

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

# Baby Heather

a story of  
belonging

SALLYANNE CASTLETON

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*Sallyanne  
Castleton*

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## Chapter One – A Different Child

The first thing Margaret noticed was the quiet.

Not the silence of a content baby, settled and warm after feeding. She knew that silence well enough and had catalogued its particular softness in the weeks after Franklin came home from the hospital. This was something else. A watchfulness. A stillness that seemed, even in those earliest days, to belong to a child far older than the one lying in the bassinet, or far younger, she could never quite decide which. Franklin would lie there and look at her with those large, unblinking grey eyes, and Margaret would have the unsettling feeling that she was the one being assessed.

She told herself it meant nothing. First-time mothers saw patterns in everything. They read significance into the angle of a yawn. She had read enough books, had spoken to enough other mothers at the antenatal group, to know that anxiety was simply part of the territory. Babies were mysterious. Babies were unpredictable. She tucked the feeling away and got on with the considerable work of keeping a small person alive.

But the quiet persisted. And gradually, other things accumulated around it.

Franklin was a small baby. The midwives noted it at every check. Not alarmingly so, not in a way that triggered referrals or worried looks exchanged over her head, but consistently, persistently small. He tracked along the lowest acceptable centile on the growth charts like a car hugging a cliff edge, never quite falling off, but never climbing. Margaret would watch other babies at the mother and infant group and feel a complicated emotion she didn't have a name for — not quite concern, not quite pride, something in between — as Franklin sat placidly in her lap while the other babies lunged and grabbed and shrieked.

He was serene. Everyone said so. *What a calm baby*, they said. *You're so lucky*. And she would smile and agree because she supposed she was, technically. He didn't scream through the night. He didn't

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throw food. He didn't hurl himself at furniture with the reckless energy she saw in other toddlers, the ones who seemed to be in a permanent state of momentum, as though stopping were physically dangerous.

Franklin was still. Franklin was quiet. Franklin watched.

He was also, she began to notice around his first birthday, not doing things he was supposed to be doing.

She was not the sort of mother who held milestones as gospel. She had told herself that firmly and had repeated it to herself when her own mother asked pointed questions about whether he was pulling himself up yet, whether he'd said any words. Every child is different. Every child finds their own pace. She believed this with genuine conviction, and yet she found herself, in the evenings after Franklin was asleep, sitting with the red health visitor book and running her eyes down the developmental checklists with a pencil, ticking and not-ticking.

Walking came eventually, at nineteen months, not early, not dramatically late, but delivered with a characteristic lack of urgency, as though Franklin had simply decided one afternoon that he might as well try it out. He moved carefully and precisely, testing each step before committing to it. He never fell over. He never ran. He walked, unhurried, from one place to another, and occasionally stopped to crouch and examine something at ground level with that same solemn, absorbing focus.

Language was slower. He understood everything — that was clear from early on, the way his eyes tracked a conversation, the way he would turn his head at his name from across a room. But speaking seemed, for a long time, to simply not interest him. He pointed. He looked. He made soft sounds that Margaret came to understand as a private language, a shorthand between just the two of them. His first clear word, when it finally arrived at two and a half, was not mama or dada or ball. It was more, delivered calmly at the dinner table with a gesture toward his bottle.

His bottle. That was another thing.

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Most of the babies in her circle had transitioned off bottles around twelve months or slightly longer. The health visitor had mentioned it at the nine-month check, something breezy and practical about cups and independence and dental development, and Margaret had nodded and bought a set of colourful sippy cups with elephants on them. Franklin had regarded them with polite indifference. He would hold one, occasionally, and tap it against the tray of his highchair as though testing its acoustic properties. He did not drink from it with any conviction.

He wanted his bottle. Specifically, he wanted his formula, warm, twice a day, morning and before bed, and he wanted it in the same soft yellow bottle with the slow-flow teat that she'd used since he came home from the hospital. He would settle into her arms for it with a sigh of such complete contentment that Margaret found it increasingly difficult to feel she was doing something wrong. The health visitor raised an eyebrow at eighteen months. At two years, she mentioned it rather more pointedly. By three, she had stopped mentioning it, and Margaret suspected this was because she'd moved on to more urgent concerns.

The more urgent concern was toilet training.

Margaret had read the books. She had purchased the small plastic training potty in cheerful primary colours. She had tried the weekend of no-nappies that one book enthusiastically described as a breakthrough method. She had tried reward charts, and sticker systems, and gentle encouragement, and patient waiting, and eventually, on the advice of a different health visitor, a gentler one she'd been switched to after the first one retired, simply giving it time.

Franklin was three. Then three and a half. Then four. He had never, not once, indicated any awareness of what his body was about to do. He was not distressed by the nappies. He was not curious about the toilet. He regarded the training potty with the same mild, inquisitive neutrality he brought to most things, but there was no connection, no understanding. It was as though the whole concept existed outside the perimeter of his world.

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She pinned the nappies herself. She had graduated away from disposables early on, not from any particular ideology but because Franklin's skin had reacted badly to them. Cloth squares, folded and pinned at the sides, were worn under plastic pants that rustled faintly when he moved. It was time-consuming, and it was old-fashioned, and she became very efficient at it. Changing Franklin was simply part of the daily rhythm of their life, as unremarkable as breakfast or bathtime. He tolerated it with patient ease, lying still while she worked, looking up at the ceiling or at her face with those watchful grey eyes.

He was four years old, still small enough to lie on the changing mat with room to spare.

The crib had also become a point of some discussion.

She had, when Franklin turned two, purchased a proper toddler bed. It was painted white and had a little rail along one side, and she had dressed it with new sheets with bears on them and shown it to Franklin with what she hoped was infectious enthusiasm.

He had looked at it for a long time. Then he had looked at his crib.

Then he had looked at her, and his expression was one she had come to know well. He was not upset, not angry, but deeply, quietly certain. The way he looked when something had already been decided. The next morning, she had tried to settle him in the new bed, and he had made a sound she had not heard from him before, a low, distressed sound that built in pitch and intensity until she scooped him up, her heart hammering, and stood holding him in the middle of the room, wondering what on earth had just happened.

He went back to the crib. The toddler bed was disassembled and stored in the spare room, where it remained.

She told herself it was temporary. He was small. The crib still fitted him comfortably. The bars didn't confine him, and if anything, she thought, they seemed to comfort him. He would curl against them sometimes, pressing his back against the cool painted wood, and sleep in a stillness so complete she had occasionally, in the dark

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hours of early parenthood, pressed her hand to his small chest just to feel the rise and fall.

She had long since stopped trying to remove the dummy. She had attempted a gradual withdrawal around eighteen months, following guidance, replacing it with a toy during the day. Franklin had not been distraught. He had not thrown tantrums. He had simply become, by degrees, less himself, slightly glazed, slightly unreachable, the way he sometimes looked when he was very tired. After three weeks, she had given it back, and the grey eyes had cleared immediately, and she had felt the guilt of it followed closely by the relief and had then sat down on the kitchen floor and cried quietly for about ten minutes before getting up and making tea.

He was nearly five now. He was still in nappies, still on his formula, still in his crib, still with his dummy at night. He played contentedly on the floor of the sitting room with soft toys, bears and rabbits and a cloth doll he had selected himself from a toy shop and carried everywhere for several months before she had, gently and strategically, persuaded him to leave it at home on outings. He arranged them. He spoke to them, soft murmuring conversations she could never quite make out. He brought them to her to look at, holding them up with the solemn pride of a curator, and she always admired them properly because it mattered to him that she did.

He was, in almost every way she could measure, a baby. A thoughtful, watchful, unusually contained baby, but a baby nonetheless.

The question she had been refusing to examine directly for the better part of four years now surfaced one evening while she was bathing him. He was sitting in the baby bath insert she had never got around to replacing, playing with a rubber duck with the focused seriousness he brought to most activities, and she was washing his hair, fine, pale hair, always slightly long because she kept finding she wasn't ready to cut it, and she thought, with a clarity that stopped her hands... He is not going to grow out of this.

She didn't know where the certainty came from. There had been no single event, no diagnostic conversation, no moment of

revelation. It had been building for years, small stone by small stone, and now it was simply there, a structure that could not be unbuilt. She looked at her son in the bathwater, small, perfect, placidly quacking the duck against the side of the tub, and understood that this was not a delay. This was not a phase. This was not something that speech therapy, occupational therapy or more time or better technique was going to resolve.

This was who Franklin was.

The thought was followed immediately by a feeling she was not prepared for, not grief, as she might have expected, but something that moved in the opposite direction entirely. Something that felt, improbably, like arriving somewhere.

She began to pay different attention after that. Not closer attention thought. She had always been close, but now it was differently calibrated attention. She watched Franklin with new eyes, and what she saw was not a child failing to develop. It was a child living, fully and contentedly, at a different level entirely. He was happy. Not in spite of the nappies and the bottle and the crib, but in the midst of all of it, surrounded by it, embedded in it. He moved through his days with a serenity she now recognised was genuine, not a symptom of passivity or absence but of a kind of settled rightness.

The other thing she began to notice, and this was newer, this had only begun in the past year or so and was still tentative, still something she turned away from as often as she examined it, was Franklin's particular relationship with softness and with femininity. Not a dramatic or overtly stated thing. He had never said anything. It was in the dolls he chose over trucks, in the way he watched the girls at the playgroup with something that looked less like curiosity and more like recognition, in the way he would sometimes, when he thought she wasn't watching, hold his cloth doll a certain way and speak to it in a voice that was distinctly maternal.

She thought about the name she had given him. Franklin was her father's name, chosen before the birth when the scan had shown that she was having a boy. She had liked it. She still liked it. But she

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had also, in the strange private hours of early motherhood, tried out other names. Girls' names, which she had also had a list of, which she had not used but had not entirely discarded.

One name in particular kept returning.

Heather.

She didn't know why *Heather*. It wasn't a family name. She had no particular association with it. But it arrived in her mind sometimes with a quiet insistence that she was not yet sure what to do with. When she looked at her child playing on the floor, so small and so content, surrounded by soft toys in the thin afternoon light, the name arrived again.

Heather.

She did not say it aloud. Not yet. But she did not dismiss it either.

She put it somewhere careful, somewhere she could find it again, and she turned back to the considerable work of preparing her child, her small, napped, bottle-fed, crib-sleeping child, for school. Which was, she was already well aware, going to be a challenge of some magnitude. But that was a problem for tomorrow.

Tonight, she went to the doorway of Franklin's room and stood for a moment watching the small shape in the crib, the soft rise and fall, the dummy moving gently, the cloth doll tucked under one arm. The nightlight cast everything in amber.

Heather, she thought, and went quietly to bed.

## Chapter Two – The School Years Begin

The letter from the local primary school arrived on a Tuesday in early spring, and Margaret sat with it at the kitchen table for a long time before opening it.

It was the standard welcome pack, as she could tell by the envelope, with the school's crest printed in navy in the top left corner, the cheerful sunflower yellow of the paper visible through the window. Inside would be the induction schedule, the uniform list, the permission slips, and the reassuring letter from the headteacher about the exciting journey ahead. She had been expecting it. She had, in fact, requested a preliminary meeting with the school's SENCO — the Special Educational Needs Coordinator — some months earlier, and that meeting had been useful and careful and had left her cautiously optimistic.

She still sat with the letter unopened for nearly ten minutes.

From the sitting room came the soft sounds of Franklin at play. A murmured conversation with his bear. The quiet thud of a soft toy being repositioned. Then his voice, slightly louder, addressing his rabbit about something with evident seriousness.

She opened the letter.

The uniform list presented the first practical difficulty, though it was not the one she had anticipated. Franklin was small. She had known this, and had been knowing it incrementally for five years, but the uniform sizing chart made it newly concrete. The smallest size stocked by the school's recommended supplier was for ages five to six. Franklin, who would be turning five in September and therefore entering reception at precisely the standard age, was the size of an average three-year-old at best. She ordered the smallest size and took it in herself on the sewing machine, sitting at the kitchen table on a Wednesday evening with pins in her mouth, shortening the trousers, taking in the sides of the shirt.

The trousers required a particular modification she had not anticipated when she bought them. She sat for a moment with the

waistband in her hands, considering, then went to her sewing box and began to work.

She was experienced at this. She had been making modifications to Franklin's clothing for years.

The nappies were the larger challenge, logistically and socially, and it was the one she had addressed most directly in her meeting with the SENCO, a composed woman named Mrs Alderton who had short silver hair and reading glasses on a chain and who had taken notes throughout their conversation with the unhurried thoroughness of someone who had genuinely heard everything before.

"We do have a small changing facility," Mrs Alderton had told her. "It's used primarily for children who join us with medical needs. We can allocate Franklin a changing time, discreet, private, and with no involvement from other children. Our classroom assistant in reception, Mrs Peel, is trained for this and is very matter-of-fact about it. You'd send in supplies in a named bag."

"Cloth," Margaret had said. "He uses cloth nappies. And plastic pants over them."

A brief pause. "That's fine. We can accommodate that."

"He'll also need... he uses a dummy. For rest time. He gets distressed without it."

Mrs Alderton had looked at her for a moment over her glasses, not unkindly. "We'll note it. Reception children still have a quiet rest period after lunch. We can make that available to him."

Margaret had left feeling that things were as well arranged as they could be, which was not the same as feeling that things were going to be easy.

The first day of school arrived with the bright, slightly unreal quality that significant days often have, the light too clear, the air too still, the whole morning arranged like a photograph already being taken. Margaret dressed Franklin carefully in the altered uniform, the white shirt, the small grey trousers with their modification hidden neatly inside. She combed his hair. She looked at him