants, soft, rustling and pulled up over the nappy's bulk, the waistband checked with two fingers, the leg holes smoothed. Then the pyjama bottoms, which were striped, dark blue and white.

Thomas had never wet the bed without this arrangement. Or rather, he had never reached morning dry, regardless of any other arrangement. His parents had understood this early. There had been a period, from ages four to five, of mattress protectors and pyjama changes in the night, of gentle wakings that never quite worked, of Thomas standing sleepily in the bathroom at two in the morning,

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uncertain what was expected of him. His mother had eventually sat with his father one evening and said, very practically, that they should simply do what had been done for David's brother, and David's father, and in all likelihood someone further back than that. The nappies had made everything easy. Thomas slept well. The mornings were calm. It all made perfect, practical sense.

He did not think of himself as different, because within the walls of his house, he was not. The nappy was as unremarkable as the nightlight or the bear or the pyjamas. His father, David, sometimes came in to say good night when Thomas was already pinned and settled, and would ruffle his hair and say, "See you in the morning," and there was no weight in it at all. Margaret washed the nappies on Mondays and Thursdays and hung them on the airer in the spare room. They were simply laundry. Thomas was simply Thomas.

What he liked best about bedtime was the feeling of being fully settled. Once the plastic pants were on and the pyjamas adjusted and Gerald was tucked under his arm and the nightlight was doing its amber work on the wall, there was a completeness to the moment that he found deeply satisfying. He was contained. Everything was where it should be. He would turn onto his side, press his cheek into the pillow, and feel the comfortable bulk around his middle, and within minutes, he would be asleep.

In the morning, he would wake wet, always, invariably, without exception, and this too was simply part of the day. He would lie for a moment in the warmth, not unpleasantly, and then call out, and Margaret would come with a warm flannel, and the day would begin. He was seven, and he was happy, and the lighthouse sent its amber stripe up the wall, and Gerald the bear watched over him all night long.

Chapter Two: The Same Hour, A Different House (Her Story)

Eleanor Marsh — Ellie, always Ellie — lived in a terrace house three towns away, where the street curved slightly downhill, and the lamplight came through the curtains at a long evening angle. Her bedroom was at the front of the house, and her nightlight was a star-shaped thing that rotated slowly and cast small points of light across the ceiling. She watched them sometimes before sleeping, the slow revolution of tiny stars above her, unhurried and reliable.

She had a rabbit called Bun, which was not a creative name and she knew it, a bear called Humphrey, and a China doll called Marie-Claire whose name she had given her very seriously at age four after hearing it in a song. Bun and Humphrey slept with her. Marie-Claire sat on the dresser where she could be seen but not rumbled. Ellie was also seven.

Her mother, Anne, came in at eight o'clock. Anne was a careful woman, practical in the way that people with a great deal of affection and not a great deal of time tend to be practical. She expressed love through organisation. The nightly routine was organised with quiet competence. The nappy was pre-folded on the chair, the plastic pants beside it, the pins with their little yellow heads, yellow, the same as Thomas Alderton's pins three towns away, though neither child would ever know this coincidence, waiting in their tin. Anne pinned them with the ease of long practice, checked the legs, and settled the pyjamas. Ellie submitted to all of this with an equanimity that her mother found both touching and, occasionally, slightly remarkable.

Ellie's father, Robert, was a gentle man who had been a bedwetter himself until he was fifteen and who had a very clear memory of how that had felt, and of how much better it would have felt if everyone around him had simply not made it a thing. He had been determined, from Ellie's first wet morning, that it would not be a thing in this house. It was not. The family history was long and consistent, and Robert understood it to be essentially beyond

anyone's agency, a matter of biology, something that certain people simply carried, like height or the particular colour of an eye. Ellie had his eyes. She had, it seemed, also his bladder.

What Ellie loved about nighttime was the completeness of the arrangement. Pinned in, settled, Bun under one arm and Humphrey under the other, and the slow stars turning on the ceiling, she felt entirely herself. The world outside could have opinions about all sorts of things, but in this room, at this hour, everything was simply correct. She had never articulated this thought in those words. She was seven, and did not yet have those words, but she felt it completely, and it shaped her understanding of what rest meant, what safety meant, what home meant.

She would wake in the morning wet without distress. Wet was just the morning. The morning was warm, and Anne would come, and the flannel would be warm too, and then there would be breakfast. She was, in her own quiet way, entirely at ease with herself.