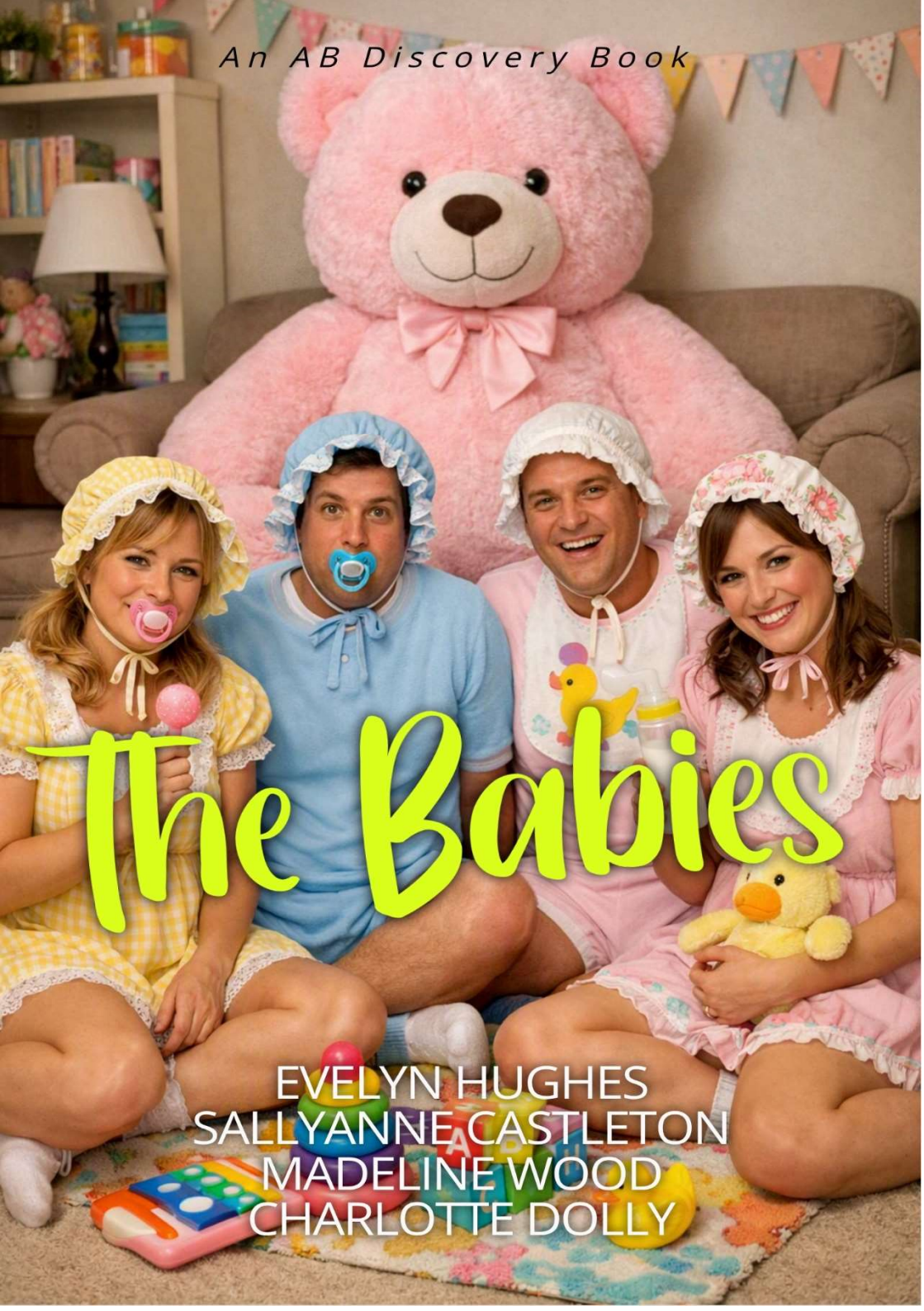


An AB Discovery Book



The Babies

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The Babies

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Baby Evie

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A photograph of a baby's hands holding a light brown stuffed rabbit. The baby is wearing a pink tutu and a white diaper. The rabbit has a small blue bow around its neck.

*Baby
Evie*
eternal babyhood

MADELINE WOOD

Baby Evie

Madeline Wood

Chapter One – The World They Built

The morning began, as it always did, with sound.

Not an alarm clock. Not the radio. It began with a soft, insistent sound drifting down the hall, a rhythmic, contented babbling, punctuated by the occasional squeak of a cot mattress and the gentle thud of small fists against padded cot rails. It was a sound that Amanda had heard every single morning for twenty-five years, and even now, even with the ache in her joints and the tiredness that lived permanently behind her eyes, it made her smile before she was fully awake.

She lay still for a moment, listening. There was a language to Evie's morning sounds that Amanda had long since learned to read. The soft babble meant she had woken content, had found her dummy, and was entertaining herself with whatever caught her eye, perhaps the turning mobile above the cot, the morning light shifting across the nursery ceiling, or the worn plush rabbit she had slept beside since she was a toddler. The louder, more persistent calls, rising in pitch, moving toward a grumble, meant she was wet and beginning to notice it. And the full, rounded cry, the one with real feeling behind it, meant she was hungry and had run out of patience.

This morning, it was the soft babble. Amanda had a few minutes of peace yet.

She pushed herself upright slowly, the way she always did now, giving her body time to remember what it was doing. She pulled on her dressing gown, pushed her feet into her slippers, and padded down the hall toward the nursery door, which stood slightly ajar as it always did at night. She never fully closed it. She liked to be able to hear.

She pushed it open.

The nursery was a large room at the back of the house, south-facing, warm with morning light even in winter. It had been a spare bedroom once, then a study, then gradually, decisively, and lovingly had been remade entirely into something else. There was nothing in it now that spoke of adult life or adult expectation. The walls were painted in soft yellow, printed with a pattern of small white rabbits and pale blue clouds. The curtains were thick and cheerful, covered in the same motif, and they held the morning light in a warm amber glow that filled the room like something poured.

Along one wall stood the cot, a large, purpose-built one of solid pine, its bars sanded smooth, its mattress deep and firm and dressed in white cotton sheets printed with ducks. The sides were high enough to be secure, with a drop mechanism on one side that Amanda operated with the ease of long habit. Beside it sat a changing table, wide, cushioned, covered in a wipe-clean surface and stocked with meticulous care. The shelf beneath it held everything it needed. A stack of folded white cloth nappies, soft and thick, laundered to a bright, clean white. A row of plastic pants in various pastel shades in pink, yellow, and pale green, all folded neatly, and waiting. A tin of barrier cream. A tub of baby powder. A box of fragrance-free wipes. A small bowl that Amanda would fill with warm water when she needed it. Everything was in its place. Everything was ready.

The rest of the room was given over to the business of baby life. A nursing chair sat in the corner nearest the window, low and gently curved, its cushions worn to a soft familiarity. This was where Amanda sat to give bottles, sometimes for forty minutes at a stretch. Evie settled in her arms, one hand wrapped around the bottle, her eyes drifting in that slow, satisfied way that was one of the most peaceful sights Amanda had ever known. Beside the chair, a small table held a bottle warmer, a rack for drying teats, and a row of bottles, six of them, in different sizes, some for milk, some for juice, some for water. They were washed and sterilised each evening as part of the night routine, lined up ready.

On the floor, which was carpeted in a thick, soft rug in cream and pale yellow, were arranged the things that made up Evie's

waking hours. A large, low play mat patterned in bright colours was slightly raised at the edges to form a soft boundary. There was a basket of soft toys, a wooden activity centre with buttons, levers, and spinning segments, a set of stacking rings in graduated colours, and a shape-sorter. There were fabric books with crinkly pages and things to press and touch, along with a collection of rattles. None of it was sophisticated. All of it was exactly right. Amanda knew what Evie liked and what Evie didn't, what held her attention and what bored her, what made her laugh with a real, bubbling, unrestrained baby laugh and what made her fretful.

She had spent twenty-five years learning her daughter, discovering her baby identity.

Evie was lying on her back in the cot when Amanda came in, her legs cycling in a lazy, contented way, her dummy moving gently. She was dressed for sleep in a soft, footed sleepsuit of pale pink, printed with small white stars, and even in the dim morning light, Amanda could see the familiar bulk at her hips that told her the night nappy was well used and would need changing soon.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Amanda said, and her voice shifted automatically into the warm, slightly elevated register that she used with Evie, not condescending, not performed, but simply the voice of a mother greeting her baby. "Did you have a nice sleep?"

Evie's legs stopped cycling. She turned her head, found Amanda's face, and her whole expression changed to the slow smile of recognition, the arms reaching upward, the dummy falling from her mouth as she made the eager, urgent sound that meant *pick me up, pick me up now*.

Amanda lowered the cot side and leaned in. Even now, even with the illness making her arms less steady than they used to be, she lifted Evie in a single, practised movement and settled her against her chest, one hand at her back, one at the base of the heavy nappy. Evie's arms went around her neck, and she made a low, satisfied sound, pressing her face into Amanda's shoulder. Amanda stood there for a moment, just holding her, swaying slightly without thinking about it. The sway was as automatic as breathing.

"Let's get you sorted," she murmured. "You're soaked, aren't you. Yes, you are."

She carried her to the changing table.

The change was a ritual, a long, well-rehearsed sequence of actions that Amanda performed with the confident ease of someone who had done the same thing thousands upon thousands of times. She settled Evie onto the padded surface, unclipped the poppers that ran down the inside leg of the sleepsuit, peeled the suit back to the waist, and set about unpinning the nappy.

Evie lay still and cooperative, as she always did. She had never fought a nappy change. If anything, she seemed to enjoy them with the warm wipe, the air, the barrier cream, the powder, the careful pinning of the fresh cloth, and the clean smell of it. Her eyes followed Amanda's face throughout, and Amanda talked to her as she worked, the way she always had, a soft, running commentary that was less about the words and more about the sound of a familiar voice, the reassurance of being attended to, of being known.

"There we are. All clean. That's better, isn't it? Yes, it is."

The clean nappy went on with the efficiency of long practice, the cloth folded and angled, pinned snugly at each side, the plastic pants pulled up and over. Amanda tugged them smooth, pressed the waistband gently with her thumb to check the fit, and reached for the sleepsuit. But Evie grabbed her hand.

"Baba," Evie said, with great clarity and urgency. Milk. First.

Amanda laughed softly. "All right, all right. Bottle first. Then we'll get you dressed."

She carried Evie to the nursing chair and settled her into the position they had always used, Evie cradled in the crook of her left arm, head resting against Amanda's chest, both of them turned slightly toward the window and the morning light. The bottle had been warming since Amanda came in. She had switched it on as she passed the table, and now she shook it, tested it against the inside of her wrist, and offered it.

Evie latched on immediately, both hands coming up to hold the bottle in that particular baby way, not controlling it so much as

resting against it. Her eyes went soft, and her whole body relaxed. The only sound in the room was the gentle rhythm of swallowing and the early morning birdsong beginning outside.

Amanda watched her.

This was, she had always thought, the most extraordinary thing she had ever been given, this specific stillness, this quiet weight, this small person utterly at peace in her arms. It had not been what she expected. None of it had been what she expected. She had imagined a very different life for both of them. But what she had instead was this, and she had long since stopped measuring it against anything else.

Evie was happy. Evie was safe. Evie was completely and entirely herself. That was enough. That was, in fact, everything.

Dressing came after the bottle, and dressing was one of Evie's favourite parts of the day. Amanda had, over the years, assembled a wardrobe that any actual infant of eighteen months might have envied and which mirrored one in almost every detail. There were rompers and playsuits in soft jersey cotton, many of them printed with animals or simple, cheerful patterns. There were bibbed dungarees in denim and cord. There were little dresses with smocked fronts and puffed sleeves, some with matching plastic-legged bloomers that sat over the nappy and showed a little beneath the hem. There were cardigans with large buttons, soft and practical. There were bonnets for going out, frilled along the brim. There were tiny socks with lace edges that Amanda had to coax onto Evie's feet while she wriggled. There were shoes, soft, wide-soled shoes for the rare occasions when Evie stood or attempted a few assisted steps, and soft knitted booties for most days.

Everything was chosen for comfort and practicality first, but Amanda took pleasure in it. She had always liked dressing Evie. It was an act of care and attention, and Evie submitted to it with a patient, trusting passivity that was one of the qualities Amanda loved most in her, the way she raised her arms when asked, turned her head obligingly for a hat, lifted her feet one at a time. A full cooperation born entirely of trust.

This morning, Amanda chose a pale-yellow romper with white rabbit print, the same motif as the nursery wall. It had poppers all the way down the front and between the legs, and it sat snugly over the nappy in the way that baby clothes were designed to do, the bulk of it visible but unremarkable, simply the shape of a properly dressed baby. She added white socks with a small frill and a matching headband with a small bow.

She stood Evie up on the changing table briefly to adjust the romper, her hands steadying her. Evie stood for a few seconds, holding Amanda's forearms, then sat deliberately back down. Standing was something Evie tolerated rather than embraced.

"There," Amanda said, smoothing the romper down. "Beautiful."

Evie looked down at herself and made a pleased sound.

The rest of the morning had a shape to it that rarely changed. There was playtime on the mat with Evie on her back or front, working at the activity centre, mouthing a soft block, rolling from side to side in the loose and deliberate way of a young infant exploring what her body could do. Amanda sat nearby, sometimes joining in, sometimes simply watching with the patient attentiveness of a mother calibrated entirely to her child's mood and pace. She narrated things like the toy in Evie's hand, the sound from outside, and the light on the wall. She made the voices for soft toys when she picked them up and held them out. She clapped when Evie figured something out or made a sound of particular satisfaction. She had never stopped doing any of this, not for a single year of Evie's life, and it was not performance or effort. It was simply what you did when you were with a baby.

Mid-morning brought a snack of something soft and simple, offered in a bowl with a rubber-coated spoon like mashed banana, or soft-cooked apple, or yoghurt thinned slightly so it was easy to manage. Amanda sat across from Evie at the low feeding table in the kitchen, where the highchair had lived for as long as either of them could remember, and fed her carefully and unhurriedly. There was a

bib. There was a flannel nearby. There was always a mess, and there had never been a day when the mess bothered Amanda in the slightest.

Then there was a nappy check and often a change, quick and matter-of-fact, the routine of it so embedded in the texture of the day that it required no particular thought or attention. Then more play. Then came lunch, which was warmer, more substantial, spooned and offered and received with the particular enthusiasm that Evie reserved for foods she loved, and the particular turning-away that meant she had had enough.

After lunch came the nap. The nap was sacred as it was for all babies.

Amanda still felt the relief of it, even after all these years, the settling of Evie into the cot, the dummy found and offered, the musical mobile set turning above her, and the curtains drawn against the afternoon. She watched Evie's eyes grow heavy in the particular graduated way of a very young child, the resistance giving way to sleep in small visible stages, the slowing blinks, the slackening of the jaw, the hands uncurling, and the final full surrender. She did not leave until Evie was properly asleep. Then she pulled the door nearly closed and stood for a moment in the hallway, her hand flat against the door.

For an hour, perhaps a little more, the house was quiet and entirely hers.

She should sleep herself. The doctor had told her so more than once. But instead, she usually made tea and sat at the kitchen table and looked out at the garden, thinking her long, slow thoughts. She thought about Evie often during these quiet times, not with worry, not with grief, but with a kind of wondering attention. She thought about who Evie was. What it meant to want exactly what you wanted and refuse, with complete integrity, to be anything else. She thought about how many people went through whole lives without knowing themselves that clearly.

She thought, *I raised a baby girl. I raised my baby girl.*

And the thought came with sorrow and with love and with a complicated, irreducible pride.

Evie would wake from her nap wet, warm, and ready to be picked up and held and fed again. Amanda would hear her on the monitor and go to her. She would change her and hold her and give her a bottle in the low afternoon light. She would carry her to the window and show her the garden, the birds on the feeder, the way the light moved through the trees because Evie liked the window, liked the outside world viewed safely from inside, and liked the warmth of her mother's arms as context for all of it.

The afternoon would offer more play, more nappy changes, the unhurried companionship of a mother and her very small child. Tea at the low table. A bath in the early evening, a deep, warm bath in the bath, filled carefully and tested carefully, Evie splashing and content while Amanda knelt beside her on a padded mat, washing her hair with the gentle shampoo, rinsing it with the plastic cup, wrapping her in a large towel warm from the radiator and lifting her out into the warmth of the bathroom.

Then came the night nappy, night clothes, and a soft sleepsuit, thicker than the daytime ones, good for the long hours ahead. The night routine had its own texture. It was quieter, slower, and the lights dimmed. A last bottle in the nursing chair, the room growing dark around them, and Evie's eyes were dropping. Then the transferring to the cot, the delicate lowering, the holding-still-for-a-breath to see if she would stir, the relief when she didn't. The mobile is set on its slowest speed. The nightlight was on.

Amanda stood in the doorway for a moment, as she always did, looking at her sleeping child. Twenty-five years, and she still did this. Stood and looked. Said nothing, in the dark.

Then she pulled the door to and went down the hall, and the house was quiet, and somewhere in her chest the familiar mixture settled, love and fear and something without a name. She went to make herself supper, and she did not let herself think too far ahead.

She thought, *just tonight. Just this.*

And tonight was enough.