

**Susan Lewis**  
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## **Stolen Beginnings**

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His face was more exquisite than that of any man alive: the bone-structure was perfect and the Italian ochre eyes seductive, mesmerising; the nose was long and straight, and the mouth wide but not too full. He was their leader.

As Sergio Rambaldi raised his magnificent head, his hand moved like a bird through the air. The silver blade glinted. The cave was dark, lit by just one candle and the light that seeped through the branches covering the entrance, shielding those inside from the brilliant sun. Laid out before them was the girl's body – naked and very still. Arsenio lifted his eyes and stole a look at the others; two women and five men, including him. This was their *bottega* – their workshop. They were grouped silently round the marble slab that he, Arsenio Tarallo, had brought to the mountain three days ago. He had known it was to bear her body, but he had not loved her then.

The leader turned from the candle and moved slowly to the marble slab. Briefly his eyes met Arsenio's and Arsenio lowered his head. He knew there had been much debate over him. He knew he did not yet have their trust. But Arsenio Tarallo understood that only time would prove the extent of his dedication to and belief in the *bottega*. He was honoured to be there – and terrified.

He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the dank smell of earth, widening his nostrils and inhaling deeply but quietly. The leader murmured to the woman beside him and she took a step back. Arsenio guessed what had been said, and his eyes flew to the face of the girl lying before him.

*Nooo!* Every nerve-end screeched. His muscles were tensed,

poising his body to spring. But he knew he wouldn't. Nor would he cry out.

She had come to him two nights ago. He had been expecting her, but the look of her had taken his breath away. He had touched the blonde silk of her hair as she removed her coat, and then moaned softly at the beauty of her naked skin. She turned, and her face was beneath his, her lips pale and her eyes blue and serene as the Madonna's. It was her duty to give herself to one of the *bottega* and she had chosen him. Their love-making was exquisite, spiked as it was by the knowledge that this would be the only time.

The fine hair on her arms lifted as a swift breeze blew through the cave. The candle flickered. Arsenio's skin prickled. The blade cut through the air and Arsenio dropped to his knees, echoing the words of the leader: '*Lunga vita alla donna! Lunga vita al nuovo rinascimento!*' Long live woman. Long live the new renaissance.

There was a deathly gasp. Arsenio's head snapped up. His mouth opened but the screams only gurgled in his throat as he rolled to the floor, his eyes blinded by blood.

## I

Madeleine dashed up the narrow staircase, giggling and spilling bread rolls, party-poppers and vol-au-vents from the shopping bag she clutched in her arms. Behind her Marian was trying to grab her ankles and trip her up.

'I've never been so embarrassed,' Marian cried, 'just wait until I get hold of you!'

Madeleine shrieked as Marian's hand closed around her ankle and she staggered against the wall. The shopping scattered and Marian snatched up a can as it rolled down the stairs.

Madeleine screamed, 'No!' But Marian's finger was pressed firmly on the nozzle and a shower of Christmas snow covered Madeleine's blonde hair. 'Right! That's it!' Madeleine declared, and scooping up a vol-au-vent, she crushed it in her hand and rubbed the gooey pastry in Marian's face.

Marian spluttered and gasped, all the while spraying snow over her cousin, the stairs, the shopping and herself.

A door opened on the landing below and Pamela Robbins – an assistant film producer – came out of her flat. There was a moment's truce in the mayhem while Marian and Madeleine, looking like nothing on earth, turned to watch their neighbour as she locked her door, threw a bag over her shoulder and trotted off down the stairs without so much as a glance in their direction.

When they heard the front door slam, four flights below, they exploded into laughter. 'Snooty old bag!' Madeleine shouted. Then lowering her voice and rolling her eyes, she said: 'I expect she's gone to make a movie!'



'I don't suppose you thought to invite her tonight?' Marian said, starting to clear up the debris.

'Not on your life.'

'And yet you'll stop complete strangers in the street,' Marian said, giving her a shove, 'and invite them.'

'Well, they were gorgeous, at least the short one was. Just the right height for you.'

Marian shot her a look. 'You're asking for more trouble!'

Madeleine's snowy face looked even more comical as she pulled down the corners of her mouth and widened her beautiful eyes. 'I was doing you a favour,' she protested. 'I mean, what's the point in us having a party if there's not going to be anyone there you fancy?'

'That,' Marian said, as she took out her keys and opened the door at the top of the dingy staircase, 'is assuming that someone *you* fancy will be?'

'Do you think he'll come?' Madeleine said, as she hauled herself to her feet and followed Marian into the darkened flat.

Marian turned to look at her with an expression of exasperated irony. 'When has a man ever been able to refuse you anything?' she said.

Madeleine hugged herself as she savoured the prospect of Paul O'Connell coming to their New Year's Eve party that night. She had been trying to get off with him for weeks, but so far he was proving the most elusive man she'd ever come across. 'I wonder what he'll come as?' she mused. 'Come to that, what are you wearing? No! No! I'm not having any of that boring old rubbish you were talking about yesterday. It's a fancy dress, Marian' – she crept along the hall towards her cousin – 'the chance to make yourself wild and exciting – and naughty!'

Marian yelped as Madeleine dug her fingers into her sides. 'Naughty is your department,' she chuckled, 'I shall just stand by and watch while you captivate every man in sight, and worry about how we're going to pay for it all.'

Madeleine threw back her head and gave a howl of frustration. 'I want a New Year's resolution from you, madam,' she said. 'To give up being sensible.'

Marian tossed her coat onto the solitary, battered armchair. 'I gave that up three years ago when I agreed to let you come up to Bristol and live with me.'

'And just look at all the fun we've had since.' Madeleine swivelled in the doorway and went into the kitchen to unload the shopping.

'Yes, just look,' Marian muttered to herself as she glanced around the shabby room, then turned on the gas fire.

They'd moved into this garret at the top of a grand house in Clifton's West Mall three months ago, after Celia, Marian's mother, had sent enough money to fly them back from Rhodes. They hadn't intended the Greek islands to be their final destination on their tour of Europe, but shopping sprees in Paris and Rome, coupled with visits to nightclubs in Amsterdam, Nice and Hamburg, had swallowed up every penny of the profit they'd made on the flat in Stokes Croft – something else Celia had financed. Marian still felt guilty about spending her mother's meagre capital, especially when it chiefly consisted of the insurance money Celia had received after Marian's father had died in a fire at the paper factory where he'd worked, just outside Totnes in Devon. It was the year Marian won her place at Bristol University. Madeleine had taken her uncle's death so badly that Marian almost turned down her place, but Celia – who was as 'proud as punch' of her daughter's achievements – stepped in and said that providing Madeleine got herself a job in Bristol, then she could move up there too. Marian had been delighted. Madeleine had lived with them ever since she was eight and Marian was ten, so they were more like sisters than cousins, and secretly Marian had been dreading life without her.

When she joined Marian in Bristol, Madeleine was sixteen and already blossoming into an exceptionally beautiful young woman; and once out from under Celia's protective eye, with the prospect of a big city like Bristol to conquer, her escapades and her reputation soon became legendary. Marian's student friends were disapproving to the point of contempt – especially when Madeleine took a job as a stripper in a nightclub just off Blackboy Hill. She'd worked there for almost a year, hoping that someone would recognise her talent and whisk her off to London; but no one did so she left and became a strip-o-gram girl.

She loved stripping. There was nothing that gave her a greater thrill than to have her honey-coloured skin, long legs and abundant breasts admired. It excited her in a way that the act of sex never did – though she had sex regularly, sometimes with men she met and fancied in the local wine bars, but mostly with men who told her they could help her become a model or an actress. She was easily taken in because of her obsessive craving for fame, and it was left to Marian to mop up the tears when nothing came of the promises. If Madeleine had been bright enough to get to know the right people, to behave in a way that at least came close to being socially

acceptable – if she hadn't so firmly believed that her sexuality had to be demonstrated rather than suggested – then her route to the top might have been assured. As it was, her skirts were too short and her tops too low, she wore too much make-up, her voice was coarse and her behaviour brazen. Yet even these shortcomings could not detract from the effect of her remarkable violet eyes, luscious wide mouth and incomparable figure. She had the lazy, sensuous look of Bardot and the voluptuous body of Monroe – a breathtaking combination which, in the right hands, might rocket her to fame and fortune. By anyone's standards her beauty was extraordinary, and she knew it.

Marian was used to Madeleine's shameless exhibitionism; ever since she'd had breasts, she'd shown them to any boy who was willing to pay; but being used to it did not mean that she approved. However, her disapproval was something she only ever voiced to Madeleine in private, and she took great exception if anyone else uttered a word of criticism. So when, one night in the Coronation Tap, she overheard one of her friends describing Madeleine as a common little tart, she had so violently torn into the girl that she fully expected her friends to drop her as a result. But if anything, after that, they treated her with a greater respect; as if someone they had until then regarded as retiring – almost dull – might at any time burst into flames of rage or passion. Marian found their baffled esteem amusing, secretly knowing that the likelihood of her firing up like that again was remote; Madeleine was the only subject she ever got heated about.

Despite the endless ebb and flow of men through their Stokes Croft flat, and the outrageous parties that vibrated on into the early hours of most Sunday mornings, Marian managed to get her philosophy degree. And to celebrate Madeleine had suggested they sell the flat and go on a tour of Europe. Still heady with her success, Marian had thrown her inherent caution to the winds, and agreed. They'd returned to Bristol four months later, with a hundred pounds – which they'd used as a deposit for this one-bedroomed attic – and enough anecdotes to make them – or at least, Madeleine – the centre of attention for weeks.

Now Madeleine was back working for the strip-o-gram agency and she, Marian, was a struggling temporary secretary with the Sue Sheppard Agency in Park Street. One day, she told herself, she'd think about what she really wanted to do, but for now the only thing that mattered was that they should earn enough money to pay the bills . . .

At eight o'clock they were still decorating the flat with the tinsel and trimmings they hadn't bothered with for Christmas - they'd spent Christmas in Devon with Celia - when some of Madeleine's crowd from the Chateau Wine Bar showed up, bearing crates of wine, trumpets and streamers. Music blared from the cassette player Marian had bought Madeleine for Christmas, and squealing with delight at the men's preposterous costumes, Madeleine made them all dance while she rocked and gyrated between them, all the time watching her reflection in the cracked mirror over the fireplace. 'You'll have to go back to the Chateau,' she told them ten minutes later, 'the party doesn't start until nine, and besides, Marian and I aren't ready yet.' She handed one of them a cheque for the wine; knowing it would bounce, Marian winced.

'What you wearing, Maddy?' one of the men asked.

Marian watched as Madeleine pouted her lips and studied him through narrowed eyes. Then, running a hand through her blonde mane, she slowly broke into a grin. 'Nothing!' she declared, then pushed them out of the door.

When she turned back Marian was waiting for her. 'I told you, not Eve!' she cried. 'If you're going to prance around here with no clothes on, I'm calling the whole thing off.'

'Nag, nag, nag.' Madeleine tripped lightly past her and disappeared into the bedroom. Marian followed.

'You won't mind sleeping on the sofa, will you, if I manage to get off with Paul O'Connell?' Madeleine said, flopping down on her bed.

'What, or who, are you going as tonight?' Marian demanded.

'You'll have to wait and see. No, it's not Eve,' she said, as Marian began to protest. 'And what about you, where's your costume?'

'You'll have to wait and see,' Marian said, and went to pour some wine.

'I got you a wig in Dingles,' Madeleine told her when she came back with two glasses. 'Cover up that horrible old hair of yours.'

'You're so charming,' Marian answered. 'I won't ask how you paid for it, but you know where you can stick your wig. Now, who's first in the bath?'

'You were yesterday, so it's my turn today.'

'Well, don't let the water go cold like you usually do,' Marian called after her.

Two hours later the flat was jammed with oddly-attired people. Music shook the walls, and dancing feet scuffled over the dull brown carpet. A fog of smoke was beginning to gather around the dimmed

lights, and red and white wine flowed into glasses, over fingers and down the furniture. Marian stood in a corner beside the meagre buffet, watching the heaving mass, her eyes darting from one squealing, grotesquely laughing face to another. Tinsel was dragged from the walls and draped round necks, champagne corks popped and glasses smashed. Marian bit her lips and wondered how they were going to pay the off-licence for the damages.

Most of their guests were Madeleine's friends, girls from the strip-o-gram agency, old and current boyfriends, and the regulars from the Chateau Wine Bar. Marian had kept in touch with a few of her university chums, like Rob and Mary, the bookworm and the bluestocking, and they had deigned to attend this decadent party before flying off to some obscure part of the world the following week. They had brought along a couple of friends from America who were staying over the Christmas period, and the discussion in the kitchen, on the merits of Buddhism, couldn't have been more at odds with the writhings and shenanigans in the sitting-room.

'Where's that Madeleine?' someone yelled to no one in particular. 'Get her in here, shaking that body about!'

'What's the matter, mine not good enough for you?' a brassy-looking blonde answered, pressing herself against the man who was done up as Madonna.

There were whoops and cheers as the girl fondled his false breasts, and picking up a bottle of wine, Marian wandered through the crowd, smiling shyly and offering refills. She could have been invisible for all the attention she was receiving, but she didn't mind, she was used to it. The music changed, and Whitney Houston's 'I Want to Dance With Somebody' rocked the room. 'Excuse me,' Marian said to Anthony and Cleopatra, squeezing past them and slipping out into the hall. As she started to open the bedroom door it was slammed back in her face. 'Madeleine!' she shouted. 'Let me in!'

The door opened a fraction and Madeleine popped her head round. 'Is he here yet?' Then her expression changed as she saw Marian's costume. 'Who the bloody hell are *you* supposed to be? What's that on your head?'

'I'm the cook,' Marian answered, adjusting the chef's hat she had bought in a secondhand shop.

'Jesus! And you're supposed to be the one with all the imagination. Anyway, is he here yet?'

Marian rolled her eyes. 'Not yet. Look, what if he doesn't come? You can't stay in there all night. Everyone's asking where you are.'

'I'll give it another ten minutes,' Madeleine said, 'then I'll make my entrance whether he's here or not.'

'You'd better have some clothes on,' Marian said meaningfully.

'Oh, go and get drunk,' Madeleine snapped, and snatching the bottle of wine, she closed the door before Marian could say any more. Marian pressed a path down the hall, grabbed another bottle of wine and took it into the kitchen.

'The Labour party's nothing more than a turd that the Thatcher-ites can't quite flush away,' Rob was saying. 'There's no hope for us here, man. The great canker capitalism is raping this land of conscience and morality. I doubt if Mary and I will ever come back from Tibet. Ah, Marian, any more of that revolting Leibfraumilch going?'

He held his thin, serious face on one side as Marian poured. 'Why don't you come to Tibet with us?' he said. 'You're not cut out for the superficialities of life. You should write, I've told you that a hundred times. In the mountains of Tibet you could do some serious thinking, make a serious analysis of the soul, an exploration of Why?'

'I could also seriously vegetate,' Marian said, and winked at one of the Americans. When his face remained impassive she blushed. 'Sorry,' she said, smiling at Rob. 'An exploration of why what?'

He gave her one of his pained looks. 'Why anything, Marian? Why the sun, why the moon, why the stars, why life?'

'For fun?' she suggested.

The mute Americans shuffled their Roman-sandal-clad feet and glanced sympathetically at Rob.

'But what is fun?' Mary interjected. 'You could write a whole tome on what really makes fun. I mean, to begin with, what's fun for one man could be gross tedium for another . . .'

'I'd go along with that,' Marian said, not without irony.

'Exactly!' Rob proclaimed. 'Just take the people here tonight, Marian. They could be the very subject of your study. Push it to its limits, find out why the empty-headed pursuit of cheap wine, easy sex and new clothes fulfils them. Dig right to the root, Marian, find out what has lured them into the Penelope's web of our time. Put the rot of their lives under a microscope . . .'

'Ah, poppycock!'

The voice simmered with delight, and in one movement the five of them turned to the door. A strange sensation coasted across Marian's heart, and the corners of her mouth twitched with laughter. Paul O'Connell's frame filled the doorway. His thick blond hair,

falling windswept and damp across his forehead, contrasted strikingly with his black eyebrows; his eyes were alive with humour.

'If you look round a party long enough,' he said, 'you'll always find it.' He held his hand out towards Marian. 'Paul O'Connell,' he said.

She mumbled, 'Yes, I recognise you. I'm glad you could make it. Shall I take your coat?'

He took it off, but just as he was about to hand it to her, he jerked it away again, saying, 'No, don't go. I'll hang it here on the back of the door. Now, what was all this about the rot of life being put under a microscope?'

Mary answered. 'Rob was trying to persuade Marian to get to the bottom of society's deterioration. The time-wasting, the irrelevance of the fun those people out there would claim to be having.' It was evident, from the slight catch in her voice, that Paul O'Connell's presence was affecting her every bit as much as Marian.

Paul nodded. 'Undergraduate rhetoric.'

'On the contrary,' Rob rebutted, looking and feeling absurd in his Spiderman costume. 'A philosophical debate among graduates.'

'Bristol?' Paul enquired. 'I'm a Cambridge man myself. Several years ago now, though.'

'What do you do now?' Rob asked.

'I write. You?'

'He's conducting an exploration of motive,' Mary chirped, then almost giggled at the look that came over Paul's face.

'What do you write?' one of the Americans asked, startling Marian who was beginning to wonder if they'd taken a vow of silence.

'Literature,' Paul answered. Then, as a sudden whoop of hysteria sounded from the next room, he treated them to a sardonic look and left.

Marian glanced over Rob's reedy frame in its Spiderman suit and couldn't stop the grin as she said, 'Why don't you try walking up the walls?' and then she followed Paul into the sitting-room.

In the centre of the room Madeleine was lapping up the attention her costume had provoked. Marian stopped in the doorway, shaking her head and smiling; at least she had something on!

'I am Marlene Deitrich,' Madeleine purred in what she hoped was a German accent. In her black high-heels she towered above most of the people in the room. Running her hands slinkily over her corseted hips, she threw back her head and lifted a long, slender leg onto the arm of the sofa. 'Who will light my cigarette?' she said, placing a tapering black holder between her lips and scanning those

closest to her with dreamy, close-lidded eyes. There was a rush of lighters, but 'Dame Edna' got there first, and slipped his hand under a black suspender as Madeleine blew a cloud of smoke into his face.

'Quite a performance.'

Marian looked up at Paul, but his eyes, like everyone else's, were riveted on Madeleine. Even Madeleine was watching herself as she sauntered slowly towards the mirror. Her body had only one flaw in its otherwise classical perfection, but it was a flaw that Madeleine felt to be her greatest asset. Her breasts spilled over the 38D cup, the soft flesh rippling gently as she moved. With no resentment, Marian felt herself blending into the wallpaper. With her long mouse hair, small eyes and narrow lips, she was as plain as Madeleine was beautiful. And – except with people she knew well – she was as shy as Madeleine was confident. But it didn't matter to her that she was never noticed when Maddy was around; in fact, to be centre-stage herself would make her extremely uncomfortable. Thank God for Madeleine, she thought to herself now, because without her, her life would be as empty as the proverbial sack. She chuckled quietly as she considered what Rob would have to say to that, and as the music started up again she went back to the kitchen.

Madeleine was dancing with one of her bosses from the gramming agency, throwing back her head, flinging out her arms and wiggling her hips in the sensational routine she practised most evenings. It was only when her boss offered her a rise in salary for a night between the sheets, and in answer she looked at him to give him what she called her Marilyn Monroe lick of the lips, that she noticed Paul O'Connell standing by the Christmas tree, talking to her colleague and arch-rival, Felicity. Her heart gave a giant leap and her boss was abandoned on the instant. Just looking at Paul O'Connell did things to her no man had ever done before, and as she cut a path through the clustered, jiving bodies she could feel her senses starting to tingle with anticipation. Bluntly she informed Felicity that she really ought to check out the red stain on the back of her Miss Piggy costume, then grinned as Felicity hissed that it was 'the Pink Panther, actually', and swept off to the bathroom.

Madeleine watched her go, then turned her sultry eyes to Paul. 'I was beginning to think you weren't coming,' she said, looking him over hungrily. 'You know you have to pay a forfeit for not wearing fancy dress?'

His eyebrows rose and his smile was lazy and knowing. Then he caught her as a cavorting couple jolted into them, and his smile



widened as she made no move to break away. 'Tell me what it is,' he said, 'and I'll tell you if I can pay.'

Her eyes roamed his face before answering. 'I'm sure I'll think of something to take off you before the night's out,' she purred.

'I'm sure you will,' he said. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, there's someone over there I'd like to say hello to.'

He didn't miss her sour look as he gently pushed her back on her feet, but he was bored by women who threw themselves at him.

She didn't see him again until the countdown to midnight, when she found him in the kitchen with Marian and the eggheads. 'God, you could get high on the air in here,' she remarked, scowling at Rob, who was sucking at a joint. 'Come on,' she said to Marian, 'it's almost midnight.' Her voice was high, trying to inject some excitement into the soporific atmosphere, and grabbing both Paul and Marian by the hand, she dragged them into the sitting-room as the countdown finished and the New Year was given a roar of welcome. Immediately she threw her arms around Paul and pushed her tongue into his mouth. He did nothing to resist, but neither did he respond. When she'd finished, she let him go and kissed Marian. Then everyone joined hands and jostled and cheered through a chorus of 'Auld Lang Syne'.

'OK, Gerry!' Madeleine called as the circle broke up. Gerry pushed a button on the cassette player and Marian buried her face in her hands as the music started. It was 'The Stripper'.

A space was quickly cleared for Madeleine and everyone clapped their hands in time to the music as she peeled off the few items of clothing she wore. For a fleeting moment Marian thought she was going to stop at the microscopic scrap of lace she wore round her hips, but with the final beats of the music that toq was removed, and stepping back into her high-heels, Madeleine threw out her arms and let the applause wash over her naked body.

The music changed to a soft Christmas-time melody and she turned to find Paul, her face flushed with excitement. But only Marian stood behind her, and as her eyes darted about, searching, Marian shook her head.

'He's gone,' she whispered.

'Gone? What do you mean, gone?'

Marian shrugged. 'He just said he was leaving, and went.'

'Didn't you try and stop him?'

'How could I? What was I supposed to say?' She sensed a tantrum coming on, and for once watched in relief as two large hands