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Opening Extract from...

The Honeymoon Suite

Written by Wendy Holden

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Honeymoon Suite

WENDY HOLDEN



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1

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To everyone at Headline for everything they have done.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

The Cornish hamlet of Tremadoc was giving good spring. Walls thick with yellow gorse, edged fields glossy with deep-green grass. Birds sang in bushes bursting with white elder blossom. A powerful sun shone down.

At the centre of the village, its sculptured finials lacy against the blue of the sky, rose the mediaeval granite tower of St Fennec's. Beside it squatted the pub, the Miner's Arms, its beer garden dancing with parasols.

Around that was a scattering of grey cottages whose tiled roofs were orange with lichen. Behind the village the dwellings thinned out to the cliff edge. Here the gentle green land suddenly ended. It turned abruptly downwards, changed into a sheer face of grey jagged rock and plunged into the white spume of a tossing and troubled sea.

On the very edge, almost at the point where the field became the cliff face, stood a building that had been, until recently, a ruined barn. Now the roof had been repaired and out of it poked, periscope-like, the silver funnel of an Aga chimney. Windows had been pierced in the thick stone sides and fitted with custom-made frames painted, like the stable door, a modish lavender blue.

Inside, fishing nets with glass balls hung from the ceiling and papier-mâché fish swam along the stone walls. There were lanterns of a seafaring type and a framed poster recruiting 'Fit Young Men' to a Georgian frigate bound for the Americas. Upstairs were two small bedrooms with driftwood-effect headboards and a tiny bathroom with a lifebelt-shaped mirror and a little wooden lighthouse dangling from the light-switch cord. The clear plastic loo seat was set with pearly shells.

'Bosun's Whistle' had once been an upscale holiday cottage but, failing to get the expected returns, had been put on the market. Dylan, the writer who had bought it fully furnished a year ago, was relaxed about the cheesily nautical interior. He had wanted to escape the London literary circus and have somewhere quiet to work. And apart from the boom of the waves, the howl of the wind, the scream of the gulls and the farmer yelling at the loudly complaining cattle, quiet it tended to be.

He liked the name too, obvious though it was that a bosun had never been near the place, let alone whistled in it. 'Bosun's Whistle' seemed to Dylan an amusing euphemism. It had the ring of a phrase that could be used suggestively to replace something infinitely ruder. He could imagine the Two Ronnies singing about it; he had made up a song himself, or at least the last line of one, in their style:

'*She was up all night, and so was the bosun's whist-le . . .*'

Dylan hummed now at his desk at the downstairs window whose pale blue curtains were printed with little red boats. Before him was a sea of scribbled-on papers on which a laptop was in full sail. His fingers were idle and his face turned to the sea view, eyes resting on the distant horizon.

'*It's big and it's shiny, it must be the bosun's whist-le . . .*'

He must get on with his work, not sit here composing puerile ditties. He had no excuse now; there was no longer anything

between him and what he was supposed to be doing.

Finally, Beatrice had gone and he could write.

Last night, she had slammed out of the cottage amid a storm of Gallic curses and the shrieking assurance that their relationship was over. It was by no means their first row, but it was certainly the worst. The décor of Bosun's Whistle had suffered irreparably; driftwood sculptures were swept off shelves and naïf paintings of lighthouses ground beneath Beatrice's stiletto heel. Even the shell-embedded loo seat was wrenched from its moorings and hurled at the shell-patterned tiles of the shower before Beatrice made a door-slamming, cottage-shuddering exit.

Would she be back? Dylan was pretty sure she would. She always was after a row.

Did he want her back? This was more difficult. It was an understatement to say that Beatrice was a handful. She was a tsunami, a whirlwind, a maelstrom, a tornado. Her rages were violent and sudden. One minute she might be passionately devouring him, the next scratching his eyes out. But there was no question he found all that exciting.

And while she was hardly a soul mate, her body more than made up for it. Beatrice was beautiful, with her waist-length black hair, thick, straight black brows and pneumatic pouting lips. She wasn't tall – in fact she was petite – but her slender limbs looked sensational clothed in tight black rubber. Dylan had met her at Fennec Cove, the local surfing beach, and had been struck by her unusual surf boots. They had 'Devil' stamped on the side in red letters and divided the big toe from the rest of the foot by means of a black plastic cloven hoof.

Despite this, Beatrice had initially made Dylan think of the village church. St Fennec's contained a black fourteenth-century pew-end on which was a mediaeval carving of a mermaid. Her tiny waist swelled out to huge hips. You could see her navel and

her breasts, partly concealed by long, thick hair. Even in the sexually free-and-easy twenty-first century Dylan had felt a frisson on seeing the carving. The effect it must have had on the generations of repressed yokels who had worshipped here could only be imagined.

Men who never saw a woman naked till their wedding night, and possibly not even then, must have positively fought to get the nearest pews. So when Beatrice had emerged from the sea like a siren, to Dylan's literary fancy she had seemed the Tremadoc mermaid made flesh. She had been so goddamn sexy it had been hard for him to look, especially wearing something as revealing as a wetsuit.

Beatrice had looked, however, and had liked what she saw. She had wasted no time, told him that she wanted him, and had taken him shortly afterwards in a lay-by in the back of his car. That was how Beatrice did things.

She was twenty-one, beautiful and restless. Before coming to Cornwall she had been doing a film course in London, but it hadn't worked out for some reason. Surfing didn't seem to Dylan the natural next step, but Beatrice had heard that it was fashionable and she was obviously from the kind of wealthy family that allowed her to follow her urges. She wasn't much good on a surfboard, in fact, but she was very good at a lot of other things.

And if these didn't include conversation, empathy, or even humour, Dylan certainly wasn't complaining. He was young, healthy and twenty-four and Beatrice was a sex-crazed beauty three years his junior who talked dirty in husky Franglais. She was also fascinated by the fact that he was a writer.

'You must put me *dans ton roman*,' she would gasp through her tumbling hair from above him. '*Je voudrais être ton inspiration*.'

She wasn't his inspiration, though. Nothing was these days.

Writing suddenly seemed such a slog, when it had all been so easy before.

Perhaps too easy. *All Smiles*, Dylan's first novel, had been a smash hit. One minute he'd been writing a book in the evenings after work. The next, he'd sent it to an agent, it had been accepted and become a literary phenomenon overnight.

His second novel, *Charm Itself*, was the one he was currently writing. It was eagerly awaited by hundreds of thousands of fans. When it was published, Dylan would be an even richer man than *All Smiles* had made him. He supposed he should be excited about this.

Beatrice certainly was. She loved to swank about Tremadoc showing off about her famous boyfriend. It was not something that endeared her to the locals. There weren't many French people in Tremadoc, or even many locals, except in half term when the place was swamped with Boden-wearing families staying at National Trust cottages. But the handful of farmers, scented-candle-makers, fudge entrepreneurs and home-educators who made up what passed for the resident population certainly treated Beatrice with caution.

Even the contrarian landlord of the Miner's Arms refrained from irking Beatrice's ire. She was the only customer who he never asked for a table number after she'd ordered food. This was usually the Waterloo of everyone else, who, faced with the fact they had no idea what their number was, were forced to go outside, find it, then join the back of the queue again. It was, Dylan suspected, the landlord's twisted idea of a joke, but it blew up when he tried it with Beatrice. She had yelled at him to stuff his *numéros de table* up his arse and stormed out.

Now, Dylan knitted his brows and tried to concentrate on his keyboard. He should be able to crack this. Pull off the whole trick again.

But maybe a trick was all it had ever been. *All Smiles*, to be sure, had won a whole string of book prizes and garnered him a fortune. There had been film options left, right and centre. It was all terribly flattering. But had he deserved it, really?

Because it had all been won with so little effort it had left Dylan feeling curiously empty inside. So perhaps it made sense that he now sought physical sensation, something that made him feel real. Not just sex, but surfing too.

He had taken up surfing after he met Beatrice, and to his immense surprise, having never done it before, he'd proved a natural from the start. He loved the struggle in and out of the water, thighs pushing against the stiff, resisting swell, the struggle to keep upright amid the stinging white spray, balancing on the surge of pure power that was a wave. The freezing exhilaration of it was completely different from the heat and sweat of making love to Beatrice, but identical in its powerful release. Both activities calmed and exhausted him. Both required huge reserves of energy. Both, in their way, were a struggle, which writing never really had been.

Now, Dylan drummed his fingers on the table and tried to ignore the ocean. His mind remained on it, even so. Before he had come to Cornwall he had thought that the sea was just the sea. Big. Blue. Cold to swim in. Had fish below it and boats on the top. Sometimes, if the fish were caught and the boats sank, the other way round.

Now he knew better. The sea wasn't just blue, for a start. Its colours and textures changed all the time. Sometimes it was billowing pale blue silk, sometimes wrinkly purple leather. You got patches of liquid silver, sulky pewter and dark flint, often simultaneously.

The sea had personality. It was as moody, contradictory and capricious as any person, as Beatrice, in fact. Sometimes, like

her, it was roaring; furious with an insatiable rage. Then, walls of water reared and crashed and tides pounded like fists into the rocks and cliffs. At other times it was feminine, spreading sheets of lace on the sodden sands and turning a coy, baby-doll pink in the sunset while small white waves like feather boas rolled in. Like the feather boas Beatrice wore during her marabou feather routine.

He had, with enormous difficulty, only just regained his concentration when his mobile rang.

'How's *Charm* going, dear boy?' Dylan recognised the rich, purring tones of his agent Julian. 'Eve's been asking me for updates.'

Eve was Dylan's editor. 'It's going OK,' he lied.

'Marvellous. Because I need you to take a day off. Come up to the big smoke. Various new TV offers have come in and I'd like to discuss them with you in person.'

Dylan groaned inwardly. *All Smiles* had sold all round the world and there were various international telly versions in the pipeline. He'd long got used to all of that. It was spoilt of him, he knew, and complacent; nonetheless, it was how he felt. It just wasn't exciting any more.

'Can't you deal with it?' he asked Julian.

Fond as he was of his agent, a long, hot journey to London did not appeal. Not when the surfing weather was like this. It was almost overwhelming, the urge to get up and go out to the car, where his rubber wetsuit waited, still damp from yesterday and probably full of scratchy sand.

'Not really, dear boy. Documents to sign, you know the kind of thing . . .'

Dylan pictured himself in the oak-panelled office at Copley & Co., Julian's agency, while Julian himself, with his round Bakelite spectacles, glossy wings of grey hair and the red suede

shoes which were his trademark, sat opposite him on the leather-buttoned chesterfield. Despite being one of the savviest players in a hi-tech business, Julian preferred the accoutrements of patrician tradition.

'Over lunch,' the agent added.

Dylan's heart sank further. Not even the oak-panelled office; he was to be taken out and displayed in public. He would have to look smart; shave off his stubble; brush his unruly, over-long, salt-roughened mop and search in his wardrobe for something that wasn't just ancient, torn shorts and faded T-shirts.

'We'll go to Bruton Street,' Julian declared. 'Seriously, you haven't heard of it? Been in the boondocks too long. It's the new club, dear boy.'

Dylan tried his best to muster some enthusiasm. Julian was a member of every smart club going. He knew everyone and lunch with him, as Dylan knew from past experience, was a succession of famous media faces swooping in for air kisses over reductions of cauliflower and black pudding ice cream. It was exactly that kind of exposure, as well as that kind of food, that Dylan had come to the West Country to escape.

He knew he had no choice, however. The arrangements were made and Dylan clicked off his mobile with a heavy heart.

It soon lifted again, however. The door of Bosun's Whistle slammed and the familiar clack of high heels on kitchen lino could now be heard. Heels so high and sharp that they had pierced the floor tiles like bullet holes. Eyes burning, hair flying, nostrils flaring, Beatrice now appeared round the door.

'Hi, hurney,' she pouted in her heavily accented English. She was already unbuttoning her blouse. 'I'm 'ome!'

Dylan rose from his desk and went towards her. *Charm Itself* would just have to wait – again.

CHAPTER 2

It was May, and a dull Tuesday afternoon in North London. In a downstairs flat in a row of Victorian semis, a mobile buzzed.

Nell, at her bedroom mirror pulling straighteners through her hair, put them hurriedly down on the floor. The phone was spasming about the surface of her desk; the bedroom was also her office. Nell leapt to grab it. Her heart was thumping. Surely not. With only an hour to go?

The screen in her shaking hand confirmed her worst fears.

Sorry. Can't make tonight. Babysitter probs. Will reschedule. Lx

A wave of rage and helplessness swept through Nell. 'Shit!' She rumpled her just-straightened blonde mane in sheer frustration.

It was always the bloody same. Whichever one of her friends she arranged dates with – and she was always the one doing the arranging – they always got cancelled in the end.

Usually this happened the night before. But as this was the actual day she'd had high hopes of this drink with Lucy. Lucy was one of her more reliable friends and Nell's one-time business partner at Vanilla, the small PR and marketing operation which the recession had put paid to two years ago.

Nell had fought hard to keep Vanilla going. She had worked

every hour possible. But in the face of squeezed client budgets she had had to accept the inevitable. The business had died, but Nell believed in Fate and was sure that, in the future, she would set up again.

Even though she now worked at home she still wore a crisp white fitted shirt each day; still put on her make-up and did her hair. She still had her pride and self-respect; she was still investing in her appearance. How, otherwise, could she expect anyone to invest in her?

And now this self-belief, she had hoped, was about to pay off; the economic outlook was improving. Perhaps Vanilla could rise again, phoenix-like from the ashes. 'Phoenix PR' had a good ring, and it was about this that she had hoped to talk to Lucy tonight. But Lucy had let her down.

An acrid smell alerted her to the hair straighteners burning into the floor. Nell pounced on them and stared miserably at the smoking black line eating the gold weave of the carpet.

There was no phoenix, but there were certainly ashes. Her recently installed sisal was ruined.

Nell took in a deep breath and fought a sudden urge to cry. For goodness' sake, it was only a carpet. Albeit a very new and very expensive one.

And she was a grown-up. Almost thirty. She was educated, reasonably attractive, financially independent, she had her own flat. She had a career, even if, following the collapse of Vanilla, this was working at home writing catalogue copy.

But what she didn't have was either a partner or children. And this, Nell had discovered, made dates with you eminently cancellable.

Take tonight. Lucy's children had come first. Everyone's children came first. Children were the great enemy of the single woman.

All her friends – people she had been at university with, or had worked with – had families now and had moved to the provinces or to suburbs so remote they might as well *be* the provinces. Not that Nell would ever have dared to say so. People clung to the idea of living in London even when they were actually deep into Surrey. Or, like Lucy, practically in Brighton.

And just as the tide of friends had receded, the work colleagues one had too. Her professional interactions now took place, not in an office with real people, but online with commissioning editors she'd never met and who changed so frequently there was no chance to build up even an email friendship.

Nell wasn't quite at the stage of going to zumba classes for the social opportunities. But she was definitely getting there. The white shirt's days were numbered too; it was getting harder and harder not to shuffle to her keyboard in her onesie.

Nell now turned off her mobile, dropped a book on the scorch mark to cover it and tried to concentrate on her work.

She flexed her fingers and began to type. 'Splash some colour about in this appliqué top, made from ultra-strong hi-tec fabric.'

Hi-tec or high-tech? Or hi-tech? Or high-tec? Nell consulted the style sheet. Hi-tec.

Every catalogue had its own style sheet and for ease of reference Nell kept them in a box file tucked into a copy of the relevant publication. The box file lived on her desk and she looked at it now, counting the small volumes.

Here was *Urban Fox*, an interiors and lifestyle catalogue which offered 'tradition with a twist' to image-conscious thirty-something men. This seemed to boil down to silver shaving brushes, underpants with Latin mottoes and witty neon chess sets.

An Englishman's Castle supplied vintage coat hooks, framed

destination boards from old Routemaster buses and Twenties-look gramophones that concealed state-of-the-art music systems.

Eggheads sold ironic crocheted antimacassars and other knowingly grannyish knitted goods. *Croker & Descendants* was a retro furniture catalogue specialising in corner units upholstered in PVC and other examples of 'Sixties penthouserie'.

Some of the catalogues were designed to go out with museum membership packs and acknowledged the subscriber's cultural interests. They sold headscarves printed with the rose window of Salisbury Cathedral, Charles Rennie Mackintosh cardigans and Ancient Egyptian-themed wristwatches.

Year Zero was an eco-chic catalogue offering weekend bags made of recycled Cambodian rice sacks, sustainable armchairs upholstered with vintage Welsh blankets, and underpants made from cotton produced by Indian farmers whose access to Wi-Fi the catalogue helped fund. Buy underpants, connect people, was the subliminal message.

There was *The Knitting Sheep*, an upmarket children's emporium selling miniature deckchairs, personalised ballet bags, child-sized croquet sets and hand-crafted wooden play-forts. *Buttermilk* dealt in undateably plain and floaty women's clothes in light wool and linen. Every item had a name chosen to trigger certain associations: the 'Elizabeth' coat, the 'Margaret' dress, the 'Cate' pyjamas, the 'Angelina' thong. Sometimes, as in the case of the *Morpheus* beds catalogue, Nell chose the names herself. She had worked her way through the atlas of Europe this way, with beds called after towns from Albi to Verona.

Less romantically, there were several catalogues for financial services, all featuring images of people in vaguely horticultural environments. This, Nell had guessed, suggested growth whilst euphemistically avoiding any suggestion of actual money. The models were obviously selected to represent all social types – a

man with a trim white beard (older savers) smiling at an apple tree; a blond tot by some daisies (parents and grandparents); a groomed young man of vaguely Asian appearance squatting over some tomatoes (a complex catch-all including middle-youth, couples, homosexuals, career types and people of ethnic origin).

And here was *Toe Be Or Not Toe Be*, a cashmere sock catalogue which required a Shakespearean reference in every description. Nell always had to rifle the *Complete Works* for that one and enjoyed it so much it made her wonder whether a career in academia might, in other circumstances, have been a possibility.

Looking at her range of clients, Nell tried to fan her sense of pride; she had done well, after all, to launch herself as a freelance copywriter. At least she was still working with words. Even if it was describing lamps and bathmats. She was still paid for ideas.

And yet her ability to persuade people from the back bedroom of 19a Gardiner Road N1 wasn't quite the same as holding meetings in Vanilla's Soho offices and advising clients over an entire range of marketing options – brochures, posters, websites, ads. It wasn't the same at all.

'Every man's favourite casual shirt. Great price too. As easy as life should be!'

Nell paused over her keyboard and wrinkled her nose. Was that quite the right description? A price tag of £99 did not strike her as especially great. And where did the idea of life being easy come from, exactly?

Everything she had achieved had been through sheer dogged hard work. Especially Vanilla. Its collapse had been heart-breaking, but tonight, she had hoped to persuade Lucy that they could resurrect it. Oh well. If Lucy hadn't even managed to make it into town she was hardly a good bet as a business

partner. Even if she'd been a good one in the past. But these days Lucy was a full-time mum and seemingly content to be so.

They probably wouldn't have talked about Vanilla at all. Lucy would have spent the whole evening – or the couple of short hours before she had to get her train back – banging on about her children or complaining about her partner Uri, who sold eco heat-pumps for a living. They were always going wrong, apparently, and poor Uri spent his life snorkelling around in people's filthy ponds trying to fix them.

Nell wouldn't have wanted Uri herself, but at least he was a partner. Even ones covered in pond slime were in short supply, especially as one grew older.

Nell had been single for over a year now, ever since things ended with Toby. He had dumped her, although not in any dramatic fashion. Nothing was ever dramatic with Toby which, actually, had been the problem. They had parted amicably but had not kept in touch; he was married now, Nell had heard through the grapevine.

Well, good for him. She hoped he would be happy. But in the middle of the night sometimes the fear gripped Nell that she had rather easily let go what might prove to be her last ever relationship. London, after all, was famously full of single ladies. Sternly she would tell herself that she was an independent woman, better off alone than with the wrong guy.

She focused on her screen again. An expensive, swingy little miniskirt needed a breezy caption. Resolutely, Nell poised her fingers over the keyboard. 'Life's a party!' she wrote. 'And you've been invited!'