Megan (No. 3)

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

'Megan! You're not putting him in that outfit,' Mum said. 'Please don't tell me you're putting him in *that* for his birthday party.'

'Yes, I am,' I said. We both looked at Jack. He was wearing a white Baby Gap T-shirt and denim shorts with studs around the pockets. 'I think he looks really sweet.'

'Sweet! The legs of his nappy are sticking out of the shorts and that T-shirt is too small, too tight around the arms and will be filthy by four o'clock. He looks really common – all he wants is an earring.' She frowned. 'Why don't you put him in that nice little yellow jumper I bought.'

'Per-lease,' I said.

Mum gave a great sigh. 'Well, you think you know best, of course. Far be it for me to interfere in my own grandson's upbringing.' And then she went on, trying to do just that. 'Clothes make a person, Megan. You dress to an image; how you want to be seen. If

you dress Jack like a yob, he'll grow up like a yob. When you were little I dressed you up for parties. You had special clothes for parties. Always looked pretty.'

'Things have changed,' I said.

'Oh, they certainly have,' she said. 'And not for the better, either.'

Jack was sitting on the floor in our flat, surrounded by a coloured sea of wrapping paper that had held his presents. One year old that day, he had straight dark hair, blue eyes with long lashes, pink, plump cheeks and two teeth. As I stared at him, wondering how it was possible that he was really mine, he leaned forward, grabbed a corner of a crumpled sheet of red wrapping paper, and began to push it into his mouth.

'Get that off him!' Mum said. 'That'll be poisoned. Make him sick.'

'They wouldn't make wrapping paper that was *poisoned*!'

Mum put down the big iced sponge cake she was carrying and darted at Jack, snatching the paper away. 'I expect it's made in Hong Kong. They haven't got the same standards there.'

Jack gave a startled cry as she pulled the paper away from him. He turned, put out his bottom lip and looked at me sadly, his eyes filling with tears. 'Bye-

byes,' he said. What he meant was he wanted the grubby bit of blanket he always liked to hold when he was upset, or went to sleep. Before he could start crying properly, I picked him up and swung him on to my hip.

'Now see what you've done!' I said to Mum. 'It's unlucky to cry on your birthday.'

'Rubbish!' she said. 'Old wives' tales. I should say it was more unlucky to get poisoned by wrapping paper.'

I looked at her and just couldn't be bothered to argue. 'Yeah. Whatever,' I said.

Heaving a big sigh, I took Jack off to the bedroom we both shared with my sister Ellie. This was Mum's old bedroom, so still had horrible flowery wallpaper and pink shiny curtains. It was much too cramped for the three of us, of course – and it would be worse still in a few months' time, when Jack would need a proper bed.

I sighed again. I'd have to put up with it, though. And put up with Mum.

'I can hear her going on from here,' Ellie said. She was lounging on her bed with headphones hanging around her neck. A song I didn't recognise was coming out of them – not that I recognised much on

the music scene nowadays. Since I'd had Jack I didn't seem to be able to keep up with things like that: music, boy bands, fashion, whatever was cool. Somehow I seemed to have stopped being a teenager. Ellie, who wasn't yet thirteen, was more of one than I was. Exactly what *I* was, I wasn't sure. I didn't seem to fit in anywhere.

'Mrs Nagface,' I muttered.

'Come here then, Jack!' Ellie put out her arms and I dropped him on to her tummy.

'Sing with me. Happy birthday to you!' she started singing, and Jack gave a chuckle.

I flopped on to my bed, glad she was around. Glad of the respite. It had its drawbacks, being a single mum – mostly because it meant there was only one of you. You had no one to offload on to.

Ellie was a help, though. She'd changed a lot. Eighteen months ago, when I'd first found out I was pregnant, she'd been ten and a prissy, miniature version of Mum, all shock and horror. Pregnant at fifteen! The earth is going to open up and swallow you whole! Now she was twelve, though, we got on OK. She was really grown-up for her age: as tall as me and (although it killed me to have to say it) prettier. I'd seen boys hanging around outside the flats for

her already. Mum blamed the boys business on me, saying that Ellie had grown up too fast because of 'what's happened in this family'. Anything like that was my fault, although actually, I'd only ever had one boyfriend in my life – the boy who'd got me pregnant.

Luke was at university and lived in Sheffield now. About as far away from me as he could get. He'd remembered it was Jack's birthday, though – he'd sent a horrible fluffy green troll thing, and it was that which had been wrapped in the red wrapping paper. A note round the troll's neck had said, 'Happy Birthday from your daddy' and I'd removed this before Mum had seen it and started on about it ('Fine daddy he's turned out to be. Seen his son twice in a year. He needn't think he'll get away without giving you maintenance as soon as he's earning,' etc etc).

I let it all go over my head. I had to with Mum. If I reacted to everything she said I'd go mad. Besides, I never defended Luke because I'd long since stopped feeling anything for him. Any love business between us had finished before I'd even had the baby. He was a million miles away in Sheffield and could have been on the planet Zog for all I cared.

'What time's Mark coming?' Ellie asked, looking at

me from under her eyelashes. She was wearing electric blue mascara, I noticed.

'What d'you want to know for?'

Ellie sat Jack on her pillow and gave him a book to look at. He began to gnaw the corner of it. 'I was just asking . . . '

'He's not going to be interested in you!' I said. He wasn't even interested in *me*. 'He's ten years older than you are.'

'So?'

'Besides, he's our cousin.'

'So?' she said again. 'It doesn't stop me fancying him.'

Mark was, I have to say, extremely fit. I'd spent most of Jack's early weeks in a tizz about him – until I'd found out that he was actually related to us. My Auntie Lorna had had a baby when she was seventeen and had it adopted, and that baby had turned out to be Mark. To be quite honest, it wasn't so much finding out we were cousins that had stopped me fancying him, but realising that he wasn't the slightest bit interested in me.

I'd had a bit of a crisis then and it had made me stop and think: who *was* going to fancy me? Ever? A girl of sixteen with a baby in tow? The answer was,

practically no one. And once I'd realised that it meant I could stop thinking that some gorgeous boyfriend was going to come round the corner at any minute. It just wasn't going to happen.

'I didn't fancy boys when I was your age,' I said to Ellie. 'I was into plastic ponies.' I glanced at Jack, who was still gnawing the book. It was blue, and there was a stream of blue dribble about to go on to his T-shirt. I pulled a tissue out of a box and caught the dribble just in time.

'I only want to look at him,' Ellie said. 'I'm not going to fling myself at him. Anyway, what time is his *mum* getting here?'

I grinned at the way she'd said it. Mark's mum – our Auntie Lorna – was my dad's younger sister, and when I was pregnant and excluded from school I'd been sent away to stay with her. It was only then I'd found out that, twenty years before, she'd had a baby of her own who'd been adopted.

I glanced at my watch. 'She's supposed to have been here by now. She wanted to arrive before the party started and before Mark arrived.'

Ellie gave me a wide-eyed and wondering look. 'How weird was that!' she said. 'I still can't believe he's our cousin. Fancy Auntie Lorna . . . How many

times have they seen each other now?'

'About four, I think,' I said. 'Lorna wants to see him more, but he's being a bit offish. I don't think he's properly forgiven her for getting shot of him when he was born.'

'At least she *had* him,' Ellie pointed out. 'She needn't have done. She could have had an abortion or something.'

I nodded, watching Jack. He'd dropped the book and rolled himself on to his tummy, then wriggled and kicked until he was at the edge of the bed. He dangled his fat little legs until they reached down to the floor, then put his weight on them and stood for a moment, swaying, before he collapsed.

I clapped him. 'Clever Jack!'

'Just look!' Ellie said admiringly. 'It won't be long before he's walking.'

Jack shuffled forward on his bottom, then rolled sideways and went under the bed and straight into a wodge of fluff.

I groaned. Mum's predictions had an uncanny way of coming true – he *was* going to be filthy before we started the party. Grabbing him, I brushed down his T-shirt, and as I did so there was a ring at the doorbell.

'I'll go – in case it's Mark,' Ellie said, batting her blue eyelashes.

She went off and I looked at myself in the mirror. My hair was long and a bit straggly – I hadn't had it cut for ages because I couldn't take Jack in the hairdressers with me – and anyway, it cost too much. I hadn't bothered with any make-up either. I never did these days. I might wear a bit of lippy or something when I went to the educational unit in term-time, but when I was at home no one ever saw me except Jack, so it didn't seem worth the bother.

But now, seeing as it was a *party* . . .

I rummaged in a drawer for my make-up bag and found, among the broken eye pencils, sample sizes of moisturiser and grubby pieces of cotton wool, the remains of what had once been my favourite lipstick. That was another thing about being a teenage mum: no money. After buying Jack's nappies and jars of baby food and whatever shampoos and stuff he needed each week, there was never anything left over for me. The things I had in my bag were crumbling to bits and it was a lucky day for me if I found a magazine with a free mascara or something on it.

I dug my fingernail into the lipstick and rubbed

what I could get over my lips. Then I found Ellie's make-up, in a smart silver wire basket, and borrowed her eyeshadow. Bit of a role reversal, I thought – it was supposed to be her who was pinching mine.

I listened at the door to find out who'd arrived. It wasn't Mark, though, it was Claire, supposed best friend. And unfortunately, she had Josie with her.

They came steaming into the bedroom with screams of jollity.

'Where's the birthday boy, then?' Josie cried. I looked at her. She'd always been slim but now she was as thin as a whippet, with spiky hair which was half blonde and half dark. She had a tattoo of a bracelet around her upper arm and, though I could never decide if tattoos were naff or not, I had to say she really looked good.

'Can't wait to see him!' Claire said, which was a bit rich, I thought. If she really couldn't wait to see him, then why hadn't she been round here in five weeks? Claire was looking good, too: slim and nicely made-up, with shiny cheekbones and a really tight pair of leather jeans. Next to them I felt like Mrs Frump.

'There he is!' Josie swooped on him and picked him up. 'He's gorgeous! Hasn't he grown!'

As she hadn't seen him for about four months, I thought he probably had.

'He's lovely!' Claire said. 'And isn't he beginning to look like Luke?'

I nodded, mentally pricing up her jeans and her top. If I wanted them (and I'd have killed for them, actually) I would have to go without food for at least six months.

They both gave me presents for Jack. Claire's was a photo album with BABY in furry writing on the front, and Josie's was a plastic duck on wheels which pushed along with a loud *quack-quack-quack*.

They sat down on the bed while I showed the presents to Jack. Josie had him on her knee and was jogging him up and down enough to make him sick. He sat there, startled, staring at her while she jiggled and made kissing noises.

'Oh, isn't he gorgeous! Megan, you're so lucky!' she cooed. 'It's so cool to have a baby. Wish I had one!'

I didn't bother to say anything to such a blatant lie. If anyone wanted a baby that badly then they knew how to get one. They'd seen me, though. They'd seen boys shouting after me at school and seen me pushed away with Auntie Lorna in Cheshire to live for most

of my pregnancy. They'd seen – and were still seeing – me miss out on parties and discos and boyfriends and holidays and about a million other things. Lucky? I didn't think so.