Megan (No. 2)

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

When I woke up properly it was day. The hospital ward was hot and bright with sunshine, and along my back I was wet with sweat from the plastic mattress underneath me.

I still didn't feel that things were real. Surely it wasn't true. Surely I hadn't had a baby. How *could* I have? Having babies was a grown-up sort of thing; a married and mortgage thing that friends' older sisters and aunties did. How had I managed to have a baby?

I'd had the weirdest night ever. I'd woken on and off and heard babies crying somewhere in the distance, and people talking and laughing, and then someone rattling a trolley around. In-between this I'd slept and had funny dreams: one where I'd gone out with the baby and had left him on a bus, and a strange one in which he'd grown enormous overnight, so that I couldn't get him through the front door at home. In the worst, most nightmarish one, Mum had come to hospital to collect me, but we hadn't taken the baby.

We'd just pushed him into a dark corner and abandoned him.

Remembering the dream again and feeling a sudden panic, I struggled to sit up. There was no cot beside my bed now, but there had been, sometime earlier, and I could dimly remember a nurse telling me that she was taking the baby into a nursery for the night to make sure that I got a good night's sleep.

I wasn't quite sure how long I'd been on this ward; exactly when I'd arrived. I knew I'd come from the operating theatre, where I'd had a Caesarean, some time yesterday, but whether it had been daytime when I'd arrived, or the evening, or the middle of the night, I couldn't remember. I knew that Mum had come in to see me, but I'd been too exhausted and woozy from the operation to talk to her much, and I couldn't remember her going home, so I think I must have fallen asleep in the middle of her visit.

I tugged at the curtain which divided me from the rest of the ward, trying to pull it back and see round it. There were three other screened-off beds in the room, and on the far side was a glass dividing wall with a hallway along which nurses were coming and going. On the other side of this hallway was the nursery, and I could just see the tops of some plastic cots.

Was that where my baby was?

'Ow!' I'd tried to move again and with the effort had pulled at the stitches that held my tummy together. I put my hand under my nightie and onto the gauze covering and tried to count how many there were. Six, was it? Or maybe eight.

I flopped down again and lay still for some moments, feeling again the panic that had accompanied the dreams. In that nursery, just over the way, was a baby. *My own baby*. It was a boy and he was entirely my responsibility. I had to look after him, feed, clothe and care for him and take him everywhere with me forever. Or not quite forever, but near enough.

And I hadn't even told Mum that I wanted to keep him yet.

Suppose she wouldn't let me? Suppose he was taken away from me? Or suppose they didn't take him away, but I had nowhere to go with him and was homeless, left wandering round the streets?

I began to breathe in sharp, shallow pants, feeling almost faint: *What was going to happen to me and the baby?*

'Morning!' A blue-uniformed nurse came in and zipped down the centre of the ward, pulling all the bed-curtains open as she went. 'Here come the babies!'

As I tried again to sit up, another nurse came in, pushing two see-through cots in front of her.

'Baby Boyle and Baby Warrell,' she announced.

'Baby Warrell's mine,' I said, hearing the uncertainty in my voice and feeling sure she was going to say, 'Don't be ridiculous. Of course it's not *your* baby.'

She didn't, though. She pushed the cot right up to the top of my bed. The baby inside it, my baby, was tightly wrapped in a white cotton blanket that went right over his head, leaving just his small pink face showing.

I gave a gasp of surprise and delight. There he was. There he really was.

'Breast or bottle-feeding?' the nurse asked me.

I hardly heard her, I was too busy staring.

'Breast or bottle?' she said again.

'Bottle,' I said. It seemed easier, somehow. Less shameful. I'd always been mortally embarrassed at anyone breast-feeding in front of me.

She delivered the other baby to the bed on my left, and then came back to me.

I was still staring down into the cot. The baby was lying peacefully, the blanket cocooned around him. I didn't want to disturb him. And I wasn't sure how to pick him up, either.

'Aren't you getting him up?' the nurse asked.

'He looks so peaceful,' I said. And so fragile, too. A tiny, pink china object that might break if handled wrongly.

'He wasn't peaceful in the night,' said the nurse. 'Little monkey! Two feeds since midnight, he's had.'

I leaned forward awkwardly in the bed to try and reach him, and gasped as my stitches pulled. I wished the nurse would go away so that I could work out how to handle him. I wasn't sure which bit to go for: should I sort of drag him out from the top, or go underneath and scoop?

'Mind your stitches,' the nurse said. 'I'll get him up for you, shall I?'

She bent over the cot, lifted the baby up effortlessly and laid him in my arms. 'Look at you!' she said, smiling. 'Anyone would think you'd never held a baby before!'

I swallowed. 'I . . . '

'It's okay,' she said, patting my hand. 'We all have to learn. I'll be back in a minute to show you how to feed him.'

She went out again and carefully I unwrapped the top of the blanket bundle and stroked his dark hair.

He was truly beautiful. His skin was pink and

gleaming, his cheeks were round, his eyelashes were long and his nose was the tiniest little piggy thing I'd ever seen. He was wearing a grey-coloured hospital nightie, creased and shapeless, and out of the sleeves of this stuck small pink hands, splayed like starfish. I opened the blanket further and lifted the nightdress to see plump, ringed ankles and red feet with ridiculously small toes, complete with nails. The smallest toe had a silvery nail as tiny as a pin-head.

I giggled with delight. He was perfect. Entirely, absolutely perfect.

'Where did you come from?' I asked him. How could it be that Megan Warrell, immensely average until she'd got pregnant at fifteen and been hounded out of school, had managed to have this perfect angel baby?

The nurse came back carrying a small bottle of milk, and I started guiltily and began to wrap him up again.

'That's okay!' she said. 'That's what you're supposed to do. He's your baby. You must play with him and talk to him and love him as much as you can.'

I looked at her, blinked, and burst into tears.

'That's okay, too,' she said, patting my hand.

I slept again after lunch. Well, they called it lunch: it was a sandwich and a rice pudding. While we slept they took the babies back into the nursery, so that we wouldn't be disturbed. We were disturbed, though: two of the four girls in my room went home, and one new one arrived. I was the only long stay, being a Caesarean.

That morning I'd learned how to give a bottle of milk and get a baby's wind up, and how to clean a bottom and change a nappy. Tomorrow, when I could move around better, I was going to be shown how to bath and top-and-tail. I'd seen some of these things done when I'd been staying at Auntie Lorna's and going to the educational unit, but it was all different now with my own baby. I had to do it absolutely right. I didn't want anyone to think that just because I was only fifteen I couldn't handle him.

I'd started to think about names. I hadn't bothered before because I didn't know whether I'd be keeping him and also because, deep down, I didn't really believe that I was having a baby at all. Now I thought about Ben, and Zak, and Josh. And then I thought maybe something a bit more fancy: Elliot or Russell or Dermot.

That morning, I'd spoken quite a lot to the nicest

nurse, whose name was Debs, and confessed that I'd only just made up my mind to keep the baby when I'd actually had him. She'd told me that hardly any unmarried girls gave their babies up now, that the girls' parents nearly always allowed them to bring their babies home.

'I'm sure your mum will be okay,' she'd said.

I'd sighed. 'Doubt it. You don't know what she's like. She's one of those women who're always worried about what the neighbours will say.'

'Once she sees him properly she'll give in. He's her grandchild, after all.'

'I know that,' I'd said, biting my lip, 'but she goes on and on about me getting my A Levels and going to university and getting a good job and all that.' I'd looked down at the baby in my arms. 'Things like that don't matter compared to him, though, do they?'

Debs had pulled a face. 'Well, they *do* matter,' she'd said. 'You won't want to stay home looking after that baby for the rest of your life, you know.'

'Well,' I'd said, shrugging, 'I'll go to night school or whatever and get some qualifications.'

I'd said it flippantly, but the thought caught hold of me: what was I going to do with my life? Could I go to evening classes? Could I still, somehow take

exams? *How* could I?

I think I only slept for a while, and when I woke up the new girl in my ward had a toddler jumping on her bed and a man – her husband, I supposed – was standing by her side with a big bunch of flowers. This made me think about Luke, my ex-boyfriend and the baby's father, and I wondered whether he knew yet and whether he'd visit me. Would my friends come? Did Dad know yet? He was divorced from my mum and lived in Australia with his new family, but Mum had said she'd ring him.

I felt a bit stronger about things; better than I had done first thing that morning. Before I did anything else, though, I had to tell Mum that I wasn't giving up the baby. According to what she said, I would then decide what to do. If she wouldn't have us at home, then we'd have to find somewhere else to live. I'd get in touch with Susie, my social worker, and she'd have to find me a hostel, or a bed and breakfast place. They weren't that awful, surely?

I heard Debs's voice from the hallway.

'Megan's absolutely fine, Mrs Warrell,' she was saying. 'And the baby's in the nursery at the moment. Do you want to see him first?'

'I'll go and see my daughter, thanks,' I heard Mum

say. She had her posh voice on.

I squirmed back under the bedclothes a little. Deciding to tell Mum I was keeping the baby was one thing, doing it was another. I closed my eyes, pretending to sleep, putting off the moment for a few seconds more.

Mum bent and kissed me. 'You awake? Are you all right, love?' she asked.

I opened my eyes and nodded slightly. 'Yes, thanks. Just tired.'

She looked over to the nursery. 'I'm surprised the baby is down here with you.'

'What d'you mean?'

'I thought when babies were being adopted they kept them apart from their mums. They asked me if I wanted to see him and I thought it best not to.'

I didn't say anything.

She laid a bunch of flowers on the bed. 'I'm so relieved you're all right.' She smoothed my hair in a very (for her) motherly way. 'I didn't sleep at all last night. This morning I rang Auntie Lorna – and your dad. Woke him up, actually; it was four in the morning there.'

I smiled. 'What did he say?'

'He sent his love and said he's writing. He said I'm

to take you on holiday and get you back on your feet – he's got some business deal coming up so he's going to send us some money.' She tucked a strand of hair behind my ears. 'That's the ticket, eh? Get us all back to normal.'

I swallowed. 'Well . . . ' I began.

'And it's about time he coughed up something!'

'I want to . . . '

She patted my hand. 'I know it's going to be difficult for you, love, but least said soonest mended and all that. We'll sign all the papers and get you out of here, and then we'll have a good holiday. After that you can think about starting an A Level course. You might not want to go back to that school – it's up to you.'

I drew in my breath to speak but she started again, hardly pausing between sentences.

'Ellie wanted to visit but I thought it might be unsettling for her. I didn't want her to see the baby and get upset about it.' She picked up the flowers. 'Shall I get a vase for these? Will the nurses have one out there?'

'I expect so,' I said. I felt too weak; I couldn't think about starting an argument.

'Your Auntie Lorna said she'd try and get to see

you before she goes to Italy – did you know she's got a three-month job up in the mountains there? She's very pleased you're all right. Now, what d'you want me to do about ringing your friends? If you don't want me to ring I think there's a phone in here you can use and if I get you a phonecard . . . '

She went on nineteen to the dozen, from one subject to the next, as if she was scared to let me get in between her sentences. I let her words rattle on, wondering how I was going to get round to saying what I had to. And then something happened . . .

'Here come the babies!' Debs called, and she came through from the nursery pushing a cot with him – my baby – inside. Mum turned round in alarm as Debs stopped at the end of the bed. 'Here's your lovely grandson, Mrs Warrell!' she said, winking slightly at me.

'Oh, but I didn't . . . we're not . . . ' Mum began.

'He's gorgeous! D'you want to hold him?' Debs said, and before Mum could protest she'd picked him up and placed him in her arms.

Mum looked down at him, startled, as if he was an alien life form, and for a moment it looked as if she was going to thrust him back at Debs. Then, as I held my breath and watched, she put out a hand and

stroked his cheek. Then she put her finger into his hand so that he grasped it.

She was quiet for a long time, just looking at him. Then she broke the silence. 'Incredible. He looks just like you did. It brings it all back.'

I swallowed. 'I don't want to give him up, Mum,' I said. 'I don't want him adopted. I can't bear to give him away, I really can't.'

There was an even longer silence, and then Mum said, 'No. Of course you can't. I pretended you'd be able to, but I was only kidding myself.' She shook her head wearily. 'Oh well, we'll just have to try and sort something out, won't we? I don't know what, but I daresay I'll think of something.'

Ward 7
St Brides' General Hospital

August 10th

Dear Dad (and Grandad!)

Just a short note. I'm too shattered to write much, but too churned-up to sleep. I know Mum has rung you already, and thanks in advance for the holiday

money. I'm not sure if we'll be going on holiday, though, because I'm writing to say that I'm keeping the baby! He's just gorgeous and I love him to bits. I couldn't possibly let him go.

Mum is being okay about it. I'm so excited but I'm going to try and sleep now.

Lots of love, Megan