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Stolen

Written by Lesley Pearse

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Stolen

LESLEY PEARSE

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1

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Chapter One

'Leave, Toto!' David shouted when he saw his neighbour's dog pulling at something half in and half out of the water, some three hundred yards further along the shingle beach.

It was six o'clock on a beautiful May morning, too early yet for most residents in Selsey to rise. David Mitchell, who was thirty-two, always came out with his neighbour's terrier at this time of day, taking a run along the coastal path while Toto charged about on the beach.

The dog backed off from whatever it was that he'd found, barking furiously. 'I'm coming!' David shouted and jumped down from the path on to the shingle from where he saw that the object of Toto's attention looked alarmingly like a body.

As he drew closer, David realized to his horror that it was a woman, for her bare legs were still in the sea and as the waves came in they lifted the skirt of her dress and made it billow. Her head was hidden from view until he was almost upon her, then he saw she was young, perhaps in her mid-twenties, slender and pretty with brutally cropped blonde hair.

Assuming she was dead, and afraid the tide might sweep her away before he could report he'd found her, David bent down and putting his hands beneath her arms began to haul her further up the beach. But as he lifted her, a sound came from her, not quite a cough, more of a sigh, and her eyelids fluttered.

'Who are you?' he asked, dropping down beside her on the shingle and lifting her to a sitting position against his

shoulder. He took her wrist and though her skin was like ice, and very wrinkled from submersion in the water, he could feel a faint pulse.

'I've got to run and ring for an ambulance,' he said, when she didn't reply to his question, and he laid her down on her side and used the fleece jacket tied around his waist to cover her.

He wished there was someone else around, for he didn't want to leave her there alone, but the path above the beach was deserted. He wondered what nationality she was, for her blue, high-necked and full-skirted dress was very old-fashioned, like the kind he'd seen in films set in the Fifties. He thought maybe she was from one of the Eastern European countries, but whoever she was and wherever she came from, he felt she'd been ill treated as there were purple marks on her wrists and ankles, as if she'd been restrained. Her hair had been crudely hacked off too, leaving it in uneven clumps.

Ordering Toto to stay with her, he sprinted back up the beach to find a phone box.

'Mystery Girl. Who Is She?'

Dale read out the newspaper headline to the two other girls in the beauty salon as they had their first cup of coffee of the morning. 'It says she was found yesterday half drowned on the beach and she's lost her memory,' she explained. 'Of course, if they gave us a picture of her maybe someone would recognize her and come forward,' she added sarcastically.

'Maybe she's a rich bitch and her husband got tired of her and slung her overboard from his yacht, like in that Goldie Hawn film,' Michelle suggested. 'Did you ever see it? A poor widower with loads of kids found her, and as she'd lost her memory he made out she was his wife and took her home to

look after his family. It was hilarious. She couldn't cook or wash up and the place was a tip.'

All three girls remembered the film *Overboard* and laughed and chatted about it for some time.

'It must be so weird to lose your memory,' Dale mused. 'Imagine not knowing who you are, where you come from or anything. I wonder whether if someone gave you something to eat that you hated before, you'd still hate it?'

The three girls were beauticians in the spa at Marchwood Manor Hotel near Brighton in Sussex. The hotel was well established, but the spa had only opened two weeks earlier, and this was why the newly appointed beauty staff were lounging in one of the treatment rooms drinking coffee and looking at the newspaper instead of attending to clients.

Dale Moore was a Londoner, twenty-five, tall, curvy, with rather exotic looks as if she were Spanish or Italian, and very much the leader of the group. Michelle from Southampton was a slender blue-eyed blonde of twenty-four. Rosie was the youngest at twenty-three, a plump, sweet-faced brunette from Yorkshire.

Across the reception area was the hairdressing salon. Frankie, April, Guy and Sharon had Radio One on, which suggested they hadn't got clients yet either, for any kind of pop music was a hanging offence if the spa manageress, Marisa De Vere, caught them. She would only tolerate classical music tapes in the salon, and here in the beauty section they could only play special music to promote relaxation. But as Marisa was in London today no one would be doing the endless unnecessary cleaning she insisted on when they had no clients, nor would they stick to her choice of music.

'It says this girl's about twenty-four,' Dale said, going back to the newspaper. 'Found at Selsey by a man walking his dog. They think she'd been in the sea a long time but she had nothing on her to identify her. She was taken to St Richard's Hospital in Chichester.'

'She'll be an illegal immigrant,' Michelle said firmly. 'Come over from France on a boat. Maybe she fell out with whoever was bringing her and they pushed her overboard.'

'She was lucky to survive. The sea in May is still very cold,' Rosie said.

'They think she's English,' Dale said, glancing down at the paper. 'Where is Selsey anyway?'

'I haven't a clue,' Rosie said. 'But then, everything south of Birmingham is a mystery to me.'

'It's only about thirty miles from here,' Michelle said. 'We used to have holidays nearby when I was a kid. Does anyone want their nails done? Facial, head massage or pedicure? I'm bored!'

'Enjoy the boredom,' Dale sniggered. 'It's a rare treat not to have Marisa the Slave Driver prowling around.'

Dale had already made an enemy of the spa supervisor. As Dale was a first-class beautician with a great deal of experience under her belt, including a year on a cruise ship, she didn't feel anyone unqualified in her field should be telling her how to do her job.

When the staff first came here to open the salon, they had a three-day induction period to evaluate their ability. Marisa had stood over Dale while she was giving a massage, something Dale hated, and she had pointed out that the only way anyone could really assess a massage was by having one themself. Marisa had taken exception to that and since then she'd been looking for things to take Dale to task about.

Dale was no stranger to conflict with management. She was by her own admission stroppy, self-centred, opinionated, stubborn and liable to shoot her mouth off without thinking first. But she was good at what she did, she treated her clients well, and she worked hard – no one could ever accuse her of being lazy or cutting corners. She certainly wasn't cruel to anyone.

Marisa seemed to take pleasure in being cruel. She'd mortified Michelle by telling her she had bad breath, had Rosie in tears when she had a spot on her face, and April was told she had body odour in front of everyone in the hairdressing salon. Only Scott the fitness instructor, an old friend of Dale's, escaped the woman's sharp tongue, but then, Marisa clearly fancied him.

She made everyone clean constantly to look busy: mirrors with a high shine had to have a greater one, already spotless surfaces had to be wiped again. She couldn't bear to see anyone twiddling their thumbs, but unfortunately, whenever she did sweep into the spa, it was sod's law that someone was telling a joke, reading a magazine or worse, having a sneaky cigarette outside the door.

'I'll go and ask April if she wants anything done,' Michelle said. 'She was talking earlier about going clubbing tonight. If I do her nails she'll let me go with her and maybe I can stay over at her house.'

Dale smiled. Two years ago she would have been just like Michelle, wanting to experience everything Brighton had to offer, but a year on the cruise ship had made her grow up, or at least consider the damage she was doing to her liver.

Michelle, Rosie, Frankie in the hairdressing salon, Scott and Dale shared a staff bungalow in the hotel grounds with Carlos, a wine waiter from the hotel. They were a bit

cut off from Brighton, for the bus service wasn't very good and taxis were expensive, but Michelle was the only one of them who complained. The rest were quite happy to sit about chatting and sometimes sharing a bottle of wine in the evenings.

The sound of the door to the treatment room opening made them all jump, but they relaxed again when they saw it was only Scott.

'Doing nothing, eh?' he said with a broad smile. 'I'll have to report you!'

Dale threw a towel at him. 'For God's sake shag Marisa, maybe she'll become a bit more human if you get her all loved up.'

She and Scott had met on the cruise ship where he was fitness instructor, and she'd taken one look at his green eyes, spiky blond hair and rippling muscles and fancied him madly. But every other woman under seventy on the ship fancied him too, so she decided to be his friend instead. It was perhaps the best decision of her life for they had become really close. Along with Lotte, her cabin mate, they would always go ashore together when the ship docked, and any spare moments they had while at sea, they spent together.

Dale had missed him and Lotte a lot when the cruise ended and they went to their respective homes. Dale got a job in a beautician's near her parents' home in Chiswick, in London, but there was none of the camaraderie with the other staff like she'd had on the ship, in fact some of the girls were real bitches.

This was why when she saw the advertisement for staff needed here, she'd telephoned Scott immediately to see if he was interested, and luckily he was, for he'd been working in a bistro in Truro, in Cornwall, unable to get a job in a gym.

Sadly they'd both lost touch with Lotte. She was a hairdresser and Dale thought she would have loved it here. But she hadn't responded to any of Dale's calls or texts since they left the ship; Scott reported the same. They had to assume that she'd moved on and didn't need them in her life any longer.

'I wouldn't shag Marisa with someone else's,' Scott said laughingly. 'I'd be afraid that mask might crack open and underneath she'd be hideous.'

That remark created great merriment for Marisa's complexion was so perfect it was almost like a porcelain mask. In fact everything about her was perfect, from her size ten figure and her beautifully cut black suits to her jet-black hair which she wore in a single sleek plait which reached the middle of her back. It was so shiny it looked as though it had been sprayed with black lacquer, and Dale had expressed the opinion she wasn't human, just a kind of Stepford Wife who had been bred to run a spa.

'She's actually thirty-eight, not thirty-two as she told Scott,' Rosie said with a mischievous sparkle in her soft brown eyes. Rosie wasn't one for dishing dirt about anyone, but she obviously felt unable to keep this titbit to herself. 'She'd left a life insurance schedule on her desk, I couldn't resist taking a nose. And her middle name is Agatha!'

'Agatha!' Dale exclaimed. 'I thought Marisa was bad enough. I bet her surname isn't De Vere really, it's probably something yucky like Snelling or Greaseworth.'

Scott folded his arms. 'Do you actually know anyone with the name Greaseworth?' he asked with a touch of sarcasm.

'No, but it would suit her,' Dale laughed. She suddenly clapped her hand over her mouth 'M.A.D. Her initials spell Mad!'

There was a burst of giggles from the other girls.

'I'm going,' Scott said. 'I'll leave you to continue the cattiness while I check no one has drowned in the pool.'

An hour later, when Dale had to take over on the reception desk while Becky went for a coffee, she lit some floating candles in the reception water feature and stood back to admire them.

She was by nature cynical, blunt and hard to please, well known for picking holes in everything, including people. But she had found nothing at Marchwood to criticize; in fact, she thought it was absolutely perfect and beautiful. Even Marisa, however hateful she could be, did a good job making sure she kept everyone on their toes.

The hotel was old-style country house, with antiques, real fires, squishy comfortable sofas and a strong smell of lavender polish. But the spa had the kind of Oriental minimalism that cost a fortune. The central reception area had a pale grey stone floor, with the still pool in the centre, now twinkling with floating candles. Decorations were sparse: a lovely piece of Japanese embroidery in a long thin frame, a few pots of orchids, low seating along the walls. The lighting was concealed, and even the reception desk was pale grey wood with a plate-glass top so it seemed to float above the floor.

From the reception area there were three doors. The one on the right led to the beauty treatment rooms, the middle one led to the gymnasium and the swimming pool and to the left was the hairdressing salon.

Hardly a day had passed since Dale arrived here when she didn't hug herself with delight that she'd found a great job with a future. The spa might not be busy yet, but she knew it soon would be once the marketing people began pushing it. She was

well paid, the accommodation was excellent and the other staff were all very nice. She knew from past experience that it was the staff who made or ruined a job. There were around thirty or so of them in both the hotel and the spa, and although she had only really got to know the spa staff, she liked them all.

Fourteen months ago when the year's cruise contract ended, Dale had had a few hundred pounds saved. She intended to start her own salon, but that proved to be far more expensive than she had expected, and to make matters worse she frittered away quite a lot of her savings while thinking what she should do next.

She was only too aware that her parents worried about her, and she'd certainly given them cause in the past. She'd hung around with low life, flirted with drugs, had an abortion, and until she trained in beauty never stuck at anything for more than a few weeks.

While Dale knew she was over all that now, her parents weren't entirely convinced. Even when she was on the cruise ship, where she had never worked so hard, they took the line that she was living the high life.

So now she felt she had to make this job work for her, to prove she really had grown up and could take responsibility for herself and others. Marchwood felt right. If she could just avoid crossing swords with Marisa, she might even end up running the place.

It got busier later in the day when several guests at the hotel booked various treatments, and it was after eight when Dale, Michelle and Rosie walked back to the bungalow after having dinner in the staff room next to the hotel kitchen.

It was a mild evening and the hotel garden looked beautiful by floodlight. The staff bungalow was hidden away behind

some shrubs, and they were all looking forward to warm summer evenings when they could sit outside with a drink.

All of them had been surprised by how good their accommodation was. Most of them had worked in places where they were expected to share a room, and where the food had been awful. But here at Marchwood they each had their own room with a tiny en suite bathroom, and their meals were almost as good as those served to the guests in the hotel.

Frankie was in the lounge reading a paper. He looked up and grinned as they came in. 'I put a bottle of vodka in the fridge a while ago,' he said. 'It should be perfect by now.'

Frankie referred to himself as 'Gay' Frankie, as if his sexual persuasion wasn't immediately obvious by the turquoise streaks in his hair and his flamboyant clothes. Just a few days earlier Rosie had pointed out that whatever you said about Frankie you had to put 'very' in front of it. A very funny man, a very good hairdresser, and so on, for there was nothing mediocre about anything he did or said. Tonight he was wearing a ruffled white shirt which made him look as if he'd stepped out of an old swashbuckling movie.

Rosie collected the vodka and some glasses and by the time Dale had changed her work tunic for jeans and a teeshirt and gone back to the lounge, Frankie was lighting some candles.

'The light is more flattering,' he said by way of an explanation.

'Don't worry, sweetheart, I fancy you even with harsh electric light,' Scott said.

There was some laughter about this for Frankie had spent the entire first week at Marchwood acting as though he was coming on to Scott. It had only been leg-pulling; Frankie said

he couldn't resist because Scott was so obviously heterosexual. Frankie had stopped it now, but Scott had taken over with the teasing.

'Oh, look, Dale,' said Rosie, picking up the newspaper Frankie had been reading. 'They've printed a picture of the girl they found half drowned.'

It was the local evening paper, and presumably by tomorrow the picture would hit the nationals. Dale picked it up and glanced only briefly at the picture, which wasn't a real photograph but a police likeness, but she'd no sooner put it down than she felt compelled to pick it up again and study it a little more closely.

'Who does she remind you of?' she asked Scott, handing the paper to him.

Scott looked. 'Lotte? Same high cheekbones and round eyes. But this one isn't as pretty.'

'That's because she's been to hell and back and her hair's been cut off,' Dale said thoughtfully. 'Besides, it's not a real photo. But just imagine this girl with long, shiny hair, and a smile on her face. Scott, it really could be Lotte!'

'It couldn't be.' Scott shook his head.

'Why not?' Dale asked. 'We know she came from Brighton, she's the right age, and it says the girl is a blue-eyed blonde with a slight build.'

'That description would fit thousands of girls,' Scott said, shaking his head again. He picked the paper up and studied the picture again. 'But you've got a point – if you change the messy hair, she's a dead ringer.'

All the others wanted to know who they were talking about.

'She was a hairdresser on the cruise ship and I shared a cabin with her,' Dale explained. 'I was horrified I'd got to share with her when we first met. She's one of those Alice in

Wonderland girls, all big eyes and flowing hair. She was dressed in baby pink, and I thought she'd never read anything but *Hello!*, talk endlessly about conditioners and ring her mum up to find out what was happening in *Coronation Street*. But she wasn't like that, she was just the sweetest, kindest, most brilliant friend I've ever had.'

Dale was surprised that she was publicly admitting how much she liked Lotte. There had been a time in her life when she mistook using someone for having a friend, but Lotte had made her see what real friendship was all about.

'The three of us did everything together,' Scott butted in. 'Not just going ashore for booze-ups, but nights talking together and stuff. But then something terrible happened to her in South America.'

'What?' Rosie and Michelle asked in unison.

Scott looked at Dale for support. They had never discussed whether or not they ought to keep quiet about this matter, but there didn't seem to be any harm in telling the people they shared a home with.

'She was raped,' Dale said quietly, understanding Scott's dilemma.

'Raped? Who by? Someone on the ship?' Michelle asked.

'No, it was some nutter in Ushuaia – that's right down as far south as you can go, the last place before the Antarctic,' Scott explained. 'In broad daylight too! She was never quite the same again, and Dale and I felt terrible that we had left her to go ashore alone.'

'Poor girl,' Frankie said in sympathy. 'So what happened to her when she left the ship? Are you serious that this girl in the paper could be her?'

'She was going home to her parents in Brighton when we said goodbye,' Dale explained. 'We all promised to keep in

touch, and I did phone and text her, and so did Scott, but she never replied. I guess Scott and I were unwanted reminders of that terrible ordeal.'

'It's pure coincidence that a year on we've ended up near Brighton too,' Scott added. 'I suppose if so much time hadn't passed since the cruise we'd probably have gone and looked her up. But there didn't seem much point as she didn't appear to want to know.'

'If you think this is her,' Frankie said, pointing at the picture, 'you should ring the police.'

'We'd look pretty silly if it wasn't,' Scott retorted. 'But maybe we ought to get in touch with her parents and just check up on her?'

'Ring them now,' Frankie suggested.

'We haven't got a number for them,' Scott said, 'just an address she gave Dale. We tried to get a number from directory inquiries, but they were ex-directory.'

'We could go tomorrow,' Dale said impulsively. 'I've got no appointments booked till the afternoon, and it's your day off, Scott. We could catch the nine-thirty bus.'

'I'd ring the police,' Frankie said with a disapproving sniff. 'For one thing, her poor parents might be looking at that same picture right now and if they don't know where their daughter is they'll be freaking out. You don't want to walk in on that! And besides, Dale, if Marisa finds out you've bunked off she'll go ape shit.'

'If her parents do think it's Lotte too, then they'll need the comfort of someone who cared about her,' Dale said stubbornly. 'And as for Marisa, you lot aren't going to grass me up, are you?'

'Of course not,' they chorused as one. 'She's not due back till the afternoon, but if she does get back early what will we say?'

'That I had to go to the dentist as I had a bad toothache,' Dale suggested.

'Is it a good idea to go barging in on her parents?' Scott asked Dale much later that evening just before they went to bed. 'I can understand you wanting to check with them before going to the police. But what if they haven't seen Lotte for a couple of weeks, and haven't seen the picture tonight? They are going to flip with horror and shock and we'll be there in the middle of it. The police know how to handle that sort of thing, we don't.'

'We could just ask for Lotte,' Dale said. 'Make like it's just a social call. If she's off at work then we can just leave a message for her to ring us and leave. But if they haven't seen her for some time, then we either show them the girl in the paper or go straight to the police, depending on how strong we think her folks are.'

Scott shrugged. 'On your head be it if they freak out!'