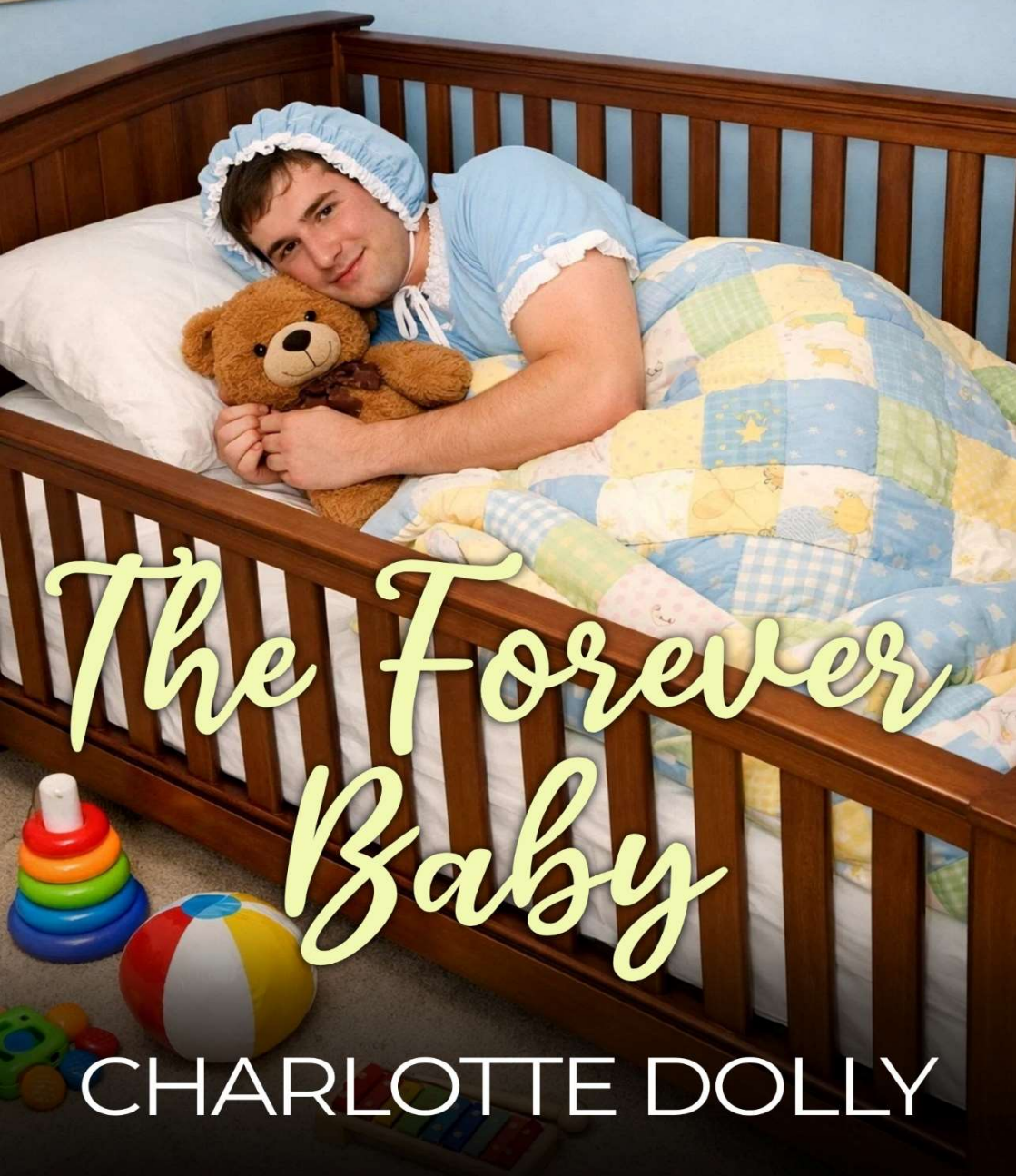


AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK



# The Forever Baby

CHARLOTTE DOLLY

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*Charlotte Dolly*

First Published 2026

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Title: The Forever Baby

Author: Charlotte Dolly

Editor: Michael Bent, Rosalie Bent

Publisher: AB Discovery

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[www.abdiscovery.com.au](http://www.abdiscovery.com.au)

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## Chapter One — The Quiet Nursery

The hallway of the Armitage house was dim, lit only by the soft light from the kitchen. Evening had settled gently over the suburban street, and the home was quiet except for the faintest rhythmic sucking sounds coming from the far end of the corridor.

Julie paused outside the last door on the left. Her hand hovered an inch above the doorknob. “Do you hear that?” she whispered.

Craig came up beside her, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah. That’s him. He’s... probably still awake.”

Julie gently turned the knob. The door opened with the soft sigh of hinges that had been tended carefully over the years, just like everything in the room beyond.

Warm lamplight filled the space, painting the walls with a soft glow. It was impossible, at first glance, to tell that the room belonged to a sixteen-year-old boy. The pastel wallpaper with little clouds. The wooden crib pushed against the far wall, fitted with high rails and lined with plush blankets in baby blue. The shelves were overflowing with rattles, stacking cups, and cloth picture books. The oversized changing table, with bottles of powder and cream lined neatly beside stacks of thick, pinned nappies.

And there, curled up in the crib, lay Simon.

He was lying on his side, cuddling his worn-out teddy bear, its fur patched and thinning from years of love. His lips hugged the tip of a large baby bottle, still half-full of warm formula. The soft white onesie he wore stretched a little over his lanky teenage frame, snaps straining faintly at the legs. The pastel-blue plastic pants over his nappy crinkled every time he shifted in his sleepiness.

Julie stepped closer. Her heart tugged.

His eyelids fluttered. Not asleep. Simply content.

Craig sniffed once. Not in disgust but just acknowledging reality.

“He’s messy again,” he murmured.

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Julie nodded, almost instinctively lowering her voice to that gentle, motherly hush she always used with him. "It's a full one. Poor darling's soaked through, too."

Simon opened his eyes slowly. His gaze, hazy and warm, found Julie first, and a smile crept onto his face, the pure, innocent kind you'd expect from a toddler waking from a nap.

"Mama..." he mumbled around the bottle's teat. "Teddy was scared of the thunder..."

Julie's heart cracked open in all the familiar ways. "There hasn't been thunder for hours, sweetheart."

"He... remembered it," Simon insisted softly.

Craig exhaled. A long, heavy breath filled with resignation and something else too. Confusion, maybe. Or concern. Or love. None of it was simple anymore.

"It's been sixteen years," he whispered, more to himself than anyone. "Sixteen."

Julie reached down and brushed Simon's hair from his forehead. The simple act calmed him instantly.

"He doesn't want to grow up," she said. "He never has."

"And he refuses to try," Craig muttered. "Every therapist, every suggestion, every attempt. He just clings tighter to this."

Julie didn't respond. Not because she disagreed, but because she didn't know what to say.

Simon let the bottle fall to the mattress with a soft thud. He reached his arms up toward Julie, needing, expecting, and trusting.

Julie hesitated. Not because she didn't want to pick him up. But because she didn't know what the right choice *was* anymore.

Craig saw the hesitation and looked away. "Do you ever worry about what happens when he's twenty? Or thirty?" His voice cracked slightly, just enough for her to hear it. "What's the plan, Julie? What's his future going to be?"

Simon made a small whimper. His hand patted the air, searching. "Mama... cuddle?"

Julie reached into the crib and lifted him, not easily, not the way she used to, but with practised care. He wrapped his arms tightly

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around her neck, burying his nose against her shoulder. The warm, heavy sag of his soaked nappy pressed against her hip.

“He’s happy,” she whispered. “He’s safe.”

Craig nodded once, though uncertainty clouded his eyes.

“But is he *living*?” he asked softly.

Simon nuzzled deeper into Julie’s shoulder, clutching his teddy with one hand.

Julie quieted him with a gentle sway. “We’ll figure it out,” she murmured.

But she knew Craig’s question was echoing inside her too.

*What future existed for a boy who had never left the nursery?*

## Chapter Two — Mixed Feelings

The living room felt too quiet after they settled Simon back into his crib. The soft baby monitor crackled faintly on the coffee table, picking up his occasional suckles and the slow crinkle of his nappy as he shifted in his sleep. Julie sat curled on the sofa, fingers twisting at the hem of her cardigan. Craig stood by the window, staring into the dark yard as if some answer might be hiding in the shadows.

Neither spoke at first. It was always like this after a “moment.” A new realisation. A reminder. A fresh wave of worry mixed with affection.

Julie broke the silence. “He just... looked so small tonight.”

Craig turned, brows furrowed. “Julie, he’s six feet tall.”

“I don’t mean physically.” Her voice trembled. “I mean... emotionally. When he reached up for me like that... he wasn’t acting. That’s who he is. That’s where he’s comfortable.”

Craig rubbed his temples. “I know. And that’s what scares me.”

Julie’s heart squeezed. “He’s always been different.”

“He’s always been *avoiding growing up*,” Craig countered gently, not unkindly. “There’s a difference.” She flinched but didn’t argue. Craig crossed to the sofa and sat beside her with a sigh. “I’m not angry at him. I’m just... lost.”

Julie leaned her head against his shoulder. “Me too.”

For a long moment, they just breathed. In the background, the baby monitor picked up a soft, sleepy whine. Simon must have turned over. The plastic pants gave a distinct rustle.

Julie’s arms ached with the memory of his weight. “If you had seen his face when he hugged me... Craig, he was so content.”

“I did see it.” Craig’s voice softened. “That’s what breaks my heart. He’s happy—but he’s sixteen.”

Julie swallowed. “He doesn’t think like a sixteen-year-old.”

“He *can*,” Craig insisted. “He’s brilliant. Top of his class. His teachers say he could skip a year if he wanted.”

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"But he won't." Julie closed her eyes. "Every time life asks something from him, he runs back into the nursery."

Craig's jaw tightened. "And we've let him."

The guilt hit her like a wave.

"Do you think we made it worse?" she whispered.

Craig hesitated. He wasn't good at lying to her. "I think... we didn't know what else to do."

Julie's eyes filled with tears she didn't want to shed. "He was so anxious. So overwhelmed all the time. The nursery made him happy. The bottles calmed him. The nappies kept him from spiralling in panic. We gave him safety."

Craig reached for her hand. "We did what parents do. We protected our child."

"Even if that child is sixteen and still in nappies." Her voice cracked.

He squeezed her hand. "We love him. That's never been the problem."

Silence settled again, heavy, thoughtful, not hostile.

After a minute, Craig spoke, almost reluctantly. "We can't pretend this is temporary anymore."

Julie nodded. "We haven't pretended for years."

"But we *did* assume he'd grow out of it." Craig leaned back, staring at the ceiling. "We assumed he'd decide to be a teenager one day. That he'd get tired of the crib, tired of the nappies, tired of... all of it."

Julie let out a small, sad laugh. "He never did."

"No." Craig exhaled. "And maybe he never will."

They sat with that truth between them. A quiet reality. A soft, unavoidable acceptance. And all the fear that came with it. Julie turned her head to look at the monitor. On the small screen, Simon was curled up again, thumb in his mouth, teddy tucked under his chin. Completely at peace.

"He shouldn't be alone in this," she whispered. "There must be someone out there who understands families like ours."