

The Long Weekend.

Veronica Henry



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*The Mill House
Mimsbury
New Year's Eve 1999*

My darling, beautiful boys,

I know by the time you read this letter, you will be angry with me. But please, think beyond what you are feeling just now and try and understand why I chose to do this. I know you will think that I was the only one who had a choice in the matter, that I didn't give you any, and maybe this is true. Maybe I was selfish. Maybe I did it for me. But then I didn't want to have to make the choice in the first place. That's the cruel thing.

So. I hope you will forgive me, and remember me as I want to be remembered. Just as my last memory of each of you was as you should be – happy, laughing, carefree. Stay like that for ever, for me.

With all my love, every day and always,

Mummy xxx

One



Bloody seagulls. And bloody Jeff. Why couldn't he put the rubbish in the bin properly? They'd told him time and again that the gulls would rip the bag to shreds if he just dumped it on the top of the bin, but he never listened. And sure enough, the bag had been eviscerated and its contents strewn over the five square foot of grass that passed as a front garden. The grass that no one ever mowed, so it had grown as high as it could then drooped with the effort. Angelica banged on the bathroom window, but the five gulls took no notice, lighting with glee on the remains of a Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket that someone must have brought back from a night out, though heaven knows where – Angelica was pretty sure there wasn't a KFC for fifty miles. That was the price you paid for living in Pennfleet. Pretty views, yes, but none of the things that were the lifeblood of your average twenty-one year old, like Topshop or Maccie D's or even a bloody cinema.

Mention Pennfleet to most people and they thought of a picturesque harbour filled with merrily bobbing boats and quaint narrow streets lined with even quainter cottages painted in ice-cream pastels. It was the subject of a thousand clichéd paintings, many of which hung for sale in its bars and cafés, hefty price tags swinging from their

distressed wooden frames. The shops sold self-consciously stylish leisure wear – ditsy dresses, sloppy sweatshirts in dusty pinks and blues and patterned Wellingtons – bijou mugs with clever-clever slogans and hand-made jewellery, all at overinflated prices. Families thundered through the streets in an orgy of excitement, revelling in the playground that was theirs for the summer, with little regard for the custodians, the locals who held it together over the long winter months and served them their cream teas and gin and tonics. Boden-on-Sea, they called it, and in the summer you couldn't move for men in khaki shorts and deck shoes, and fragrant yummy mummies in capri pants and Chanel sunglasses.

What most visitors to Pennfleet didn't know was that if they followed the road up past the museum and forked left, past the tiny fire station and then over the hill and right into Acland Avenue, they would find a grimy grid of uncared-for terraced houses totally out of keeping with the maritime idyll it overlooked. Here was the underbelly, the residents of Pennfleet who weren't blessed with a view of the verdant mouth of the river and the sea beyond and whose only hope of gainful employment was a season of backbreaking sheet-changing or toilet-cleaning, unless they were lucky enough to have a job at the pie factory on the nearby industrial estate on the way to St Austell.

And even the chance to change sheets and clean toilets was diminishing. The hotel and café and restaurant owners were doing a lot of their own dirty work to keep costs down, and many of the B&Bs had been converted into self-catering apartments. Times were hard, and although the word on the street was that people would be holidaying at home this summer thanks to the recession, bookings so far

were down. Except at the high end, it seemed, which remained buoyant, with bookings ahead for the whole summer. And for that Angelica was grateful. She had started out as a chambermaid at The Townhouse by the Sea five years ago, at weekends and during the holidays. When she left school they offered her a full-time job as receptionist, and she'd grabbed the opportunity with both hands. Then, three weeks ago, they'd promoted her to assistant manager.

She picked up her suit from where she'd left it on the floor the evening before. The black linen skirt was crumpled; the jacket not so bad. She tried to smooth out the fabric but the creases were deeply engrained. She'd have to iron it. Claire would go ballistic if she was less than bandbox-fresh. The Townhouse by the Sea was all about style over practicality. Everything was high-maintenance, from the Egyptian cotton sheets to the glittering glass and chrome surfaces in the bathrooms that needed polishing with a soft cloth. No corners were cut.

At least as assistant manager she wouldn't have to do the backbreaking donkey work any more, unless they were really short-staffed. Angelica had been thrilled with her promotion, although the gloss had been taken off that thrill by the fact that her pay packet wasn't going to show much increase.

'Our margins are so tight at the moment,' Claire had explained, her eyes wide. 'But if the summer is a success, we can give you a bonus.'

And if it wasn't? Angelica knew only too well, having lived in Pennfleet all her life, that a dull, rainy summer could be the kiss of death to any seaside business. And she wasn't convinced that the Townhouse was going to get away for much longer with the rates they were charging.

Luxury was all very well, but over two hundred quid a night? Unless it was a real scorcher, they'd be lucky if they weren't bankrupt by the end of the summer.

Which would be devastating. Not least for her. For Angelica realised that she had landed on her feet. She loved every minute she spent in the hotel, and she was hungry to learn everything she could. Every job she'd had before had just been a means to an end, a way to get cash into her hand, but this was different. If she was going to be stuck round here for the rest of her life – and at the moment it looked that way – then the Townhouse was the place to be stuck.

It was certainly a marked contrast to her home surroundings. She looked around the bathroom with distaste. The pink suite was ancient and cracked, dirt settling into every nook and cranny. Jeff had fitted a rubber hose-style attachment to the taps so they could attempt to have a shower, but it wasn't long enough to be any use. Angelica hardly used the bathroom at home any more. She sneaked into the en suites at work instead, during her break, checking on the rota which ones were waiting to be cleaned. She loved the powerful stream of water from the showers, the blistering heat, the herbaceous rosemary scent of the complimentary shower gel, the thick white towels . . .

How wonderful it would be to live that life all the time. Because there were people who did, she knew that. Not everyone was trapped. Although at least the trap she was in wasn't of her own making. She thought of her friends, her naïve, foolish friends, who'd painted themselves into a corner by using the baby meal ticket. She scoffed at their supposed wiliness. How could saddling yourself with a kid work to your advantage? She'd seen the scuzzy flats they'd

been given; knew the meagre amounts they were handed to live on. That was no future.

Of course, technically speaking, she was free to walk away any time she liked. But how could she? It simply wasn't in her to be that selfish. A trait she hadn't inherited from her mother.

She looked at herself in the medicine cabinet that hung over the sink. Milk-white skin, eyes that made up for their smallness by being a brilliant blue, fine, silky black hair that hung to her shoulders with a blunt fringe, a wide mouth with a full bottom lip. She looked nothing special without make-up, which was useful for the day job, because she could blend into the background. But come the night, with black eyeliner and false eyelashes and red, red lipstick, Angelica could paint on a face that would never be forgotten. It was just a shame there was no one to appreciate it.

Well, except one person, and he was definitely out of bounds. So she didn't let herself dwell on him any longer than was necessary.

She grabbed her clothes and skittered down the stairs into the kitchen on long legs. She pulled the ironing board out from its resting place between the fridge and the wall, erecting it with a clatter and total disregard for the fact that Jeff was listening intently to the traffic report on the radio. He was a courier, so it was important for him to find out if the bank holiday jams had already begun.

'Pour us a cup of tea, Jeff,' she wheedled, plugging in the iron and twirling the dial up high. She wasn't going to tell him about the rubbish. If she admitted to noticing it, she would feel obliged to pick it all up, and then she would be late for work. Her mother would find out soon enough, when she deigned to drag herself out of bed. She could have

the argument. Trudy didn't have anything else to do, after all.

Jeff reached out an arm without blinking and poured the dark-brown dregs from a stainless-steel teapot into a mug, sloshed in milk from the carton, then held it out to her obligingly.

'Ta.' Angelica held the mug to her mouth, then grimaced as she realised the tea was lukewarm. 'Yuck – it's disgusting.'

'You know where the kettle is,' riposted Jeff.

She plonked the mug down on the side as the steam came out of the iron in an angry hiss.

'Go on. Make me a fresh one. You know you want to.'

He rolled his eyes and got up, lumbering over to the kettle. It turned her stomach just to look at him, his belly bulging under the Jack Daniel's T-shirt optimistically tucked into jeans and cinched with a belt displaying a hefty gilt eagle. Add to this his wispy grey ponytail and the goatee beard . . . Angelica shuddered, wondering just what it was that had attracted her mother to him.

Actually, she knew. It was because Jeff was kind. Plug-ugly and boring to the max, but a kind-hearted soul. He couldn't do enough for her mother – well, except actually get the rubbish into the bin – and for that Angelica was grateful, because it took the pressure off her. Anyway, Jeff might look like a skank and have dodgy dress sense, but he was a million times better than her mother's last boyfriend.

Angelica had never seen why she should have to cover up her modesty while she ironed. Unfortunately Jeff's predecessor had taken advantage of the fact that she was only wearing her underwear to have an experimental grope, sliding his fingers into her knickers. Angelica had grabbed

his wrist, slammed his hand down on the ironing board and shoved the iron on his palm. There was a hiss of burning flesh, followed by a roar of pain and rage. It had taken the bloke a few seconds to realise what had happened.

‘You mad cow! I’ll call the bloody police on you. That’s assault, that is. Jesus!’ He had run to the sink and turned on the cold tap. ‘I’ll sue you into the middle of next week.’

Angelica had watched him calmly.

‘I think you’ll find it was self-defence,’ she replied.

Trudy had come down to find out what the rumpus was all about.

‘You’ll have to take me to the hospital!’ He held out his injury for inspection. ‘She put the iron on my bloody hand.’

‘The hand you had in my knickers,’ Angelica pointed out fairly. ‘And stop moaning. It wasn’t that hot; it was only on polyester.’ It had been before she worked at the Townhouse, when she was serving at the pasty shop.

‘You shouldn’t be ironing in your underwear!’ shouted her mother.

‘It’s my house too. I’ll iron naked if I want,’ Angelica shouted back.

The bloke had never been seen again, and Angelica’s mother had sulked for weeks. Until she’d found Jeff at the country-and-western night she went to at the local pub, and dragged him home. He’d been part of the fixtures and fittings ever since. He brought a little bit of stability to the household, for when Trudy had a man she was definitely calmer, which made things easier to handle.

Angelica stuck the iron back in its holder with a crash.

‘Put it away for me, would you?’ she asked as she left the room, knowing full well that he would.

‘Oi – what about your tea?’ he demanded, indignant.

‘Haven’t got time . . .’

She raced up the stairs, checking her watch.

She’d given Dill as long in bed as she could, but if she didn’t get him up now, they would be late. She pushed open his bedroom door, her eyes seeking out the shape of his little body under the SpongeBob duvet, and stepped inside, avoiding the detritus on the floor – empty DVD cases, football cards, plastic mutants with hard edges that killed your feet if you stepped on them by accident.

He was still out for the count, his headphones clamped to his ears. She could hear the tinny treble of Jessie J on a loop. He always went to sleep with his iPod on. Angelica worried that it meant his brain never rested properly. She had read somewhere that children should sleep with the light off, and no stimulation. The health visitor had told her not to worry. Angelica didn’t have a great deal of faith in the health visitor, however. All she seemed to want was a quiet life, just like Angelica’s mother. Neither of them really had Dill’s best interests at heart.

‘Hey. Sleepyhead.’

She prodded him through the marshmallow of the duvet. His eyes opened. She pulled the headphones off him gently.

‘Don’t wanna get up,’ he groaned, stretching out, the top of his pyjamas riding up to expose his belly. At eight, he still had the plump cheeks and chubby fingers of a toddler. Her little brother. Well, half-brother – none of Angelica’s siblings shared a father – but he never failed to make her heart squeeze.

‘Come on. You’ve got half an hour. Get dressed and do your teeth.’

If it was up to their mother, Dill would still be in bed for another two hours. Trudy couldn’t see how it mattered if he

was late for school, given that he was never going to learn much anyway. What difference did a couple of hours here and there make? But Angelica believed in routine. Routine was important to Dill, whether he or anyone else liked it or not.

He rolled over, putting his arms over his head in protest. She bent down to tickle him, and he flailed around, eventually rolling off the bed in capitulation and landing with a plop at her feet, grinning up at her in delight.

Her heart melted, as it always did. She loved him. Which was lucky, because he needed her. If she ever left, she didn't hold out much hope for his future. Trudy wouldn't fight his corner; fight for him to have a place at the local school, fight for him to be treated like a normal kid. As Down's syndrome went, he wasn't severe. But he needed continuity, stability, nurturing, discipline. None of which Trudy was capable of. Her haphazard parenting style, her volatility and her periods of black gloom were the last thing Dill needed. Not that Trudy didn't love her son – of course she did – but she didn't seem able to make the sacrifices needed to ensure he thrived as best he could.

Angelica tried to give him what he needed. She was as good as a mother to him. She didn't resent it. How could she? Dill was the card she had been dealt, and she was never going to leave him as long as he needed her. And it wasn't *that* tough. She could work when she wanted; go out when she wanted, because the buck didn't stop with her. The others did their bit – even her two half-sisters, Kimberley and Faye. And Jeff. But Angelica was Dill's safety net. She noticed things before anyone else, and acted on them. Her mother was inclined to let things drift. Of course Dill would survive if he was left in Trudy's care, but Angelica

wanted him to do more than survive. She wanted him to get everything he could out of life. She took him swimming and horse riding. She read to him; helped him with his homework. Took him to football practice. Gave him as much stimulation as time and money would allow.

He was her little mate.

Half an hour later, the pair of them walked out of the front door: Dill with his hair carefully gelled as he liked it, in his green school uniform, his Doctor Who rucksack on his back, and Angelica, her linen suit pristine and her hair immaculate. She walked him to the school gate and kissed him goodbye with the other mothers, while their own mother slept on in bed, oblivious.

It was the same every day.

Guests invariably gasped with delight when they walked into the Townhouse. A square five-storey building overlooking Pennfleet harbour, it had once been the custom house. It had thick stone walls and large windows that filled it with a translucent light. Inside the feel was opulent, steering firmly away from maritime jollity – Pennfleet was already well served with nautical stripes. The walls were covered in pale-green wallpaper embossed with birds in golden cages. A Murano chandelier hung over the reception desk, throwing a rosy glow on to the chalkboard that bore the day's weather forecast and tide times; below that hung the keys to the eight rooms, attached to outsize leather fobs, impossible to lose. A small seating area housed a chaise longue covered in burnt-orange velvet and two distressed-leather club chairs; on a round table in the middle of the hall was a glass-lined crate filled with moss and stuffed with blowsy, fat ranunculus. The air smelled delicious: fresh

coffee mingled with the scent from a large three-wick candle that burned cinnamon, ginger and cardamom.

The overall effect was both calming and stimulating. Guests felt as if they were walking into a little haven that was unique and special. Claire hated the descriptions 'quirky' and 'classic with a twist' – she found both overused – but she supposed the hotel was both, though she never once sacrificed style for eccentricity. Everything was just as it should be.

She ran her eye down the list of guests for the coming weekend. The three rooms on the third floor had been booked by a stag party. Two blokes in each. Normally Claire balked at stag events, but the best man, Gus Andrews, had reassured her. 'We're coming down for some sailing. We just want a good dinner and some nice wine,' he told her. 'We won't leave the groom trussed up naked in reception, I promise you.' He sounded civilised and was happy to leave a hefty deposit, so Claire accepted the booking, crossing her fingers that he was true to his word.

Two of the rooms on the next floor were interconnected, and could be reserved for families with 'well-behaved children over ten'. These interconnecting rooms had been booked by a Mr Colin Turner, who wanted a double in one room and twin beds in the other – for his 'friend' and her daughter. Claire was immediately intrigued. 'Friend' always had connotations.

The smallest room, the one they fondly referred to on their website as 'the Broom Cupboard', had been booked by a Miss Laura Starling. And finally, the grand suite on the first floor, with its drawing room and balcony overlooking the harbour, was reserved for their most important guests,

Mr Trevor Parfitt and his wife Monique. Claire's stomach churned slightly at the thought of their arrival.

Trevor and Monique always had the grand suite, because they had a twenty per cent stake in the Townhouse. Trevor had long been a fan of Luca, when he had been a chef in London. When he'd heard that Claire and Luca were planning to buy a hotel of their own, he had jumped at the chance to invest. The Parfitts visited regularly, coming down for long weekends to enjoy the fruits of their investment, and had even bought a boat – a shiny white gin palace that stuck out like a sore thumb in Pennfleet harbour.

And now, it turned out, the pair of them had had a brainwave. They wanted to open a hotel in London, and for Claire and Luca to go in with them. They had mooted the idea at their informal AGM three weeks ago. Trevor had pitched it as 'The Townhouse in the City', and Claire had felt a prickle of irritation. The Townhouse name had been her idea. Now Trevor seemed keen to roll it out as a brand, and Claire couldn't help feeling that he had somehow hijacked her concept. She told herself that that was how he had become successful, which he undoubtedly was. Not many people had spare cash to invest in a new hotel these days.

Trevor was also keen for Monique to have as much input as possible, especially on the 'dekkor' front. Claire didn't need to see their house to know that Monique would go for a Jackie-Collins-meets-Versace-in-*Hello!*-magazine look, all marble and leopardskin and glitz, which wasn't Claire's style at all.

When she expressed her fears afterwards to Luca, he just laughed. 'You can handle her. Let her choose a bit of curtain fabric and some cushions.'

'She'll want more input than that!'

‘Then make her work really hard. Run her ragged trotting round London for samples. She’ll soon get bored.’

Claire looked doubtful. Monique was the sort of person who would get the bit firmly between her teeth and never let go.

‘Just smile sweetly and pay lip service. Then we’ll take the money and run. I promise you, Trevor will just let us get on with it. It’s a vanity project.’

Claire wasn’t convinced of the value of being involved in a vanity project, but Luca persisted.

‘Trevor won’t want it to fail. And Monique will get bored eventually. Then one day we’ll be able to buy them out. Trust me, Claire.’

Claire couldn’t help wondering if this was what she and Luca really wanted. Yes, Luca’s ultimate dream was to have his own place in London, but they were already overstretched. He seemed to think they could just leave The Townhouse by the Sea to fend for itself, in the capable hands of whoever they chose to delegate to. Claire knew it was not as simple as that. Who, for example, would cook? People came to eat Luca’s food; it was his light touch and inspirational juggling of flavours they wanted to experience. They didn’t want a substitute.

She decided she wasn’t going to worry about it for the time being. There was a long way to go before the dream became a reality. Instead, she printed out the registration forms for the weekend’s guests, and was just noting any special requests on a notepad when the front door opened and Angelica came in.

Angelica was Claire’s lifeline. When she had first started, as a part-time chambermaid, Claire had recognised something in her, a hunger to learn, a quickness that she was

convinced she could harness. When she heard Angelica was leaving school, she offered to train her up as the hotel receptionist. Angelica had been thrilled – she'd been on the verge of taking a job at a travel agent in Bodmin. Claire gave her two hundred pounds to go and have her pink-streaked hair dyed back to a normal colour, and to buy some respectable clothes. And she had to take her tongue ring out. Pink streaks and body piercings were acceptable in a chambermaid, but not front of house.

Angelica had reappeared the next Monday with a dark chestnut bob, dressed in a black linen skirt (it was a little on the short side, but Claire had to concede that probably wouldn't do any harm), a fitted white blouse (again, her black bra was clearly visible underneath, but the same conclusion applied), a boxy linen jacket and a pair of ballet flats. And now, three years later, she was almost – *almost* – fit to be left in charge of the hotel. She still had a tendency to be a little sharp-tongued, and Claire was working on rubbing off these rough edges before letting her loose, but she was proud of her protégée.

She was also very protective of her. She knew that all was not as it should be chez Angelica, that she took her responsibility to her little brother very seriously and that her mother Trudy was a bit of a loose cannon. Claire never pried, but she always noticed when Angelica was feeling the strain, and lent her as much support as she could. In the meantime, it gave her a warm glow to think that she'd provided an opportunity for a local girl, rather than some smugly ambitious trainee fresh from a university hotel-management course. And in a strange sort of way they had become quite close, despite the age gap. In quiet moments at the hotel they would gossip and chat and share confidences. And once

or twice, in the depths of winter when the hotel had been almost empty, they had gone off to the big shopping centre in Bristol, like two naughty schoolgirls doing a bunk from double maths, coming back laden with shoeboxes and make-up samples and the sort of dresses they would never wear in Pennfleet, but that every girl needed in her wardrobe.

In return, Angelica never abused Claire's generosity or openness. During working hours they were a team, and they both knew better than to blur the distinction between employer and employee. Becoming too close to someone who worked for you could be the kiss of death, Claire knew. She thought she'd managed to get the balance right.

'Hey,' she said. 'I hope you're ready for the weekend. It's going to be a long one.'

'The car park's already filling up,' Angelica told her. She picked up the guest list and made a face. 'Mr and Mrs Parfitt? Again? They were only down two weeks ago.'

'Well, we have to be extra specially nice to them this weekend.'

'We always are,' protested Angelica. 'I go out of my way not to slap his face when he pats my bottom.'

Claire laughed. It was true: Trevor Parfitt was of the old school, the type who really didn't think bottom-patting was offensive. He called his wife 'babe' without a hint of irony.

'Trevor's not going to change.'

'No,' said Angelica. 'But why do we need to be *extra* nice? The Parfitts always get treated like royalty when they come here.'

Claire hesitated. They hadn't told anyone about the possibility of a new hotel yet – rumours like that always unsettled staff – but if the deal did come off, she was going

to be relying on Angelica more than ever. She decided to take her into her confidence.

‘This is strictly between you and me,’ she said, ‘but Trevor and Monique might want us to open a hotel in London.’

Angelica’s face clouded.

‘You won’t be leaving, will you?’ she asked. ‘Because I won’t work here without you. You know that, don’t you?’

‘I didn’t,’ replied Claire lightly. ‘But you don’t need me.’

‘I’m not working for anyone else.’

‘I’m touched by your loyalty.’ Claire smiled. ‘Don’t worry, I’m not leaving yet. And anyway, it might be good for you. We’d need someone to hold the fort here if it does go ahead.’

Angelica said nothing. Claire rather wished she hadn’t mentioned the London hotel, but she didn’t like secrets. In her experience, they were bad news. From the corner of her eye she saw the fisherman walk through to the dining room en route to the kitchen with today’s catch – she’d better check it over and sign for it.

She picked up the phone and handed it to Angelica.

‘Can you call Buddleia? We need a large bouquet for the Parfitts’ room and a replacement for the flowers on the front table, as well as the usual.’ Angelica nodded and took the receiver from her. ‘And if you can bear it, take Luca a coffee and tell him to get up. We need all hands on deck this morning.’

Claire headed for the kitchen. She needed some super-strength coffee herself, and a bowl of their hand-made granola mixed with Greek yoghurt and berries. It was going to be a long day.

*

Angelica watched Claire go, a horrible sinking feeling in her stomach. She felt unsettled. A hotel in London? What was that going to mean?

Change, definitely. Angelica didn't like change. She wanted things to stay the same, for ever.

Except, of course, for the things she wanted to be different. But life didn't work like that. She knew that perfectly well. She took a deep breath, and told herself that nothing was definite. She didn't need to panic yet. Anything could happen. She dialled the number of the florist, running her eye down the list of other requests Claire had written out, making a mental note of the things that needed doing first. Angelica was nothing if not well trained.