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Johnny Be Good

Paige Toon

Prologue

'Sing! Sing! Sing!'

No. I can't.

'Sing! Sing! Sing!'

No! Stop it! And for God's sake, cut that bloody music!

'SING! SING! SING!'

Argh! My palms are so slippery I almost dropped the mic. I'm in bad shape. I can't sing. I can NOT sing. But they won't stop. I know they won't stop until I deliver. And I shouldn't disappoint my audience. Okay, I'm going to sing! Here comes the chorus ...

I'm locked inside us

And I can't find the key

It was under the plant pot

That you nicked from me

That's not my song, by the way. And when I say I can't sing, I mean I really can't sing. When you're as drunk as I am, you could be forgiven for thinking that if only Simon Cowell were in the room, he would say, 'Girl, you've got the X Factor.' But I'm under no illusions. I know I'm, in his words, 'distinctly average'.

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As for the audience ... Well, I'm not singing to a 90,000-strong crowd at Wembley, but you've probably guessed that by now. I'm in the living room of my flatshare in London Bridge. And the music comes courtesy of my PlayStation SingStar.

The person who's just grabbed the mic from me is Bess. She's my flatmate and my best friend. She can't sing either. Jeez, she's hurting my ears! Next to her is Sara, a friend of mine from work. And then there are Jo, Jen and Alison, pals from university.

As for me? Well, I'm Meg Stiles. And this is my leaving party. And that song we're making a mockery of? That's written by one of the biggest rock stars on the planet. And I'm moving in with him tomorrow.

Seriously! I am not even joking.

Well, maybe I'm misleading you a little bit. You see, I haven't actually met him yet.

No, I'm not a stalker. I'm his new PA. His Personal Assistant. And I am off to La-La Land. Los Angeles. The City of Angels – whatever you want to call it – and I can't bloody believe it!

Chapter 1

Ouch. My head hurts. What sort of stupid person has a leaving party the night before starting a new job?

I'm not usually this disorganised. In fact, I'm probably the most organised person you're ever likely to meet. Having a leaving party the night before I had to board this plane to LA is very out of character. But then I didn't have much choice. I've only just got the job.

Seven days ago I was a PA at an architects' firm. My boss, Marie Sevenou (early fifties, French, very well-respected in the industry), called me into her office on Monday morning and asked me to shut the door and take a seat. This had never happened in the nine months I'd been working there and my initial reaction was to wonder if I'd done anything wrong. But I was pretty sure I hadn't so, above all, I was curious.

'Meg,' she said, her heavy French accent laced with despair, 'it pains me to tell you this.'

Shit, was she dying?

'I do not want to lose you.'

Shit, was I dying? Sorry, that was just me being ridiculous.

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She continued, 'All of yesterday I toyed with my conscience. Should I tell her? Could I keep it from her? She is the best PA I have ever had. It would devastate me to let her go.'

I do love my boss, right, but she ain't half melodramatic.

'Marie,' I said, 'what are you talking about?'

She stared at me, her face bereft. 'But I said to myself, Marie, think of what you were like thirty years ago. You would have done anything for an opportunity like this. How could you keep it from her?'

What on earth was she going on about?

'On Saturday night I went to a dinner party at a very good friend of mine's. You remember Wendel Redgrove? High-powered solicitor – I designed his house in Hampstead a couple of years ago? Well, anyway, he was telling me how his biggest client had lost his personal assistant recently and was having a terrible time trying to find a new one. Of course I empathised. I told him about you and how I thought I might die if I ever

lost you. Honestly, Meg, I don't know how I ever managed before ...'

But she regained her composure, directing her cool blue eyes straight into my dark-brown ones as she said the words that would change my life forever.

'Meg, Johnny Jefferson needs a new personal assistant.'

Johnny Jefferson. Wild boy of rock. Piercing green eyes, dirty blond hair and a body Brad Pitt would have killed for fifteen years ago.

It was the chance of a lifetime, to go and work in Los Angeles for him and live in his mansion. To become his confidante, his number one, the person he relies on more than anyone else in the world. And my boss, in a moment of madness, had suggested me for the job.

That very afternoon I met up with Wendel Redgrove and Johnny Jefferson's manager, Bill Blakeley, a cockney geezer in his late forties who had managed Johnny's career since he split up with his band, Fence, seven years ago. Wendel drew up a contract, along with a strict confidentiality clause, and Bill asked me to start the following week.

Marie actually cried when I told her it was all done and dusted; they'd offered me the job and I had accepted. Wendel had already persuaded Marie to waive my one-month-notice period, but that left me only six days, which was daunting, to say the least. When I raised my concerns, Bill Blakeley put it bluntly: 'Sorry, love, but if you need time to sort your life out then you're not the right chick for the job. Just pack what you need. We'll cover your rent here for the first three months and after that, if it all works out, you can have some time off to come back and do whatever the hell it

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is that you need to do. But you've got to start immediately, because frankly, I'm sick to fucking death of buying Johnny's underpants since his last girl left.'

And so here I am, on this plane to LA, with a shocking hangover. I glance out of the window down at the city. Smog hangs over it like a thick black cloud as we fly towards the airport. The distinctive white structure of the Theme Building looks like a flying saucer or a white, four-legged spider. Marie told me to look out for it, and seeing it makes me feel even more spaced-out.

I clear Customs and head out towards the exit where I've been told there will be a driver waiting to collect me. Scanning the crowd, I find a placard with my name on it.

'Ms Stiles! Well! How do you do!' the driver says when I introduce myself. He shakes my hand vigorously as his face breaks out into a pearly white grin. 'Welcome to America! I'm Davey! Pleased to meet you! Here, let me take that bag for you, ma'am! Come on! We're this way!'

I'm not sure I can handle this many exclamation marks on a hangover, but you've got to admire his enthusiasm. Smiling, I follow him out of the terminal. The humidity immediately engulfs me and I start to feel a little faint so it's a relief to reach the car – a long black limo. Climbing into the back, I slump down into the cool, cream leather seats. The air-conditioning kicks in as we exit the car park and my faintness and nausea begin to subside. I put the window down.

Davey is rabbiting on about his lifelong ambition to meet

the Queen. I breathe in the outside air, less humid now that we're on the move, and start to feel better. It smells of barbeques here. The tallest palm trees I've ever seen line the wide, wide roads and I'm amazed as I stick my head further out of the window and gaze up at them. I can't believe they haven't snapped in half – their proportions are skinnier than toothpicks. It's the middle of July, but some people still have sad little Christmas decorations hanging out in front of their tired-looking homes. They twinkle in the afternoon sun – no wonder they call this place Tinseltown. I look around but can't see the Hollywood sign.

Yet.

Oh God, how can this be happening to me?

None of my friends can believe it, because I've never been that fussed about Johnny Jefferson. Of course I think he's good-looking – who wouldn't? – but I don't really fancy him. And when it comes to rock music, well, I think Avril's pretty hardcore. Give me Take That any day of the week.

Everyone else I know would give their little toe to be in my position. In fact, make that their whole foot. Hell, throw in a hand, while you're at it.

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Whereas I would struggle to give up more than my big toenail. I certainly wouldn't relinquish a whole digit.

That's not to say I'm not thrilled about this job. The fact that all my friends fancy Johnny like mad just makes it even more exciting.

Davey drives through the gates into Bel Air, the haven of the rich and famous.

'That's where Elvis used to live,' he points out, as we start to climb the hill via ever-more-impressive mansions. I try to catch a glimpse of the groomed gardens behind the high walls and hedges.

The ache in my head seems to have been replaced by butterflies in my stomach. I wipe the perspiration from my brow and tell myself it's just the side effects of too much alcohol.

We continue climbing upwards, then suddenly Davey is pulling up outside imposing wooden gates. Cameras point ominously down at us from steel pillars on either side of the car. I feel like I'm being watched and have a sudden urge to put my window back up. Davey announces our arrival into a speakerphone and a few seconds later the gates glide open. My hands feel clammy.

The driveway isn't long, but it feels like it goes on forever. Trees obscure the house at first, but then we turn a corner and it appears in front of us.

It's a modern architectural design: two storeys, white concrete, rectangular, structured lines.

Davey pulls up and gets out to open my door. I stand there, trying to control my nerves, as he lifts my suitcase out of the boot. The enormous and heavy wooden front door swings open and a short, plump, pleasantly smiling Hispanic-looking woman is standing beside it.

'Now then! Who have we got here?' She beams and I like her immediately. 'I'm Rosa,' she says, 'and you must be Meg.'

'Hello ...'

'Come on in!'

Davey wishes me goodbye and good luck and I follow Rosa inside, to a large, bright hallway. We go through another door at the end and I stop in my tracks. Floor-to-ceiling glass looks out onto the most perfect view of the city, hazy in the afternoon sunshine. A swimming pool out on the terrace sparkles cool and blue.

'Pretty spectacular, ain't it?' Rosa smiles as she surveys my face.

'Amazing,' I agree.

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I wonder where The Rock Star is.

'Johnny's away on an impromptu writing trip,' Rosa tells me.

Oh.

'He won't be back until tomorrow,' she continues, 'so you've got a little time to get yourself unpacked and settled in. Or even better, out there by the pool ...' She nudges me conspiratorially.

I lift the handle on my suitcase and try to ignore my disappointment as Rosa leads me into the large, double-height open-plan room. The hi-tech stereo system and enormous flatscreen TV in the corner tell me it's the living room. Furniture is minimal, modern and super, super cool.

I'm impressed. In fact, I'm feeling less and less blasé about this job by the minute, and that's not helping my steadily swirling nerves.

'The kitchen is over there,' Rosa says, pointing it out behind a curved, frosted-glass wall. 'That's where I spend most of my time. I'm the cook,' she explains before I get the chance to ask. 'I try to feed that boy up. If I were a bartender I'd have a lot more joy. He likes his booze, that one.' She chuckles good-naturedly as we arrive at the foot of the polished-concrete staircase.

'Are you okay with that, honey?' She glances back over her shoulder at my suitcase.

'Yes, fine!'

'We should really have a butler here, but Johnny don't like a lot of staff,' she continues, as she climbs the stairs ahead of me. 'It's not that he's stingy, mind, he just likes us to be a tight-knit family.' She turns right. 'Your room is over here. Johnny's got the big one at the other end, and behind them doors there you've got your guest rooms and Johnny's music studio.' She points them out as we go past. 'Your offices are downstairs, in between the kitchen and the cinema.'

Sorry, did she just say cinema?

'I'll show you round later,' she adds, slightly out of breath now.

'Do you live here, too?' I ask.

'Oh no, honey, I got a family to go home to. Apart from the security staff, you're the only one who'll be here overnight. And Johnny, of course. Okay,' she says, clapping her hands together as we reach the door at the end. 'This is you.' She turns the stainless-steel knob and pushes the heavy metal door open, standing back to let me pass.'

My room is so bright and white that I want to put my shades on. Windows look out over the leafy trees at the back of the house and a giant super-king-size bed is in the

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centre, covered by a pure white bedspread. White-lacquer floor-to-ceiling wardrobes line one wall, and there are two doors on the other wall.

'Here you've got your kitchenette, where you can whip yourself up some food if mine ain't good enough for you.' From her jovial tone I'm guessing that's not likely to be the case. 'And here you've got your en-suite.'

Some en-suite. It's enormous, with dazzling white stone lining every surface. A huge stone spa is at the back, and a large open shower is to my right, opposite double basins on my left. White fluffy towels hang on heated chrome towel rails.

'Pretty nice, huh?' Rosa chuckles. She walks to the door. 'I'll leave you to settle in. Why don't you come on down to the kitchen when you're good and ready and I'll get you something to eat?'

As the door closes behind her, I start jumping on the spot like a mad woman, face stretched into a silent scream.

This place is mental! I've seen rock star mansions on MTV Cribs, but this is something else.

I kick off my shoes and throw myself onto the enormous bed, laughing as I look up at the ceiling.

If only Bess could see this place ... It's such a far cry from our dingy flatshare back home. It's getting on for midnight now in England and she will have hit the sack long ago, sleeping off her hangover before work tomorrow. I decide to send her a text to wake up to in the morning. I climb off the bed, smiling at the feeling of the thick white shagpile carpet between my toes, and grab my phone from my bag.

Actually, I think I'll send her a picture. I slide open the camera lens instead, snapping the massive room with the (now slightly crumpled) bed in the middle. I punch out a message:

Check out my bedroom! Haven't met him yet but house is amazing! Wish you were here x

She is going to die when she sees the outside view. I'll have to send her that tomorrow.

I decide to unpack later and instead go and see Rosa downstairs. I find her in the kitchen, frying chicken, peppers and onions in a pan.

'Hey there! I was just preparing you a quesadilla. You must be starving.'

'Can I help?' I ask.

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'No, no, no!' She shoos me away, minutes later delivering the finished product, cheese oozing out of the edges of the triangular-cut tortillas. She's right: I am starving.

'I would offer to make you a margarita, but I think you just need feeding up, judging by the state of those skinny arms.' She laughs and pulls up a chair.

My arms are skinny compared to hers. In fact, every part of me is skinny compared to Rosa. She's like a big Mexican momma away from home.

'Where do you live, then?' I ask, and discover that home is an hour's drive away, where she has three teenage sons, one ten-year-old daughter, and a husband who works like mad but loves her like crazy from the way she smiles when she speaks of him. It's a long way for her to travel, but she adores working for Johnny. Her only regret is that she's not often there to see him tuck into the meals she leaves for him. And it breaks her heart when she comes in the next morning and finds the food still in the refrigerator.

'You have got to make that boy eat!' she insists to me now. 'Johnny don't eat enough.'

Hearing her speak about 'Johnny' is strange. I keep thinking of him as 'Johnny Jefferson', but soon he'll just be Johnny to me as well.

I do already feel like I know him, though. It's impossible to live in the UK without knowing about Johnny Jefferson, and after a lunch break of Googling him when I worked at Marie's, I now know even more.

His mother died when he was thirteen so he moved from Newcastle to live with his father in London. He dropped out of school to concentrate on his music and formed a band in his late teens. They signed a record contract and were global superstars by the time Johnny was twenty. But he spiralled out of control at the age of twenty-three when the band broke up, before coming back almost two years later as a solo artist. Now thirty, he's one of the most successful rock stars in the world. Of course there are still rumours of his dodgy lifestyle. Drink, drugs, sex – you name it, Johnny's probably done it. I don't mind the odd drink, and I'm not a prude, even if I have had only three serious boyfriends, but I'm really not into the drug scene, and I've never been attracted to bad boys.

Rosa heads off at six-thirty and urges me to get outside by the pool. Ten minutes later I'm on the terrace, clad in the black bikini that I bought for my recent holiday in Italy with Bess. The sun is still baking hot so I stand on the steps in the shallow end and tilt my head back up to catch the rays. The glittering blue water is cool, but not cold, and I don't flinch as I immerse myself fully. I swim a few laps and decide then and there to swim fifty every morning. I did so much walking in London that keeping fit was effortless, but everybody drives cars here so I might need to work at it.

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After a while I climb out and spread my towel on the hot paving stones beside the pool, forgoing the sunloungers so I can trail my fingers in the water. My hangover is long gone, and I lie there feeling blissfully happy, listening to the sound of the water filtering through the swimming pool and the cicadas chirping in the undergrowth. High overhead a distant aeroplane leaves a long white streak in the cloudless sky and out of the corner of my eye I can see little black birds swoop down to drink from the pool. I begin to feel dozy.

'Is this what I pay you for?'

I jolt awake to find a dark figure hovering above me, cutting out my sun. I'm so shocked I almost fall in the pool.

'Whoa, shit!'

I rummage around to try to pull my towel out from under my bum so I can cover myself up, but it drops in the water.

'Bollocks!'

I hastily scramble to my feet, realising all I've done in the last few seconds is curse at my new boss.

'Sorry,' I blurt. His eyes graze over my body and I feel like he's undressing me. Which isn't that difficult, because I've barely got anything on as it is. I cross my arms in front of my chest, desperately wanting to retrieve my soaking towel from the pool. Unfortunately, though, that would involve bending over, which is not something I feel comfortable doing right now. I look up.

He's actually quite tall – about six foot two, I estimate, compared to my five-foot-seven-inch frame – and is wearing skinny black jeans and a black T-shirt with a silver metal-studded belt. His dirty blond hair falls messily around his chin and his green eyes, with the light of the swimming pool reflected in them, look almost luminous.

Christ, he is gorgeous. Even more so in real life than in pictures.

'Sorry,' I say again, and his mouth curls up slightly as he reaches down behind me to drag my sopping-wet towel out of the pool. I instinctively want to step away from him, but the only way is backwards and into the water, and I think I've made enough of a tit of myself as it is. He straightens himself back up and wrings the towel out, muscles on his bare arms flexing with the movement. I notice his famous tattoos and can't help but feel on edge.

I remember my sarong is hanging on one of the sunloungers behind him, but he makes no attempt to move for me as I awkwardly sidestep him before hurrying over to grab it. I quickly tie the still-way-too-small green piece of material around my waist.

'Meg, right?' he says.

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'Yes, hi,' I reply, watching him while shading my eyes from the sun as he rolls the wet towel up into a ball and aims it at a basket six metres away. It goes straight in. 'And you, er, obviously, are Johnny Jefferson.'

He turns back to me. 'Johnny will do.' I note that he has a few freckles across his nose that I've never noticed in photographs.

'I was just, um, taking a break,' I stutter.

'So I figured,' he replies.

'I didn't think you'd be back until tomorrow.'

'I figured that also.' He raises an eyebrow and delves into his jeans pocket, pulling out a crumpled cigarette packet. Sitting down on one of the sunloungers, he lights up and casually pats the space next to him, but with the way my heart is beating, I figure I'd be safer on the sunlounger opposite instead.

'So, Meg ...' he says, taking a long drag and looking across at me.

'Yes?'

'Do you smoke?' he asks, not offering me a cigarette.

'No.'

'Good.'

Hypocrite. I think it, but I don't have the guts to say it.

'How old are you?' he asks.

'Twenty-four,' I reply.

'You look older.'

'Do I?'

He flicks his ash into a two-foot-high stainless-steel ashtray and narrows his eyes at me. 'There's a lot of pressure with this job, you know.'

Oh, okay, not really a compliment, more a concern.

'I can handle it.' I try to inject some confidence into my voice.

'Bill and Wendel seem to think so.' He sounds quite American, which is surprising considering he spent the first twenty-five years of his life in England. 'Got a boyfriend?' he asks.

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Hey, hang on a second ... 'What's that got to do with anything?'

'Don't get touchy,' he says, looking amused. 'I just want to know what the chances are of you getting homesick and buggering off back to Old Blighty.' Now he sounds English ...

His stare is making me feel uncomfortable so I hold his gaze for only a couple of seconds. He remains silent and I sure as hell don't know what to say to him.

'You haven't answered my question.'

Question? What question? Oh, boyfriend question ... I'm finding it difficult to focus.

'No, I don't have a boyfriend.'

'Why not?' he bats back immediately, before taking another long drag on his cigarette.

'Er, well, I did have one but we broke up six months ago. Why?'

He grins, stubbing out his fag. 'Just curious.' He gets to his feet. 'Want a drink?'

I stand up quickly. 'I'll get it.'

He gives me a wry look over his shoulder as he wanders over to the other side of the terrace where there's an outdoor bar area. 'Chill out, chick, I'm perfectly capable of getting myself a drink. What are you having?'

I opt for a Diet Coke.

He returns with two large whiskies on the rocks and hands one over. I look down at it and back up at him. His expression is blank. Did he hear me?

'Um ...' I say, but the next thing I know he's dragging his T-shirt over his head. Oh my God, I don't know where to look. I take a large gulp of whisky as he stretches out on a sunlounger.

Right then and there, the ridiculousness of the situation hits me. This is nuts. Johnny Jefferson – the Johnny Jefferson! – is here in front of me, so close that I could actually reach out and touch him. I could tweak his nipple, for crying out loud! Imagine if I sent Bess a picture of this view. A small snort escapes me at the thought.

'You alright?' He glances over at me.

'Yes,' I answer. But, embarrassingly, I start to giggle.

'What's so funny?'

'Nothing,' I quickly reply, but inside my head my mind is going into overdrive ...

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Nothing? A week ago I was working in an architects' studio in London and now I'm in LA, in a rock star mansion, sitting on a sunlounger next to a half-naked rock star! If that's not surreal, I don't know what is.

He knocks back his whisky in one and I hold out my hand for the glass.

'Another?'

He hesitates for a moment before offering it up. 'Why not.'

About time I start doing my job. I get up and hurry to the bar area, finishing the rest of my drink. I survey the bottles in the cupboard under the bar, searching for the whisky. I spot a can of Diet Coke and consider switching but think better of it. What I need right now is some Dutch courage. And a few shots of tequila wouldn't go amiss ... Ooh, there is a bottle of tequila in here, actually. I glance over at Johnny Jefferson, sprawled out on a sunlounger and facing away from me, oblivious to my beverage dilemma.

No, Meg, no. No tequila for you.

Oh, bugger it, I'll just have one.

I take a quick swig from the bottle and almost spit the booze back out as it sears the back of my throat. I desperately, desperately want to cough. Instead I swallow furiously and choke back the tears.

I need water. Water!

Or perhaps another swig of tequila would help?

Oddly, it does.

'You know what you're doing over there?' Johnny calls out.

Whoops, I've been ages.

'Yes, just coming!'

I approach the sunloungers, trying not to get distracted by the sight in front of me.

'Cheers.' Johnny chinks my glass and takes a gulp as I sit down.

His chest is toned and smooth and he has a dark tan. There's a tattoo of some writing right across his trouser line. I can't read what it says, but phwoar ...

Oi! Focus, Meg, focus!

'So Rosa said you were away on a writing trip?'

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'Yeah. Trying to get everything together for next week.'

'What's happening next week?' I ask.

He looks a little surprised. 'The Whisky?' he replies.

'More whisky?' I ask. Jesus, he really does have a drink problem.

'No, the Whisky,' he says.

'I don't understand.' I look at him blankly.

'Girl,' he says, 'don't tell me you don't know about my comeback gig at the Whisky – you know, the venue?'

'No, sorry, I don't.' My face heats up. 'Should I have heard about it?'

He laughs in disbelief.

'Sorry,' I say, 'but I don't really know much about you.'

And then I begin to ramble like a lunatic ...

'I mean, I'm not really a fan.'

Shut up, Meg.

'I don't mind some of your songs but, well, you know, I kind of prefer Kylie, to be honest.'

Why the bloody hell did I admit that?

'But at least you haven't ended up with a mad stalker,' I continue. 'I could know anything and everything there is to know about you. I could know your favourite colour, the brand of shampoo you use ...'

Christ Almighty, ZIP IT! Nope. It just gets worse ...

'At least I'm not a star-fucker.'

ARGH!

'I should hope not, Meg,' he says, stubbing out his second cigarette in five minutes. 'That would be going above and beyond the call of duty.'

'Another drink?' I offer weakly, the reality of everything I've just said starting to sink in. I'm going to lose my job. I'm going to lose my job before it's even started.

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'Nah, I've got to shoot off.' He stands up. 'I'm going to hook up with some pals in town. Ring the Viper Room and reserve us a table for eight.'

'Sure. Er, where ...'

'In the Rolodex in the office. You'll find all the numbers you'll need in there.'

'Is that eight people or eight p.m.?'

'Eight people. Get them to hold the table. I don't know what time we'll be there.'

So I'm still employed, then? I get up hastily and take his empty glass from him, unable to meet his eyes. I turn away and notice in the reflection of the glass window that he's watching his new PA's departing derrière as she makes her way inside to the office.

Half an hour later Johnny Jefferson comes downstairs and finds me tapping my fingers on one of the two big desks in the office. I'm still feeling nervy, despite the tequila, and I'm not quite sure what to do next.

'Table all booked?' he asks, hooking his thumb casually into his jeans pocket. They're the same ones he was wearing earlier, but he's changed into a fitted cream shirt with silver pinstripe.

'Yes, and champagne chilling on ice. I didn't know if you wanted the car so I called Davey just in case. He's waiting on the driveway.'

'Cool.' He nods. 'Thought I'd have to take the bike.'

At least I got that right.

He stays standing in the doorway for a moment, staring at me, his hair still damp from the shower.

'Right then, I'm off.' He pats the palm of his hand on the door with an air of finality.

I try to resist asking, but can't. 'When will you be back?'

'Tomorrow,' he answers. 'Probably.'

And then he's gone. And suddenly the house feels very empty indeed.

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