

BUILD YOUR TEDDY BEAR



BY ELLIE OWEN

Teddy Bear



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TEDDY BEAR

Two years of being together and a child later didn't change how Adrian still feels as if bees were droning within his veins whenever he held Thea's hand.

Yet, nothing could've prepared Adrian for the bliss woven into a giddy happiness that overpowered him whenever he held Thea's hand while pushing an empty stroller as Adrian preferred to carry Alara close to his chest.

"Why are there garlands everywhere?" Thea murmurs, brows knitted in curiosity as her brown eyes rake over the mall's large halls. "We are still in November. Why are they putting Christmas decor up already?"

"Don't they always put the decor in November? It reminds people to do Christmas shopping, which is a big profit for all levels of the economy."

"I know, but I don't want to think about our Christmas decor. That seems like too much work with a newborn."

"Don't worry about it; I'll take care of it, Thea Tea."

And by that, Adrian means he has already hired interior decorators to go into their homes on a random Tuesday when his parents would be back in town to visit Alara, and Thea would spend the day with Marine in a spa.

Thea lets go of Adrian's hand, inching closer to him as she gently pushes down the yellow wrap sling that keeps Alara secured around Adrian's body.

“Lala is still asleep?” She murmurs more, wondering why Alara hadn’t woken up yet when it’d been quite a bit since her last feed.

Adrian drops an arm around Thea, squeezing her body to his as he rests his chin against the crown of her head. “Our baby is so smart, isn’t she? Taking a longer nap because she knows she’ll have a blast at the teddy store.”

“She’s not even aware that she’s out of the womb and her person yet. Give another three months.”

“Shush, Alara is a genius baby. She’s your daughter, after all.”

“Our, neither mine nor your daughter. She’s our baby,” Thea corrects Adrian, unraveling herself from his embrace to hold his hand again. “Doesn’t *our* baby have enough teddy bears?”

Glancing down at Alara, Adrian walks with a bounce to his steps, rocking Alara in her peaceful slumber as they peruse the mall, searching for those overpriced teddy bear stores.

“Doesn’t she?” Thea asks, running her thumb over his knuckles as Adrian pretends he didn’t hear her. “Your sisters gave Lala a teddy bear from her due date and every weekversary until Lala turned one month old.”

“Your brother has done the same.”

“Jules was feeling left out. He doesn’t want Lala to think Cove and Olivie love her more than he loves her.”

“The three of them are excessive, not just the Friedmans,” Adrian argues, defending his sisters despite the petty arguments they’d been having about reining their siblings’ outpouring gifts. “Lala is their first niece. They are happy, and

they want to spoil her; they are excited to babysit Lala. We are lucky that Lala is so loved, aren't we?"

Resting her head against his shoulder, Thea pouts a little, annoyed that Adrian always managed to say the right thing to have her feeling blessed instead of annoyed.

"I just don't want this to be a competition, and it's been one for a while. Jules can't compete with the gifts billionaires give. Your kin is excessive."

"We are, but you did forbid them from giving Alara books, and that's a good price range for my kin and your kin. Are you sure you don't want to do the bookish advent calendar?"

"I don't want Lala to love books," Thea mutters, eyes lazily exploring the winter clothes left on display, all of which had once been impossibly out of her reach to buy—even now, she doesn't think a coat is worth \$5000. "They're a terrible thing to love."

"I know, and our baby will be no nepotism baby, will she?"

"At least not in publishing. I don't think we could stop Cove from hiring Lala as a model one day."

Adrian snorted a half-nervous, half-delight laugh as he often daydreamed about the memories he'd get to create with his family as Alara grew older, but the idea of Alara growing older made his heartache.

There was something terrible about her growing past fitting nicely against the crook of his arm or napping in her cot instead of his chest. It was even more cruel to imagine her growing into running toward him when he got home from work until one day she didn't care to greet him.

It was terrible to be so excited for the future yet so terrified of it at the same time; terrible that he was helpless against the

passage of time in a way that made him cherish every moment he could with his baby girl.

Adrian didn't care how tired or stressed he was, didn't care about anything that didn't involve Thea and Alara, didn't care if he didn't call his sisters or mom as often when he preferred the babbling company of Alara finding herself against his chest whenever she woke up from a nap.

"Are you going to cry?" Thea probes, eyes leaving his misty eyes when a babble steals her attention. "Look, Lala, Daddy is crying."

"I'm not crying," Adrian whines, rubbing his eyes until they are red. "Daddy is not crying, Lala."

Grey eyes meet each other as Alara sticks her tongue out in a yawn that makes her parents swoon with a synchronized *awn*. Alara looks around as much as she can, content to stay swaddled against her dad for a few more moments.

"Were you thinking of when she's older?" Thea teases Adrian as if she had never cried to Marine or Jules about her fear of the future; the only difference is that Adrian made his fear known to every person who knew he had a daughter.

Thea still had flashbacks to the first time they left the house without Alara. It had been necessary much coercion from Gabriela for them to agree without going out for lunch just the two of them, yet as soon as they got to the restaurant, Adrian had tears in his eyes.

Worrying himself that Alara would be terrified of being away from her parents, that she'd never forgive them for such a terrible betrayal. He managed to keep himself from crying until the tomato soup and grilled cheese he ordered received a side of paternal tears and snot.

In all of her life, Thea had never seen a more pitiful sight, nor had she ever been more embarrassed and worried that if she asked to sit at a different table, Adrian would cry louder than he had been crying.

“She’ll always love you, Adrian. You’re her dad; even when she eventually hates you, she’ll love you.”

“I don’t want Lala to hate me,” Adrian’s voice cracks. “She’s my favorite person in the world.”

“Well, it comes with having a daughter. The hate is fleeting, don’t worry, and if we raise her really well, she’ll see where we come from when we inevitably have to tell her no.”

“I also don’t want to tell Lala no. She deserves the world.”

“We are telling her no.”

Adrian drags his feet against the porcelain flooring of the mall as he turns toward his wife with the poutiest of pouts. Blinking slowly in his best attempt of convincing Thea that ‘no’ should never exist in Alara’s life.

Sighing every so often, Adrian lets Thea be responsible for taking them to the teddy bear store despite knowing she’d beeline toward it instead of leisurely walking down every hallway, stopping in front of storefronts to gawk at their winter items.

After Alara was born, all Thea wanted to do was stay home with her baby, where she knew everything was disinfected and safe for Alara, but mostly, Thea enjoyed playing with Lala and watching Adrian be the best dad she’d ever seen.

There was such beauty in seeing the man she felt the safest with, the man who’d make her laugh and made her feel loved, become that to their daughter.

Every time Alara giggled, babbled, or reached for Adrian, it made Thea love Adrian more and more as she sunk deeper into the certainty there'd never be a better man for her.

With another dramatic sigh, Adrian begins to unravel Alara from around his chest, dragging his feet when the teddy bear store comes to view in all of its vintage glory.

Bramble & Bear-ry is written in bold and ornate brass letters, enveloped by fake flowers that are woven around fairy lights, giving a beautiful contrast against the cherry red that can be found in the facade and walls.

The ceiling is painted red, and the hue drizzles halfway into the wall while the bottom half is made up of unstained oak, dividing the store into different stations for the many steps required to build a bear.

Alara crunches her legs toward her chest when Thea scoops her away from Adrian's embrace, peppering kisses on her chubby cheeks as her husband pouts.

"God, I'm envious," Adrian complains, partially wishing Thea was peppering him with kisses and partially wishing he was peppering Alara with kisses.

"You had her from the penthouse to here. It's mommy's turn, isn't it, Lala?" Thea asks the baby that babbles excitedly, almost smiling when Thea tickles her rounded belly.

Adrian slides his fingers through hers, smiling at Thea before he excitedly hurries their step toward the store that smells of gingerbread houses.

Bracing herself for human interaction, Thea watches a pimply teenager greet them with a broad smile, yet the boy doesn't approach them.

Letting the young family explore the pre-made teddy bears—which most aren't even bears, ranging from frogs, dinosaurs, cows, dogs, cats, lambs, and bunnies.

Thea lingers a few steps away from Adrian, carefully denuding herself as Alara begins to fuss, whining in the timbre she would cry when her troubles were food-oriented.

“Chlamy?” Thea calls, chuckling when her husband whips his head confused before a lightbulb lights up above his head, and he drapes the swaddle over Alara. “Thank you.”

It wasn't the nudity or the discomfort others may feel that made Thea want to cover when breastfeeding. It would take lifetimes before Thea concerned herself with the discomfort of others or when nudity made her uncomfortable, yet there was a part of her that didn't want the world to see a moment meant to be between herself and her daughter.

An act of love as much as it was a simple need of survival. Even when Thea wore clothes that didn't allow her to comfortably breastfeed Alara, leaving her no option but to give the baby a bottle, Thea would still cover her baby as she held the bottle for her.

“Which should we get?” Adrian asks, raising the empty body of a *cuddle bunny* and a fuzzy lamb. “The tag says they are hypoallergenic.”

“Lamb. I like those sage green slippers.”

Adrian picks up the teddy bear shoe before moving to the next station, perusing through the clothes and finding none he likes. “Do we add a smell?”

“No, she's too young. We can sleep with it for a few nights, so it has our smell instead.”

“You, Thea Tea, you're a genius. A bandana?”

“No, she’s too small. It could come loose,” Thea offers Adrian an apologetic smile as his teddy bear for Alara is more simple than he was planning it to be.

For days now, Adrian had promised the world had never seen a more unique teddy bear than the one he planned on making for Alara, yet there must be thousands of white lamps with sage green shoes out into the world.

“We can go to a different store and get matching beanies for the three of us? I know your mom is doing pajamas for the family for Christmas and giving everyone matching beanies when we leave for Switzerland, but we can have our little beanies as the Friedman-Scriven.”

“Can we?” Adrian asks, almost as if matching anything was too grand of a request. “Can we get gloves and scarves too?”

Thea nods, lifting the veil between herself and Alara to find those big grey eyes lighting up as if reminded that she had never been alone despite being cocooned in the shadows.

I made the most beautiful baby girl, Thea muses, unable to be mad that Alara inherited all the physical traits from her dad’s side of the family—even the way her lashes grow perfectly curved was a gift from the Friedmans.

“You’re the most peaceful baby, Lala,” Thea whispers to her daughter, ignoring that her husband is chatting to the pimply clerk as the boy stuffs the teddy bear. “You still don’t like crying, do you? You’ll whine and whimper, but you know Mommy and Daddy are just steps away, don’t you? You know you have our undivided attention. Aren’t you lucky? You get all the cuddles and daily baby massages, the most comfortable bedding, and clothes. Lala, you’re one lucky baby.”

“Thea Tea?”

Raising her head toward Adrian’s voice, Thea watches as he points toward the recording booth where clients who don’t have a pre-recorded message they want to put into their teddy bear can record one with clear audio.

“Go ahead. It’s your gift.”

“I want you with me,” Adrian protests, sauntering toward Thea before weaving their fingers together and gently guiding her toward the booth adorned to match the decor of the store—painted in that cherry red with golden accents and oak paneling.

A strangely thick silence embraces them when the door to the booth is closed from outside, making the sound of Alara feeding seem much louder than it truly is as Adrian offers the small stool for Thea to sit on.

Adrian clears his throat a few times before turning to face the glass wall between them and the pimply boy, who presses a button when Adrian gives him a thumbs up.

“Hi, Lala, it’s Daddy,” Adrian begins, voice quivering already.

“I should’ve written what I wanted to say, but I didn’t. I guess it’s hard to put into words how much I love you, Lala. You can ask your mother, and she’ll tell you that I love her very, very, very, very much, but that love pales against my love for you. It becomes a tiny grain in the ever-growing universe that is my love for you, Lala. Since you were born, everything else has been dull; there is nothing more fun or that I’d rather do than play with you. Well, right now, that’s tummy time and cuddles. Leaving for work has become the greatest torture when I just want to be by your side and watch you fall asleep

and wake up, seeing that little yawn you give that I've convinced myself is a smile reserved only for Mommy and me."

Adrian pauses for a minute, realizing the tears rolling down his cheek as he turns to face Thea, whose brow eyes are adorned by silvery lines.

"The nights we've spent awake are made beautiful because of you; they've forced your mom and me to grow closer, learning more about each other as we learn about you. The few rare times you've cried out of hunger, colic, or because you were so tired and still haven't quite figured out how to fall asleep, baby girl, those tears break my heart, and even then, I'm still so grateful that you've chosen me as your daddy. I never thought I'd find someone as bright as your mother, someone, who challenges me and makes me as happy, but you're pure light, Lala. Mommy and I are the moon, but you, Lala, you are the sun. You're everything beautiful, kind, and good in this world. You're better than heaven, Lala. I love you so much, Lala, never doubt my love for you, never doubt that I'll welcome you with open arms and hold you until you fall asleep against my chest, no matter how old you grow or how badly you fuck up, you'll always have a place in my arms. There is nothing you can do to change that, no sin you can commit to change my love for you. I love you, always and forever."

Adrian raises his hands in an OK sign, informing that pimply boy that he's done talking while hoping he hasn't said too much, that he won't need to do his speech again but cut in half.

Teddy Bear

“You truly are one lucky baby, aren’t you, Alara Friedman?”

“We are luckier,” Adrian murmurs, wrapping Thea and Alara into a hug as he sniffles against the crook of Thea’s neck. “Thank you for giving me her.”

“Thank you for giving me life, Chlamy.”