

Christmas
at the
Beach Hut

Also by Veronica Henry

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Christmas at the Beach Hut

Veronica Henry



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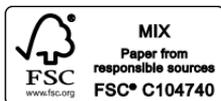
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*For Claire McLeish, who always makes sure my
stocking is full – Merry Christmas, my friend!*

Pepperpot Cottage
Astley-in-Arden

Dear Everyone,

I do hope you aren't one of those people who hates Round Robins. As someone who gets excited about Christmas almost as soon as the clocks go back, I love hearing what other people are up to, but if you don't then please feel free to bung the Kingham family update in the bin! No boasting, I promise. We haven't been to the Caribbean or bought a second home in Cornwall or a mid-life crisis E-Type Jag...

Simon is busier than ever and spends a lot of time in London as that's where most of his building projects are – luckily the high-speed train from Birmingham means he doesn't have to stay over too often. Becoming a partner at the beginning of the year has meant a lot more responsibility for him, as the MD, Colin, is taking a bit of a back seat but he's enjoying the challenge.

The twins are studying hard for their mock A levels – or so they assure me! There is no more thankless task than persuading teenagers to revise. Hattie was Snow White in the skating club's Christmas production and Luke's finger-boarding Instagram account has more than 20k followers. No, I don't understand it either but at least it's safer than actual skateboarding!! Photos below! I can't bear to think of the two of them heading off to uni next September. So please come and stay in our empty nest come autumn. Our little bit of Warwickshire has lots of gastropubs so we can offer you bracing walks and Sunday lunch by a roaring log fire. Bookings open!

I've just taken voluntary redundancy from Craven Court after nearly twenty-five years of organising events and

weddings for them. The hotel has been bought out by a big group run by a dynamic young team who all look as if they are still at school! They are making lots of changes so it seemed the perfect time for me to have a change too. I finish work three days before Christmas – it will be a whirl getting everything ready but I can't wait to have a proper break for the first time in years and make this our best Christmas ever at Pepperpot Cottage!

With love for a Merry Christmas and a wonderful New Year,

Lizzy, Simon, Hattie and Luke xxxxx

THREE DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

I

‘What are you doing?’

Harley stood on the landing, fists clenched. He could see the man looking around his room, like a landlord eager to spot something wrong so he could hold on to the deposit. He was checking out the vintage album posters, the acoustic guitar leaned against the wall, his *Star Wars* advent calendar, hung up by the bed.

The man turned and smiled, teeth white in his tanned face, the collar of his stonewashed rugby shirt turned up, his hair playboy-long: a Peter Pan look that didn’t fool Harley.

‘Just checking everything’s in order.’

Harley could see that the top drawer was open on his chest of drawers, and his Christmas cards had been knocked over.

‘You’ve been moving my stuff.’

Tony gave a little shrug. ‘I’m just making sure . . .’

‘Making sure what?’

‘I don’t want any funny business.’ He gave a little nod, as if reassuring himself that this invasion of Harley’s privacy was totally reasonable.

Harley felt a rush of heat inside him; a surge of adrenaline that had nowhere to go.

His room was on the top floor of the house, what would have been the maid's room when this was the holiday villa for a wealthy Victorian merchant. The landing was filled with light from a big round window that looked down to the harbour. He'd loved that view when they'd first moved here; loved watching the boats come in and the fishermen land their catch.

He knew what Tony meant by funny business. Drugs. It was the kind of assumption people like Tony made about people like Harley. Just because his dad was black. And in prison.

'Leave my things alone.'

Tony walked out of the room and stood in front of him. Harley was conscious that the man was a few inches taller and a good deal broader and heavier – twelve stone to Harley's ten. But Harley was fighting fit – he trained at the boxing club every day, and ran four times a week rain or shine.

Tony's eyes were wintry – as cold as the icy sea outside.

'This is my house,' he said, his voice dripping with menace. 'If you don't like it, you can go and live with your dad.' Then his face broke into a smirk. 'Oh, wait . . . You can't, can you? Not where he is.'

He started to chuckle.

Harley stepped forward. 'Say that again.'

Tony's eyes slid sideways as if he was looking for back-up. He realised that the staircase was right behind him. Suddenly he didn't seem so confident.

'I'm just having a laugh,' he said. 'Can't you take a joke?'

He was nervous. Harley could tell that by his body language. He was so close he could smell his breath.

Chocolate. He'd been eating chocolate.

'Have you been eating my advent calendar?'

Tony blinked. 'Only today. Number twenty-two.'

'I hadn't opened it yet!'

Tony gave a shrug. 'You'll have to wait for tomorrow.'

'My dad sent me that.' Harley stared at him levelly, daring him to say something.

He could see Tony rooting about for a suitable riposte, trying on a few for size, then rejecting them. He wasn't as brave as he made out. In the end, he gave a weak smile and a jerk of his head. 'Out the way, there's a good lad.'

Harley didn't move. 'Don't go in my room again.'

For a moment, there was silence. Harley could hear a thrumming in his ears as his heart whooshed blood around his body. The pressure was so intense he felt sure he might explode.

Then Tony lifted a hand and prodded Harley in the chest with his forefinger. 'It's not *your* room,' he said, accentuating each word with a tap. 'You keep forgetting that bit. This is *my* house. If I want to kick you out, I will.'

With each tap Harley felt the pressure rise even more. He had always heard about red mist. And he was surprised, when it came down, that it wasn't a jolly Christmassy red, but a deep, dark, dangerous red the colour of blood.

He put his hands up and grabbed Tony's shirt, giving him a sharp shake, like a dog with a rat.

'Easy, boy.' Tony stepped back until he was right on the top stair.

It would only take one push. No one knew Harley was at home, so they wouldn't suspect him. It would look like an accident. Poor old Tony Brice, falling down his own stairs. And just before Christmas too.

Mick the Post strode down the high street, pulling his trolley behind him, dressed in shorts and a fleece because he always wore shorts, whatever the weather. ‘*Oooh, you make me feel cold just looking at you . . .*’ people would say, but he hated being trussed up. He liked the zingy feel of the air on his skin. And it wasn’t even that chilly. Just . . . nicely crisp. It had to get well into the minuses before he put proper trousers on.

He felt much more purpose at this time of year. Nowadays, most people’s post was whittled down to speeding fines and parking tickets and unsolicited bumph. Their faces didn’t light up when they saw the postman coming any more. But Christmas was different. And his trolley was bulging, because this little town was full of the kind of people who still sent Christmas cards.

Astley-in-Arden was far enough out of Birmingham to have its own identity: small enough for you to feel a part of it, yet big enough to have a selection of shops and restaurants that meant you didn’t have to go too far afield if you didn’t want to. There was a wide high street lined with a mix of mellow red-brick Georgian townhouses and black-and-white timber cottages. Nestled amongst the history were all the conveniences of modern life:

dry-cleaners and wine shops and a decent Indian take-away. Astley-in-Arden was as perfect as you could get.

It did Christmas well, too. The oak trees that lined the pavements had strings of lights woven into their bare branches: tiny pinpricks of silver that lit up the streets. The shops went all out to look festive, their windows hung with tinsel and baubles. There was a towering Christmas tree in the marketplace and pupils from the local school sang carols there on Saturday afternoons to raise money for charity, their golden voices soaring skywards.

All Astley needed, thought Mick, was a sprinkling of snow to make it the perfect Christmas-card scene. He looked up into the sky with an experienced eye, but there was no sign of snowfall, just a few gentle clouds meandering about with no sense of the urgency everyone else seemed to have. Everyone had gone up a gear today. With only three days left before everything shut down for the silly season, time was running out.

Mick lowered his pace as the shopfronts dwindled and the houses began, his deliveries slowed up by greetings and thanks from homeowners rushing to the door to see what he had brought, wondering if the presents they had ordered online would arrive in time. If not, there would have to be a last-minute mercy dash into the larger town of Leadenbury, nearby, or Birmingham itself. He could sense their panic. Every year, people left things to the last minute. They would never change.

Eventually he drew to a halt outside Pepperpot Cottage. At the far end of the high street, heading out on the road to Stratford-on-Avon, it was one room wide and three storeys high with a pointy thatched roof, giving it

the appearance of a Georgian silver pepperpot that must have been the inspiration for its name.

He was burrowing about in his trolley for the sheaf of cards addressed to the Kinghams when the front door popped open and there stood Lizzy Kingham, in fleecy pyjamas covered in reindeer, a pair of flashing antlers perched in her curls along with a dollop of cake mix and a dusting of flour.

The front door opened straight into the living room, and behind her a staircase led upstairs. Mick glimpsed wonky walls and sloping floors and inglenook fireplaces: he had never been inside Pepperpot Cottage but he longed to, for it was the kind of house that enticed you in, always full of laughter and music and cooking smells and a warm glow. Right now, the scent of spicy chocolate and the ubiquitous sound of Slade on the radio drifted out of the kitchen.

‘Mick!’ Lizzy said. ‘I’ve caught you at last. I’ve usually gone before you get here. But today is my first day of freedom. I finished work last night. Hurrah!’ She brandished a bottle of red wine with a gold ribbon wrapped round it. ‘This is for you. Simon says it’s a good one.’

‘You didn’t need to worry,’ said Mick, but he took it gratefully. The days of tipping postmen had long gone, but a few of his regulars gave him thoughtful gifts and he preferred them to hard cash. ‘Oooh – Châteauneuf-du-Pape. I shall enjoy that. Thank you.’

‘Well, a very merry Christmas to you,’ said Lizzy, and took the cards from him. She began leafing through, stopping at one with a little frown, then she looked up, realising she was being rude.

‘Something smells good,’ offered Mick.

‘Mincemeat brownies. You’re ten minutes too early.’ Lizzy made a face. ‘I’ve got three days to get everything sorted. I’m never going to do it.’

‘You will,’ said Mick. ‘Everyone makes far too much fuss.’

‘But I want it to be perfect.’ Lizzy looked anxious. ‘I haven’t even got my tree up yet. Can you imagine?’

Mick chuckled. ‘The sky won’t fall in because your tree’s not up.’

She stared at him in mock indignation. ‘It’s not Christmas till the tree’s up!’

‘It’ll be all right,’ said Mick. ‘Everything will happen in good time.’

Lizzy nodded. ‘Let’s hope so.’

She smiled and her blue eyes twinkled at him, but Mick thought she looked tired – and something in that sheaf of letters was bothering her. He could tell because she kept glancing down.

‘Good luck with it all, then,’ he said, grabbing the trolley handle.

‘Thanks, Mick,’ she said, raising a hand, then she disappeared back inside Pepperpot Cottage, shutting out the mouth-watering smells and a rousing chorus of Merry Christmas Everybody.

Lizzy scurried back into the kitchen and sat down at the table. She was surrounded by all the detritus of baking – empty mixing bowls and wooden spoons – and there was flour everywhere. She ignored the mess as she sifted through the cards until she found the slim white envelope with the crest she had spotted earlier: Missingham Manor Hotel. Her heart was thumping as she opened it. Surely it was good news? They wouldn't waste a stamp otherwise, would they? Most prospective employers just sent an email, if that – more often than not you were left dangling, working out for yourself that if you hadn't heard after two weeks, you weren't wanted.

She pulled out the letter and unfolded it.

She knew immediately, because there were just two lines. *We thank you . . . unfortunately . . . details on file . . .* She swallowed down her disappointment. She would have been perfect for the job. She ticked all of the boxes.

When she'd taken voluntary redundancy, she had told herself she wouldn't start job-hunting until after the New Year. After all, she'd never had a career break – only six months after the twins were born, which was hardly respite. And Simon had told her not to worry about getting a new job straight away. But she couldn't resist applying

when she saw them come up, and this would have been her dream. Missingham Manor was a fairy-tale hotel in the Cotswolds – yes, it would mean a longer journey to work but once the twins were at uni come September she wouldn't be needed around the house so much. At all, in fact.

Anyway, it didn't matter how far away it was because she didn't even have an interview. She gave herself all the usual platitudes – *they probably promoted someone internally; don't take it personally* – then crumpled up the letter and shoved it in the bin. She turned to the other Christmas cards instead, trying to smile at the greetings and messages, but she could feel herself blinking back tears.

She looked up as a smell of burning curled across the kitchen. She leapt to her feet and opened the oven door: two baking trays of mincemeat brownies, ruined. She pulled them out of the oven and put them on the side, staring at them in dismay. She'd got up early to get ahead with the Christmas baking. She was going to have to start all over again.

The doorbell rang, making her jump. She switched off the oven and ran to answer the door. On the doorstep was Hattie's new best friend, Kiki, who had recently arrived at the twins' school mid-A levels. Lizzy could see why Hattie was drawn to her, with her shaggy russet bob and her fedora hat and her purple suede coat with the fringing. Next to her was another girl in black leather leggings, an outsize mohair jumper and a heavy mane of glossy red hair. At the kerb was a shiny white SUV with blacked-out windows.

'Hi, Mrs Kingham,' said Kiki, fixing Lizzy with her

slightly mad eyes; turquoise with pinprick pupils. Lizzy hoped they were like that naturally – she wasn't sure about Kiki yet. 'Is Hattie ready?'

'Oh shit,' said Lizzy, remembering Hattie was going into Birmingham shopping. 'I was supposed to wake her up. I'm so sorry. Come in, come in. Hattie!' She called up the stairs, then peered outside at the parked car. 'Is your mum waiting? Get her to come in too.'

'I'm Kiki's mum,' smiled the girl with the leather leggings, holding out her hand. 'I'm Meg.'

Lizzy stared at her for a second, then took her hand. 'Oh God, sorry. You look so...'

How could she be Kiki's mother? She looked the same age as the girls. Though on much closer inspection, maybe she was older than she appeared. Just a very few wrinkles at the corner of her eyes; pale skin with a dusting of freckles; very Julianne Moore.

Meg laughed. 'I've always looked the same age. It'll all go horribly wrong one day. I know it will.'

'Shall I go up and get Hattie?' asked Kiki, who'd obviously heard this conversation a million times.

'Sure,' said Lizzy, and Kiki legged it up the stairs. 'Come through to the kitchen,' she said to Meg. 'Would you like a coffee while she gets ready? I'm so sorry. I was supposed to get her up at half eight but I completely forgot.'

'Hey, it's not your responsibility,' said Meg. 'She has an alarm on her phone, right?'

'I suppose so,' said Lizzy. Meg had a point, but Lizzy always felt as if everything was her responsibility; her fault. 'Thanks for taking them into Birmingham. I haven't

got the time. I've got so much to do still. I only finished work last night and I'm so behind . . .'

She led Meg through the living room, keenly aware that it was in a mess, that the decorations weren't up, that the cards weren't on display, then through into the kitchen.

'It's no problem. I need to go in. I have a load of stuff still to get. It's never-ending, isn't it?' Meg looked around the kitchen and its chaos approvingly. 'What an adorable kitchen.'

The kitchen wasn't big, but it was cosy, with its quarry tiled floor, a fireplace lined with shelves and a huge picture window that looked out over the walled garden. The Kinghams ate in here too, at an old pine table with mismatched chairs. There were years and years of clutter jostling for space on the shelves and the walls. It needed a major de-clutter and a deep clean, thought Lizzy – now she was jobless there would be time . . .

'Thanks,' she said, discreetly putting her hand up to remove her antlers and depositing them on the kitchen table, conscious she was still in her pyjamas. 'I have been up for ages, by the way.' She pointed at the smouldering ruins on the side. 'The Great British Burn Off . . .'

Meg wandered over to inspect them. 'Oh, they look fine. Just a little bit singed. Stick a load of icing sugar on them. No one will notice.' She broke off a corner. 'Yum.'

'Coffee?' said Lizzy, and Meg nodded.

'I just want to say,' she said, sliding into one of the chairs, 'I'm so grateful to Hattie for making friends with Kiki. It's been tough for her, moving school in the middle of her A levels, but she had a bit of trouble at St

Margaret's. It's so lovely that they're friends. Hattie's a good influence.'

Lizzy glowed with pride. There was nothing nicer than praise for your children.

'The two of them get on well. She loves coming over to you.'

Hattie was slightly in thrall to Kiki, whose father made pop videos and a *lot* of money.

Meg smiled. 'I'm taking a back seat in the business while she finishes. My husband's away more than ever so I think it's important for me to be around.' She blinked and for a moment there were tears in her eyes. 'I worry that I wasn't there enough when she was younger and it made her go off the rails a bit. I think she's back on track now. She seems to be working hard.' She sighed. 'When does the worry stop?'

'Hey,' said Lizzy, putting a cup of coffee in front of her and sitting down at the table opposite. 'We all do the best we can. We can't hold ourselves responsible for everything.' She patted Meg's hand. 'Isn't that what you just said to me?'

Meg gazed at her. Lizzy wondered what issues she was mulling over in her mind; what her fears and worries were. She recognised the combination of panic and anxiety in Meg's face, for she felt it herself, constantly. The fears for your children only grew bigger as they did, as they became people in their own right and started making decisions for themselves. Not always good ones.

'You're right,' said Meg. 'We're too hard on ourselves. But it's tough. I might only look thirty, but I feel a hundred and eight.' She laughed and lifted her coffee cup. 'Anyway, cheers. Here's to burnt brownies. Who cares?'

I do, thought Lizzy. She'd wanted two trays of perfection, and to be standing in front of this stunning woman looking like a respectable human being, in a house that didn't look as if someone had dropped a bomb.

'Mum!' Hattie burst into the kitchen, Kiki in her wake. 'You were supposed to get me up!'

She looked different lately, thought Lizzy, the glamorous influence of Kiki and Meg apparent in her newly bleached hair sporting a streak of kingfisher blue, her skater's figure perfect for the tight military blazer and minuscule velvet skirt she was wearing. She looked fantastic.

Lizzy felt a pang, recognising that any influence she had over her daughter's sartorial style had finally evaporated. For a moment, she remembered a smocked gingham dress and a pair of red sandals with little brown feet buckled inside.

'Come on, Mum,' said Kiki to Meg, who was finishing her coffee.

Hattie and Kiki were as agitated and keen to go as young racehorses.

Lizzy beckoned Hattie over, rummaging in her handbag, and gave her twenty quid.

'Here's some money for lunch,' she said, sotto voce.

'I'm not sure that will be enough,' Hattie whispered back. Lizzy raised an eyebrow.

'Well, it's all I've got,' she said, fixing her daughter with a meaningful glare.

Hattie hesitated, and Lizzy could see her processing a choice of possible replies. Then she smiled and leaned in to give her mother a kiss. 'Thanks, Mum.'

'Make sure you're back by sixish,' said Lizzy. 'We're doing the tree tonight, remember? As long as it arrives...'

They always decorated the tree together, as a family, but they'd left it very late this year – not for want of Lizzy trying. She'd been badgering Simon for days to get the tree delivered. He had a contact who could get them cheap, but this year's tree still hadn't materialised. Simon had promised it would arrive today. In the meantime, he wouldn't let Lizzy get one from somewhere else.

'He's only charging thirty quid for a six-footer, straight to the door,' he'd told her before he left for work this morning. 'That'll cost you seventy anywhere else.'

'Yes, but it's no use if it doesn't turn up.'

'It will. Today. I absolutely promise.'

'You said that yesterday. And the day before.'

'He's given me his word. It'll be here by lunchtime.'

'Great. We can decorate it tonight. I'll do the usual.'

They always had lasagne, and Lizzy always played the soundtrack from *The Snowman* while they were doing it. For the last few years she'd had to fight for it, as the twins wanted their own music thumping away in the background, but she always won. It was her tradition and she knew they secretly loved it; they teased her when she cried when 'Walking in the Air' came on, because it was so heart-soaringly joyous. The decorating of the tree was Christmas to her, when they all came together and made the house ready.

Lizzy walked Hattie, Kiki and Meg out to the front door and waved them goodbye. As they climbed into the SUV, a flat-bed truck with a huge Christmas tree on the back careered to a halt behind it.

Lizzy gave a wide grin and pointed madly at the van so Hattie could see it, giving her a double thumbs-up. Hattie gave her a discreet thumbs-up back then turned away. To

be fair, no one wanted their pyjama-clad mother waving at them from the doorstep.

‘All right, love? Where’d you want it?’ grinned the Christmas-tree man, clambering out of his cab. ‘I’ve got a peach for you here, the pick of the bunch. Nothing but the best, your husband told me.’

Lizzy clapped her hands in delight. Simon hadn’t let her down.

Christmas was going to be perfect.