

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

CHRISTINE TEDDY

SHELTERED FOREVER

WHEN A MOTHER LOVES TOO MUCH

Sheltered Forever

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by
Christine Teddy

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Chapter 1: He Came Home Tired

The knock on the door wasn't loud, just a single, tired thud. When Alexis opened it, Theo was already halfway turned away, as if unsure he even deserved to be let in. He carried one duffel bag and nothing else. His face was pale and blotchy. He hadn't shaved. There was a stain on his shirt, something yellowish and careless. His eyes, which were too wide for a grown man, didn't meet hers.

"I just... I didn't know where else," he said.

Alexis didn't ask. She simply stepped back from the doorway, just far enough. Theo walked in like a ghost.

The house smelled like sweet flowers. Everything was where he remembered it. The framed photo of his first toothless smile, the cream sofa, the sound of the washing machine humming behind a closed door. It hadn't changed at all.

But he had. He had changed a great deal.

He sat on the edge of the couch as if he might break it. Alexis stood for a long time, watching.

"I kept your room just the same," she said gently. "But I think we'll need to make some changes."

Theo didn't answer. He simply exhaled, long, broken, and quiet.

That night, she tucked him in. Not figuratively, but literally. She pulled the old woollen blanket over his chest and patted the pillow. His shoulders shivered. It was early spring, but his body was reacting like winter had entered him months ago and never left.

"Do you want anything?" she asked.

He looked at her blankly, then muttered, "Warm milk?"

She blinked just once and nodded. When she returned, she handed him the mug like she used to when he was small, fevered, and wordless. He didn't sip it. He suckled gently and slowly. And she thought to herself with a tiny smile, *Oh... there you are.*

By the third night, he stopped getting up in the morning. By the fourth, he had wet the bed. She didn't scold. She simply opened

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the linen closet and pulled out the package she had bought over a year ago, without knowing why - adult-sized nappies, soft and floral-printed, hidden behind the guest towels.

"Let's get you sorted, baby," she whispered.

He lay back with not a word, and not a protest, just a sigh as his old boxer briefs were peeled away.

Alexis's Journal – Entry #1

April 7th

Theo came back home today. He didn't say much. He hasn't for a long time. His emails always felt like a whisper typed with trembling hands.

But today, he looked like he was collapsing inward. I could see it in the way his eyes darted, in the way he wouldn't sit fully on the couch, as if he thought it wasn't his place anymore.

He asked for warm milk. Not tea. Not coffee. Milk.

Something in me cracked open. I don't think he knows what he's asking for yet. But I do.

I see it in the way he curled his knees up when he slept. The way he flinched when the phone rang. The way he smiled, just slightly, when I pulled the blanket all the way up and said, "There, you're all tucked in."

I think he needs to come back to where he started. Not just to this house but to gentleness. To helplessness. To me. And I will give it to him. Slowly. Sweetly. Silently.

He doesn't need a plan. He needs a Mummy.

— A.

Chapter 2: The First Admission

It happened on the fourth night.

Alexis had noticed the signs earlier, the way Theo held his thighs tight before bed, the way he lingered in the hallway as if searching for something unnamed. But she didn't speak of it, not yet. Not until the silence confirmed what she already suspected.

That morning, she opened his door softly. The air was still, and dust caught in the stream of sunlight across the floor.

Theo was curled in the sheets, knees drawn up, thumb unconsciously near his mouth. His eyes opened when she stepped in, but he didn't move. His cheeks were flushed. Then the smell came, faint, but unmistakable.

She said nothing. She simply sat at the edge of the bed and rested her hand on his back. He flinched.

"I didn't mean to," he said, too quickly.

"I know," she replied.

"I... I woke up, and it was already..." His voice cracked. "I don't know what happened."

"I do," she said, calmly. "It's alright."

His lip quivered. "I didn't want to tell you."

Alexis looked at him. He looked so young then. Not just small, but unformed, like someone who'd been trying too hard for too long and had finally come undone, come apart at the seams.

"Theo," she said softly, "has this happened before?"

He hesitated. Then whispered, "Yes."

"How many times?"

He looked down. "A few. I mean... more than a few." She waited for him to explain more. "Maybe once a month last year. Then twice. Then... it was almost every week by December. And now..." His eyes filled. "It's most nights."

He didn't cry, exactly. He withered. The words had weight, and letting them go left him exposed.

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"I tried everything. Alarm clocks, not drinking water, even buying those little pads, like discreet ones, but I kept leaking. I felt like I was rotting from the inside."

Alexis said nothing. She reached for the comforter and peeled it back with care, revealing the damp, yellowed patch beneath him. His thin boxers clung wetly to his hip. He looked away.

"I'm all wrong," he whispered.

Alexis placed her hand on his chest. "No, love," she said gently. "You're tired. That's different."

She stood and left the room.

He thought she might scold him, or lecture, or cry. Instead, she returned with a towel, a plastic-backed mat, and a soft, folded garment in pale blue.

"What's that?" he asked, his voice suddenly small.

"Something for tonight."

He swallowed. "A nappy?"

"Yes."

He stared at it. "I'm not... I mean, that's..."

"You're not being punished," she said firmly, sitting again at the edge of the bed. "You're being cared for. There's a difference."

"But I'm a grown man," he whispered, shame prickling up his neck.

"Are you?"

The words hung in the air like mist, but he didn't respond.

She took his hand. "What if I told you that being a grown man isn't something you have to fight for anymore? What if I told you that you could just rest?"

He let out a shuddering breath. "I can't keep up," he said, finally. "Not with work. Not with bills. Not with the noise and the expectations and the stupid way people talk to you and act like you're supposed to know how to survive everything. I get so overwhelmed that I forget what day it is. I miss meals. I forget my own name sometimes."

Alexis rubbed his knuckles with her thumb.

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"I never wanted to grow up," he whispered. "I thought I did, but I hate it. I hate it."

"I know," she said. "I saw."

He stared at the nappy in her lap. "If I wear that, I don't have to keep pretending?"

She nodded. "Not anymore."

"And you won't think less of me?"

She smiled softly. "Oh, sweetheart. I've never thought more of you than I do right now."

Tears slid down his cheeks. He didn't sob, not yet, but his shoulders began to shake.

Alexis unfolded the nappy. Its interior was soft, cloudlike, blue-tinged. It smelled faintly of powder and plastic.

"Let Mummy help," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

And he didn't argue. Not once.

Chapter 3: The Daytime Line

Theo heard the crinkle before he saw it.

He was sitting at the kitchen table in his old cotton pyjamas, sipping warm milk from a wide-handled mug, his eyes fixed on nothing. Outside, the sky was white, the kind of pale, chilled light that never warms the room, only reminds you how small you are. Alexis entered behind him, calm as ever, holding a neatly folded nappy and a fresh pack of wipes. She set them on the counter with quiet precision.

Theo blinked.

"That's for tonight, right?" he asked, trying for casual.

"No," Alexis said plainly. "That's for now."

He turned. "Now?"

She nodded, tying her hair back. "It's time."

He stared. "But I'm awake. I don't need..."

"Yes, you do."

"I don't want to."

"That's different from needing."

His voice pitched slightly, almost petulant. "Mum..."

"Theo," she said gently but firmly, "you don't get to pick and choose when you're a baby and when you're not."

He instantly froze as the word 'baby' hit home. She stepped closer, still holding the bundle of soft supplies. "You wet the bed. You cried in your sleep. You called me Mummy yesterday."

"I didn't mean to," he mumbled.

"That's exactly the point," she replied. "You're not in control right now. That's nothing to be ashamed of, but it does mean that your care is my responsibility."

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I don't need to wear them during the day. I can hold it. I swear."

She sat opposite him. "Theo," she said quietly, "You have been trying to 'hold it' for years. Holding your breath, holding your emotions, holding your panic, holding your urine through meetings,