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Move Over Darling

Written by Christine Stovell

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Move Over Darling

Christine Stovell



Extract

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Doris Day was singing in the background, telling Coralie Casey that whatever would be would be. Coralie disagreed. Doris was a goddess – but she was wrong about fate. The future *was* yours to see. Furthermore, you could look at it, decide you didn't like it very much and do something about it.

She dragged her thoughts back to the present before they had a chance to head off like a wayward dog and poke around for something nasty festering in the corners of her mind. Instead of waiting to be dealt another bad hand she'd reshuffled the cards and laid out her own destiny. She'd swapped suburban streets for country lanes and the nine-to-five for the steady rise of Sweet Cleans, her range of natural cleaning products for body and home. It wasn't completely true to say she'd moved on, but she had, at least, moved over.

Beyond the window of her workshop the late January snow spiralled in the air like down, cushioning the gentle green slopes in soft white. In seven swiftly passing months Coralie had seen the west Wales landscape in many moods and was learning to love them all. Even the rain, which seemed to fall in epic quantities in Penmorfa, was eventually followed by pale candyfloss clouds and bright blue skies.

She stopped for a moment to gaze at the delicate beauty of her garden under its white veil. A winter wonderland. Doris Day started telling her it was magic, but Coralie knew it was all down to hard work. By taking a huge gamble and some tough decisions she'd made her own dream come true. Or was making progress towards it. Who needed a crystal ball to see that things were looking good?

And her former colleagues thought *she* was the crazy one when *they* were still holed up in their offices! As for job satisfaction? She gave a small smile of contentment. Naturally, in the early days at the management consultancy, she had really believed in what she was doing. Every night, she would turn out the light

feeling good because she'd nursed another dying business back to health. Rooting out clogged-up departments, weak processes and bloated boards saved an awful lot of money. But, that was before … Rock! Oh poor Rock! He must be desperate for food!

When she'd woken up early, unable to wait any longer to try out the idea for a new soap recipe which had popped into her head just as she was drifting off to sleep, she'd only intended to allow herself an hour before seeing to him. How could it be almost nine o'clock already? How selfish of her to lose track of time so completely when he relied on her for regular meals! Throwing on her coat, she flew quickly up the garden path as fast as its dusting of powdery snow would allow and grabbed the box off the kitchen worktop.

'Ro-ock! Rock, Rock, Rock, Ro-ock!' Back out in the garden Coralie gave the plastic box of dried cat food a hearty shake, but there was no sign of the fluffy black stray who'd adopted her shortly after she'd moved in. Although she would never have admitted it to anyone else, it had taken some time to get used to her new home. Thanks to a weight of unfinished jobs, the tiny cottage had initially felt a bit unloved. Its selling point had been the workshop – and the low price, of course. The holiday let next door might have put some buyers off too, but, touch wood, all the visitors she'd encountered had been very well-behaved.

The relative isolation of the pair of cottages, which she'd found so attractive when she'd viewed them, could also exclude them from the village's warm embrace. They were accessed by a long, narrow road trailing off from what passed in Penmorfa for a main thoroughfare. By day, it was merely The Lane That Time Forgot; perfect for a bygone age when a pony and trap might have trotted merrily down to the village and back, but less suited to modern requirements and any car without a 'thin' button.

However, once the light – and her initial excitement – had faded, there had been times when the trees seemed to scratch at the sky, the dark sockets of potholes appeared to be lying in wait

for the unwary traveller and the night air felt still and expectant. Having Rock squeezing through the hedgerow and bounding towards her whenever she appeared made her feel welcome. She paused to listen out for his little chirrup of greeting. Where was he? Perhaps he was in hiding from one of the farm cats who regularly tried to bully him? Poor Rock, you only had to look into his worried gold eyes to see how pathetic he was.

'Ro-ock!' She tried again, jumping to add a bit of extra impetus to her cat-food maraca.

'Hey! Little Red Riding Hood! I take it this is yours.'

The box of dried food went flying from her grasp as Coralie came close to finding out how it would feel to jump out of her skin. The Big Bad Wolf was tall, dark and stubbled, with a voice that could lead a nun astray. His eyes glinted like blue diamonds that cut right through her as he held Rock up from the other side of the fence. He was also, Coralie couldn't help but notice, wearing a black waffle bathrobe, which gaped open to reveal just the right amount of dark hair over smooth skin. Alys had recently given the cottage a makeover, hoping, she said, to appeal to the boutique hotel set, so if this holidaymaker was typical of the new breed, life was about to get interesting.

'Where did you find him?' she asked, wondering why she was feeling so self-conscious when *he* was the one standing there half-naked.

'On my head,' he said, tucking Rock into the crook of his arm. 'He took advantage of me whilst I was sleeping.'

That would account for why Rock was looking so pleased with himself. 'He's very insecure,' she explained. 'Sometimes he just needs the comfort of being close to someone. The first time he did it to me I dreamt I was in a sauna wearing a Davy Crockett hat. I woke up with Rock's tail in my mouth and his little legs dangling down either side of my head.'

The Big Bad Wolf's mouth was set in a straight line above a granite jaw and the blue eyes regarded her with weary irritation.

‘Would you like to take your cat or not?’ he asked impatiently, ‘because I’m freezing my balls off here.’

‘Try not to drop anything until I get close to the fence, then,’ Coralie advised, wondering if she should feel offended by a total stranger discussing his testicles with her. Good Sense Of Humour distinctly lacking, even if he was very good-looking. Pity. Safely back in her own home, he probably wouldn’t seem that good-looking, either. One downside of Penmorfa was that a surplus of crusty old farmers made it easy to get overheated about any man lacking an abundance of nostril or ear hairs. On the other hand, standing in a frozen garden in just a dressing gown was likely to make it harder to see the funny side of things. Either way he was a fleeting visitor, not her concern, unlike Rock, who was beginning to get restless.

‘Don’t worry, Rock, darling, I’m coming to get you,’ she said soothingly, just in case the nervous little cat thought the impatience was directed at him.

Except getting close to the fence was slightly harder than she’d anticipated. Gardening hadn’t been her highest priority since moving in; the first job was to set the workshop up and get the business running smoothly and the winter had proved far too wet and cold to entice her out to tidy up the borders. The hawthorn bushes the previous owners had planted had been beautiful with their lacy white blossom when she’d moved in, but now they were armed and dangerous with prickles. In one sense that made her feel safe, on the other she didn’t especially want to snag her lovely red vintage coat. Picking her way delicately through to a gap in the clearing, Coralie reached the fence, leaned across and lifted her arms to take Rock from the man the other side before his voice went up several octaves.

‘There, there!’ she cooed, as much to reassure herself as the nervous stray. For all his claims to the contrary, the brief touch of the man’s hands against hers as he started to transfer his unwelcome hostage over to her suggested there was plenty of hot

blood in him.

'Got him?'

'Yep!' she said, as she lost her footing on a patch of ice.

The silence of the normally peaceful and tranquil garden was rudely broken by a cocktail of sound comprising some fine old-fashioned expletives, yowling and hissing and a few whimpers of fear. Once it had subsided and Coralie could bear to look, Rock was nowhere in sight, but at least there were no track marks down her neighbour's chest to show where he'd been.

'Oh, I'm so sorry! Are you all right?'

'I should have looked around for something more substantial to put on my feet than open-toe hotel slippers, that's all.' He winced.

Spa slippers, too. Coralie was impressed; she wouldn't have guessed that there was any market at all for corporate businessmen looking to chill on the remote Welsh coast, but Alys had obviously done her research. Perhaps she should have done something about blocking the cat-flap, though? Still, the stylish make-over had evidently attracted at least one weary executive to her holiday cottage. Except the man on the other side of the fence was looking more chilly than chilled.

He'd gone quite pale, but she couldn't tell if his adrenalin was priming him for fight or flight. Either way it wasn't going to do wonders for his sense of humour. If he did keel over there was no way she would be able to catch him, assuming she could even pole-vault over the fence in time.

'Just stay right where you are and I'll be fine,' he said, reading her mind and scowling at her. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going in before I catch pneumonia.'

'Don't exaggerate,' she said, hoping a bit of levity might help. 'I'm sure a fine big man like you can handle a bit of cold.'

As his dark eyebrows rose, she noticed, at the same time, that in all the excitement his bathrobe had come completely undone making her wonder exactly what was on the other side of the

fence from her. She felt the deep blush, despite the freezing air, and was mortified when a flicker of amusement danced across his eyes and the corners of his mouth lifted briefly. It was some small comfort that at least he didn't have lockjaw.

'Have pity,' he said, cracking a smile at last. 'It's still four in the morning according to my body clock. And if that's not cruel enough, various parts of me are in danger of getting frostbite out here,' he added, as if she hadn't noticed. 'So you won't mind if I go in to warm up.'

Coralie stared doubtfully at him, 'Are you quite sure you're okay? You know where I am. Don't hesitate to ask if you need help.'

He drew his bathrobe round him and gave a short bark of laughter. 'Thank you, but don't worry, I've got a cell phone.'

Now was probably not the time to tell him that anything higher tech than a yoghurt pot on a string was wasted in Penmorfa. Instead, she made an attempt at a bright and cheerful smile so their encounter would end on a pleasant note and before he wrote anything like 'peaceful cottage, shame about next door's cat' on TripAdvisor. 'Right, well I'll let you get on,' she said. 'Bye then! Oh and enjoy your holiday! You couldn't have picked a lovelier part of the world to visit.'

He turned hastily and made the sound of someone stubbing a toe. Coralie decided not to look over the fence to see if she was correct. She hung around just in case her limited first-aid skills were required until she heard his back door slam, when she deemed it safe enough to go back inside her own home. Rock was stretched out in front of the wood burner looking at one with the world, but Coralie knew she wouldn't be able to relax. Everyone had accused her of running away to live in a fairy tale; now it was complete with its very own Beast.

Gethin limped inside, trying to decide which of his feet to attend to first. *Tawelfan* was the name of the holiday cottage, Alys

Bowen had told him when she'd handed him the key. *Quiet place*. Well, it wasn't especially peaceful so far. One split toe was now bleeding over the kitchen's tiled floor whilst over on the other foot his little toe had turned purple and was looking sulky.

When he'd woken up in a strange bed and discovered his even stranger new headgear, his original intention had simply been to get to the back door and forcibly eject his furry intruder. The guest robe and towelling slippers had been conveniently to hand so saved him the bother of getting dressed just to see off his unexpected guest. But then the commotion had started up in next-door's yard and he'd caught sight of the back of his neighbour's head. Her copper hair was coiled in a quaint up-do that bounced as she bobbed up and down the other side of the fence, her breath cloudy in the cold air.

The cat, in his arms, started wriggling in response to her bellowing, so putting two and two together, it didn't seem exactly gallant to give it a gentle boot or the opportunity to nip back inside behind his back, when he could easily hand it straight over. Besides, he was curious to get a better look at the *front* of his neighbour's head.

Well, the cat, presumably, had escaped unharmed but *he'd* certainly suffered for his curiosity. The new guest slippers had been trashed, but it was only good manners to avoid staining the new white grouting pink as well. A rummage in the kitchen cupboards unearthed a first-aid kit containing a giant roll of crepe bandage and a box of Gruffalo plasters. Fortunately, his essential supplies did run to aspirin and a bottle of Jack Daniels. Since he was sure he'd read something about aspirin thinning the blood, he poured himself a medicinal measure of JD instead. What the heck, his body clock was screwed anyway.

Lovely part of the world to visit, indeed! Alys had asked him if *hiraeth* had brought him back. The Welsh word described a deep longing for home; a silent call which could only be answered by the waves and the rocks and the mountains. No, not *hiraeth* so

much as a last-ditch attempt from beyond the grave to control his behaviour. So if anything had called to him when he'd crested the hill in his hired car and caught his first glimpse of the cluster of limewashed cottages below him, bound by the pewter ribbon of the sea, he'd quickly turned a deaf ear.

Resting his foot on a kitchen chair, he sipped his drink and stared at the Gruffalo and the mouse looking at each other on his toe. Like the girl peering cautiously over the fence at him, her tawny eyes widening in shock, and her Cupid's bow lips rounding in alarm. And suddenly all the anger and frustration of being dragged back to the place he thought he'd left for good diverted itself into something far more surprising; his shoulders started to shake and he threw his head back in a great shout of laughter.

A clean getaway, he reminded himself. No complications and certainly no local girls. Hell, if he'd let his father tell him what to do, he'd still be up to his knees in mud and cow muck and coming home every evening to the bitter face of the girl from the nearest farm slowly realising he'd only married her for her land. All that weight of expectation on a young couple; everyone in the village relying on them to work the land, fill the schools and keep the shops open. No pressure there then. So the local girls were strictly off-limits, he reminded himself, even if his cute next-door neighbour came round and offered to kiss every single part of him better.

More to the point, he'd promised Ruby that wild horses wouldn't stop him making sure that everything would be in place for the show – including him. Whilst he had every confidence in her abilities, it wasn't fair to leave the kid holding the fort all by herself. Especially not with Laura Schiffman, Pamala Gray's chillingly efficient senior director, breathing down her neck.

'Let Pamala down and it won't just be your father's cottage no one's touching,' Laura had warned. Pamala Gray was not the kind of art dealer anyone messed around, especially in a tightening market. Every exhibition in each of her three galleries had to

repay its outlay. If he was a less successful artist, he'd be concerned, but his gold-plated sales record insulated him from any such fears. Not that he'd take advantage of his position; he'd play the game for Ruby's sake so when the time came for her to strike out on her own, she'd be able to cash in from his patronage.

He hobbled upstairs, holding up his big toe stiffly so as not to mark the pristine beige carpet, and picked his phone up from the side of the bed, wondering if was too early to give Ruby a quick call just to reassure her. Great. No signal. Leaning out of the window to see if the reception was any better, he caught the sound of someone singing 'Just Blew In From The Windy City' in the kitchen below. Somehow it didn't come as a surprise when he cracked his head ducking back in.

Chapter Two

A little later, gazing round at the winter sun lighting up the whitewashed walls and gilding the oak A-framed rafters of her shop, Coralie felt restored by the sight of her neatly stacked shelves. *Sweet Cleans, Dream Body* for beauty and skincare on one side, *Sweet Cleans, Dream Home* for household and utility on the other. It was a comfort to see the battalions of gleaming bottles and tightly packed jars and imagine them all primed and ready to bring a little shine to so many neglected places. She shrugged off her red coat, smoothed out her pleated skirt with its fifties' geometric print and switched on her music. 'Secret Love' filled the air and Coralie quickly forwarded it to something that didn't make her think of anything messy, like half-naked strangers in the garden.

When Alys tapped at the door, she was glad of the diversion. Alys, who, with her husband, Huw, ran the Penmorfa Garden Centre, had inadvertently helped her to make up her mind when Coralie was still weighing up the pros and cons of moving to the area. Coralie had been exploring, following the winding road up and across the hill to where emerald fields sloped down to a turquoise sea, when she'd first come across the garden centre. It had been a gloriously hot day and noticing that there were signs for a café and something called the Craft Courtyard, she called in for a cool drink and the chance to nose around.

The converted stable buildings, clustering round the garden centre's pretty Victorian cobbled courtyard, housed an eclectic variety of both crafts and craftspeople and seemed to be attracting a healthy flow of visitors. With hindsight, she'd probably let her heart rule her head when she'd noticed there were units to rent. The Craft Courtyard in winter was a much quieter affair, but the attraction of such a lovely setting and an instant 'family' of friendly faces so close to her prospective new home had been too strong to resist.

Coralie waved Alys in. Even in her garden uniform of old jeans and black polo-neck, covered today with a black pea-coat, Alys looked stylish and chic, a bit like Helen Mirren, with her silver bob and slim figure. Alys had a lot of oomph, too. Considering her daughter, Kitty, was quietly causing havoc, she was also managing to stay very calm.

'I don't suppose Kitty's said anything to you about the baby yet,' said Alys. 'Not that I'm asking you to break any confidences.'

'No, and I know,' Coralie told her.

'I just wish she'd open up to me,' Alys sighed.

'How's Huw taking it?'

Alys fingered a bar of soap from the *Dream Body* range. 'He's having a late mid-life crisis. It doesn't suit him to think that his little girl is all grown up; he hasn't got the faintest idea what's going on under those loose tops she's wearing. He still thinks of *her* as a baby so he certainly doesn't think she's capable of being a mother.' She stroked her hands across the label on the wrapper. 'Mind you, I sometimes wonder what's going on inside his head these days. I could stand in front of him stark naked and I swear Huw wouldn't notice.'

Stark naked reminded her of her new neighbour again, so Coralie was relieved when Alys closed her eyes to raise the soap to her face and inhale the vanilla scent. It gave her a chance to rearrange her expression before Alys read the guilt there. She'd rather not have to own up to disfiguring one of her holiday tenants. 'Ah, but that's because you're secure with each other,' she said. 'Huw's just comfortable with you.'

Surely you couldn't keep feeling the way she had when her neighbour had appeared over the fence? Excitement like that every day couldn't be good for you, could it? And yet something in Alys's expression as she replaced the soap and stood up suggested that comfortable wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Outside in the courtyard, Willow, who sold silver jewellery to the sounds of dolphin calls and rainforest music from her little

shop, had arrived after everyone else as usual, but appeared to be having trouble with her door. Coralie and Alys watched as she drifted in to Rhys, the chair maker, as big and solid as one of his products.

'Oh, hello,' said Alys. 'Seems like Rhys's number has come up.'

Coralie did a double take; privately she thought that Willow, with her very faded pre-Raphaelite beauty, was well-named since she did an awful lot of drooping.

'I hope she doesn't frighten him away before the Valentine's raffle,' Alys said, folding her arms. 'Rhys has promised to donate some hand-carved plant labels. We had a weaver here once – lovely man he was, beautiful work – but Willow would keep pestering him. I think he was all for the free massages she offered to start with. Quite happy to have his pressure points relieved and that, but once she cornered him with her Tarot cards, telling him they were meant for each other, it all got a bit heavy for him. Last I heard he'd changed his name and was working up at B&Q near Llandudno.'

'Surely not?' Coralie blinked.

'Well, I might have misheard the bit about B&Q, but it was something like that,' said Alys, her laugh sounding very like Kitty's. 'But Willow is very fond of men who are good with their hands. Blacksmiths, potters, sculptors, gardeners,' she continued, sounding more serious. 'Treats them all as if they're superheroes. She forgets they're just ordinary men and like ordinary men they'll take what they're offered and then they move on.'

The throaty gurgle of an engine alerted them to Huw, oblivious to them watching, trundling past on a quad bike with Edith, his wire-haired Jack Russell looking full of her own self-importance, perched at the back. Alys watched him disappear, her expression hard to read. Gardeners, she'd said. Not Huw? He was certainly good-looking in a rumpled, lived-in way, but why would anyone who had Alys waiting for him need to play away from home? Just as she was starting to feel quite glum, she noticed Alys smiling

again. ‘I’ll tell you what, though,’ she said admiringly, ‘Willow will certainly bite off more than she can chew if she has a go at this one.’

Coralie took one look over Alys’s shoulder and quickly turned the sign on the door to ‘Closed’.

‘Oh, you’ve met your new neighbour, have you?’ said Alys, raising an eyebrow. ‘I knew he had something of a reputation, but I didn’t think it was that bad!’

The closed sign didn’t seem to be putting him off; he continued to bear down on them, although his progress did seem to be hampered by a barely perceptible limp.

‘It’s all right, Gethin,’ said Alys, switching the door sign over again and beckoning him in. ‘You don’t have to press your face against the glass, there are plenty of warm rolls in the oven.’

She looked rather pleased with her selective misquote from *Pillow Talk*. Coralie had lent her the DVD of the film in which Doris Day was cast as an independent interior designer forced to share a temporary telephone line with a philandering composer. As Alys stepped back, Coralie took a look at the man standing in her shop and decided that some of his pillow talk was probably quite lively, too. The late morning sun slanting through the windows caught the intense, blue-black of his hair, the twinkle of his dark eyes, a glint of white teeth as he smiled. No wonder he had a reputation. Going round looking like that, he only had himself to blame.

‘Little Red Riding Hood, it’s you again!’ He laughed, shaking his head in disbelief at her. ‘Just keep your distance, will you?’

Coralie was starting to feel that simply being on the same planet as Gethin Lewis was too close. Seven months of immersing herself in the practicalities of Sweet Cleans meant she had almost blotted out the messy memories of undertaking gladiatorial combat in some very risky arenas on behalf of corporate emperors. All the whisking, heating and blending of simple, chemical-free ingredients was highly therapeutic; every batch of marigold and lavender foot balm or Squeaky Clean window

cleaner gave her a sense of achievement and of brighter days ahead.

In some small way, the products she created were soothing the weary and banishing the dreary. Maiming the man next door on first meeting felt like a retrograde step. Towering over her now, his broad shoulders blocking out the light from the door, he looked like a dark deed in her pure, pristine world. Shame she couldn't just give him a quick squirt of something and pretend he hadn't happened.

'Have I missed something?' asked Alys, looking from one to the other.

'Apart from a suspected broken toe and hypothermia?' responded Gethin mildly, picking up a bottle of Glow Surround, Coralie's all-purpose kitchen cleaner from the *Dream Home* range. 'I nearly cracked my skull open on the window too, thanks to your singing.'

'My voice isn't *that* bad,' said Coralie, feeling slightly miffed.

'Nothing wrong with it at all,' he agreed, pleasantly. 'You just took me by surprise when I was trying to pick up a phone signal. Although, if I was being picky, I'd say maybe stay away from the Doris Day numbers.'

For Alys's sake, she was prepared to keep the peace and tone the singing down for a week or so. She was even prepared to compensate him for his injuries. She pointed to the bottle he was holding. 'Please accept that, then, by way of an apology. It's very good on hard surfaces.'

'Oh, you *have* been getting to know each other,' said Alys, sounding impressed. 'Looks as if I can skip the introductions.'

'I'm Gethin Lewis,' he said, smiling and offering her his hand.

'And this is Coralie Casey,' said Alys for her, which was good because something had got her tongue.

'Coralie?' he said in a voice like brown sugar on a Welsh cake. 'That's unusual.'

To be continued ….

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