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The Holiday Home

Written by Fern Britton

Published by Harper

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THE
HOLIDAY
HOME

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Harper

An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2014

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First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollinsPublishers 2013

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN: 9780007468546

Set in Birka by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Atlantic House 1988

THE HUSK OF A DEAD FLY LAY DRY AND BRITTLE
on the sun-bleached oak windowsill.

The house was silent and empty in the drowsiness of the bright spring morning. If its almost three-hundred-year-old walls harboured any memories of previous occupants, the weddings and wakes, conceptions and christenings that had taken place here, there was no sign. Where rich brocade curtains had once hung from the tall windows, there clung trailing cobwebs. The days when handsome young men in tight breeches and high-collared frock coats had wooed maidens in muslin dresses were a thing of the past. Maybe the rustle of petticoats along the top landing could still be heard, but only by the tattered moths. In the musty bedrooms, patches of insidious damp crept ever outward, their spread unobserved and unchecked. In the cellars, the dark, dank, seaweed-scented stone walls were covered in a glistening silvery scrawl, marking the passage of slugs and snails. The worn steps, hewn out of the rocky floor, descended into darkness and the sound of the waves lapping against the walls of a natural cave beneath the house. On moonless nights, two hundred years ago, smugglers would time their arrival for high tide, steering their vessels through the opening in the rocks on the beach where the waves

surged in, on into the torchlit cavern where their cargo of contraband brandy, tobacco and lace would be unloaded, away from the prying eyes of the revenue men. Only the odd holidaymaker ventured into the cave nowadays, but a rockfall twenty metres from the beach entrance prevented them from reaching the forgotten cave. The sea, however, continued as it always had done, ebbing and flowing into the recesses below Atlantic House.

In the old days, the gentleman of the house would welcome his gang of smugglers and lead them up the stone steps into an innocent-looking outhouse. A fortified wooden door opened into the garden. To the left was the back door of the house, now stiff with salt and age, which led into the kitchen. In front of the old hearth and chimney, still blackened by the fires of countless cooks, smugglers would have their wounds attended to by the lady of the house. And if the revenue men whose guns had caused the wounds came knocking, the fugitive would stay hidden in the cool of the pantry while the gentleman and his lady entertained them.

Today the ancient range, once the beating heart of the house, was cold, its doors seized with rust and its hot plates covered in soot falls.

Out in the garden, wild with broom, tamarisk, escallonia and fuchsia, the lawn bore no resemblance to the croquet pitch it had been between the two world wars; these days it was a Cornish meadow giving on to a buckthorn and gorse hedge. The weathered wooden gate, which had once banged so gaily on its sprung hinge with the constant traffic of beach-bound children, now drooped sadly.

As he placed the heavy key in the lock, estate agent Trevor Castle took in the commanding elevated position overlooking the much-sought-after Treviscum Beach. The

key refused to move. Trevor leaned against the studded oak front door, gave the key a twist, and tried again. Still nothing. Bending down, he laid his clipboard, camera and retractable tape measure on the worn flagstones. Using both hands now, he managed to get the reluctant key to turn. As he pushed open the heavy door, a horrible squeal of protest from the unoiled hinges gave him a little fright. He steadied himself and carried on pushing. Something was blocking the door. When he had created a big enough gap to squeeze his head through, he paused for a moment, bracing himself for the prospect of a rotting corpse on the other side of the door. To his relief, when his eyes adjusted to the darkness he made out a pile of faded circulars and junk mail wedged against it. Chuckling at his stupidity, Trevor bent his full weight against the door and heaved until the opening was wide enough for him to step into the house. He stooped to clear the blockage and then returned to the porch to collect his estate-agent tackle.

With the door now open wide, the sun poured in, lighting up the impressive oak-panelled hall and spilling into the open doorway of the grand drawing room ahead with its breathtaking view down to the ocean.

‘Wow. Hello, House,’ Trevor said out loud. He stepped into the hall, stirring aged dust motes. He didn’t feel any gust of wind, but the front door banged shut so loudly behind him, he gave an involuntary jump and a yelp of fright. Hand resting on his pounding heart, he exhaled with relief.

‘Steady on, Trev, buddy. Only the wind.’

This was his first solo trip since joining Trish Hawkes & Daughter Property Agents. After weeks of trailing around after Trish, she had finally deemed him ready

to go out and measure and photograph a house by himself.

‘Atlantic House will be a good one to start you off,’ she’d announced, reaching round to the key cabinet and unhooking a large, obviously antique key. ‘Empty. No bloody occupying owner to interfere.’

‘Has it been vacant long?’ he’d asked.

Trish had smiled, but there had been an uncharacteristic reticence about her as she’d replied: ‘Erm, about ten years. I think.’

‘Ten years! But it says here it’s a sea-front location, with its own private cliff path to the beach. Place like that shouldn’t stay empty ten minutes.’

‘Oh, erm, there was a bit of sadness in the family. Child had an accident or something. Anyway, the surviving daughter has just inherited and wants to get rid.’

‘Okey-dokey.’ Trev had been full of confidence as he had collected the heavy key from Trish’s hand. ‘Let’s make money.’

He’d sauntered out of the office, conscious of Trish’s eyes following him as he made his way to the car park. He reckoned he created a favourable impression, smartly dressed in a grey suit with matching grey shoes, his hair carefully gelled and coiffed, aftershave strong but not unpleasantly so. Little did he know that Trish considered him the epitome of an eighties wide boy, complete with aspirations of an XR3i Ford Escort Cabriolet and a fortnight in Magaluf (or Shagaluf, as she’d overheard him say when she walked in as he was on the phone to one of his mates). But the frown wrinkling her brow as he disappeared round the corner of Treway harbour had not been prompted by any doubt about his abilities. It was a pang of guilt that had Trish asking herself whether she’d done

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the right thing in sending him out to Atlantic House. But then, he was a strapping lad of twenty-three; he'd be fine . . . wouldn't he? Rather him than her.

*

Having decided to start at the top of the house and work his way down, Trevor strode across the hallway. His footsteps sounded heavy on the bare wooden treads as he climbed the wide staircase. On the landing he stopped and counted eight doors, all closed.

The door to his left opened into a good-sized bedroom with a view over the driveway and lane. He measured up, took a couple of photos and jotted down a brief description to be written up in more flowery prose later. He carried on to the next room. A huge lavatory with a cracked wooden square of a seat and a chain-handled flush. The iron cistern above had been painted in many layers of cream paint, but he could just make out the maker's name and a date: 1934. Next door was a bathroom with an enormous, deep bath in the corner. Brown stains marred the porcelain under the bulbous antique taps, but when he turned one on there was no water.

The adjacent door led to a bedroom at the side of the house with a pretty sea view. The middle door, bang opposite the stairs, opened on to a magnificent master bedroom with French windows leading out to a balcony offering a stunning view of Treviscum Beach and the Atlantic Ocean beyond. The key was still in the lock and turned reasonably easily. Trevor opened the door to the balcony and stepped out into the light sea breeze. Now this was more like it. He tested the hand rail. The wood seemed solid enough, apart from a few splinters pricking

his palms. Holding on in order to steady himself, he bounced lightly on the wooden floor. It bounced back. This house was going to be a money pit, but it would surely be worth it.

Trevor stood basking in the breeze for a moment, fantasising that the house was his. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the warm fresh air. Opening his eyes, he leaned over the balcony to take a look at the garden and terrace below. Suddenly the wood beneath his hand gave way, tipping him into empty space. As he lunged forward his scrabbling hand somehow managed to grasp one of the supporting uprights. There was a clank from below as the broken rail hit the flagstone terrace.

‘Bloody Nora!’ Beads of sweat broke out on his tanned forehead. Trevor cleared the floorboards of the balcony and made it back to the safety of the master bedroom in a single stride, shutting the balcony door behind him. Relieved that no one had seen his brush with death, yet at the same time shuddering at the thought of how long it would have taken for anyone to come to his aid, he stood with his back against the window, waiting for his breathing to return to normal. ‘Get a grip, Trev,’ he told himself.

After carefully relocking the door he set about measuring the room, followed by a further three bedrooms, all with either a sea view, a garden view, or a view of the drive. When that was done he returned to the ground floor.

Even in its dilapidated state, the drawing room was impressive with its high ceiling and generous window seats either side of French windows opening on to the terrace. Looking out, Trevor saw the broken piece of handrail lying innocently on the stone. Feeling a frisson of fear, he

immediately turned his back on it, trying to put it out of his mind.

After measuring the drawing room he turned his attention to the study, followed by a charming morning room with an inglenook fireplace, and an intimate dining room with a plaster frieze of grapes around the corniced ceiling.

At the far end of the kitchen, which surely hadn't been updated since Queen Victoria's coronation, a tongue-and-groove door with a wrought-iron latch stood ajar. He went to it and saw it led to an old pantry or larder with original worktops made of slabs of marble. This, he imagined, was where butter, milk and meat would have been stored in hot weather. Again he set to work with his notebook and measuring tape, talking to himself as he recorded the details.

When he finished measuring and checked his watch, he was surprised to discover that almost three hours had passed since he had left the office. And he still had the garden to do.

Locking up the front door and pocketing the key, Trevor fought his way through the thicket of dead grass and brambles, round to the sea-facing side of the house. How wonderful it looked from this angle, with the setting sun reflected in the windows, making the house glow as if it were illuminated from within and full of life.

Never in his brief career had Trevor been asked to measure a garden of this size. His puny tape measure was clearly inadequate for the task, so he decided instead to stride round the perimeter, counting each step as a metre.

He hadn't gone far before he lost count, the number falling from his memory as soon as he saw the old fortified wooden door in the side of the house. Natural curiosity and the desire to faithfully record every room led him to

descend the four stone steps to the door. Half hoping to find it locked, he was surprised when it opened easily, releasing an aroma of sea damp and age that seemed to envelop him. The interior was pitch-dark and he could hear the distant sound of the sea coming up from below. In the light of the setting sun he struggled to make out the odd-shaped room, which seemed almost cave-like. As he stepped over the threshold, he felt a prickling at the base of his spine. Not fear, quite, but a warning not to go any further. After his unnerving experience on the balcony, Trevor decided it might be wise to let the surveyor check this one out. Closing the door behind him, he scampered up the steps away from the gloom and into the daylight.

On the drive back to the office he rehearsed the story he would tell Trish. Best to leave out the brush with death and the dark forebodings, he decided. As far as Trish was concerned, the house was a gem. In need of renovation, but a unique opportunity to acquire a charming period home with stunning aspects. Yes, that should do nicely on the particulars.

1

As the wind whipped at her silk scarf, Dorothy struggled to tighten the knot that secured it under her chin. Although it was a sunny day with clear blue skies, it was bitterly cold. Not the ideal weather for motoring in an open-topped car.

Henry took his eyes off the road for a moment to glance at her. 'Not too cold?'

'A little.' She shrugged herself further down into her sheepskin coat.

He smiled, not hearing her. 'Jolly good.'

They had set off from their house in the Home Counties that morning, en route for Cornwall and a property described in the *Country Life* advertisement as:

An unmissable and rare opportunity to purchase this perfect Cornish Holiday/Family house. Accommodation comprises six bedrooms, two bathrooms, drawing room, dining room, morning room and study. Spacious original Victorian family kitchen. The master bedroom, with dressing room and en-suite bathroom, has its own balcony offering panoramic ocean views. All rooms on the ocean-facing side of the house boast equally stunning aspects. Set in half an acre of mature cliff-top gardens with private access to the public beach of Treviscum Bay. The property is in need of some

modernisation. Despite its age (built circa 1720) it is currently unlisted.

‘Take the next left,’ Dorothy, fighting with the turning pages of her road map, shouted above the wind as her husband sat grinning at the wheel of his new Aston Martin Virage Volante.

‘What?’

‘Next left. To Bodmin.’

‘Left here?’

She nodded vigorously and pointed with her gloved hand at the signpost.

He smiled. ‘Righto, Number One.’ He slowed the V8 engine to a throaty rumble and took the exit.

Henry couldn’t believe how wonderfully his life had turned out. Who’d have thought he’d rise to this, given the dire straits he’d found himself in a decade ago.

On the death of his father, Henry had inherited Carew Family Board Games. Unfortunately the firm that had been his father’s pride and joy was by this time a dinosaur in a shrinking market. Nobody wanted to play board games any more, even if they did have beautifully hand-crafted pieces and block-printed boards. Henry had been left an albatross, complete with a mountain of debt, a loyal workforce he couldn’t afford, and a factory with outdated machinery making parlour-game staples such as Ludo, Snakes and Ladders and Draughts. Settling the death duties on his father’s estate had left him with no means to pay his own mortgage, let alone bail out the firm. In despair, he invited his bank manager out to lunch, hoping that a sumptuous five-course meal would secure him an extension to his business loan. It took the manager less than fifteen minutes to turn down the request. Indeed,

if the current overdraft wasn't reduced forthwith, Henry's factory and machines would be repossessed by the bank.

'But my father was with your bank for more than forty years. Please, if you just bear with me a while longer, I won't let you down,' pleaded Henry.

The bank manager, a fat man who enjoyed golf and making his customers squirm, shook his head sadly.

'Henry, your father was a close friend and a good man, but he didn't move with the times. Unless you can give me a sound business plan, some reason why the bank should reinvest, my answer has to be no.'

Henry took a deep breath and looked the smug slug in the eye. 'I have an idea for a game that will knock Trivial Pursuit, Cluedo and Monopoly into a cocked hat. I can't say more because our competitors must not get wind of it.'

'My dear boy, what is it?'

'I told you, I can't say. But if I were to offer you my house as collateral, would you let me have the money I need?'

The slug stirred an extra spoonful of sugar into his coffee, thinking.

'OK, I'll authorise the loan – but only for six months. After that . . .' he continued stirring, his lips curving upward in a smirk, '. . . the bank moves in.'

The relief Henry had felt at securing the loan evaporated at the prospect of this odious man and his bank getting their hands on his home and Carew Family Board Games. Unfortunately there was a major flaw in his new business plan. The top secret game that was going to take the world by storm didn't exist.

Henry drove back to the factory and locked himself into his father's old office. How could he have been so rash

and stupid? How the hell was he going to invent a blockbuster of a game in a year, let alone six months?

He pulled out the bottom drawer of his father's desk and found the bottle of Scotch Dad had always kept there. He opened it and put it to his lips with a silent prayer: *Dad, I need your help. I'm in the shit and some of it's your fault. Give me an idea, a way out of this mess.*

He sat back in the tilting revolving wooden chair and put his feet up on the desk.

What am I going to do, Dad? I'm going to lose the factory and my home. A hundred people will be out of a job. People who loved you and trusted you. They are expecting me to make everything all right, but I'm afraid I've cocked it up. He took another swig of Scotch.

It was some time later when Old Reg, the foreman and longest-serving member of staff, came to say good night. He found Henry, his eyes red from tears, sitting in his father's chair, the bottle of Scotch half-empty. Reg saw it all and knew without asking that it was only a matter of time before Carew Family Board Games became a footnote in history. Murmuring, 'Good night, Mr Henry,' he closed the office door gently behind him.

*

Henry's brain was in turmoil. Had he committed fraud? Could making a false promise be construed as extorting money from the bank? Would he be arrested? Could he afford a lawyer? What would happen to Dorothy and the girls? Lawyers were expensive. He was only trying to do the best for his workforce, his family. Oh God, he'd go to jail. He'd better get a lawyer.

In a panic, he dug out his father's old address book

and flipped to the 'L' tab. His finger traced down the pages.

'Lawyer, lawyer,' he muttered under his breath. He stopped for a moment and said the words again: 'Lawyer, lawyer.' Feverishly he picked up a pencil and began writing the words, followed by *DEFENDANT. JUDGE. JURY.* Then he drew two boxes and wrote *GUILTY* in one and *NOT GUILTY* in the other.

He phoned home and told Dorothy not to expect him back for supper.

*

The next morning he called a meeting on the shop floor for every member of staff. He hadn't slept all night, he reeked of body odour and alcohol. They expected the worst.

'Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for giving me your time today. Carew Family Board Games was my father's proudest achievement. Many of you worked with him and loved him as I did. You miss him as I miss him. I am very grateful that you have remained so loyal to me as I try to fill his shoes. But the truth is, the world is changing and this company is struggling. When arcade games and the Rubik's Cube came on to the market, my father thought they would be a flash in the pan. "Nothing can beat the fun of a family sitting round the table playing Ludo," was his mantra.' Some of the older employees laughed in remembrance of this. 'He was wrong, though. We are on the brink of insolvency.'

There was a subdued murmur from the group, and then Reg spoke up: 'Are you shutting us down, Mr Carew?'

Henry swallowed the lump that was forming in his

throat. ‘I hope not, Reg. I have an idea for a new game. A board game that I think could beat even Monopoly for world sales. The World Toy Fair is four months away: if we can have the new game ready by then, we’ll secure the orders we need to turn this company round – but I need your help and your faith to pull it off. This is the promise I make to you: if I can’t turn this company round in the next six months, I will sell everything I have – bar my house, which is promised to the bank . . .’ He paused, gulping back the tears that threatened. ‘And I will split the proceeds between you. However, if we make this game a success, you will all become partners, sharing in the profit.’

His workforce stood, incredulous. Some of the older women who remembered the boom years were sniffing into screwed-up tissues. The younger workers looked dumbstruck. In the end it was Reg who stepped forward and asked, ‘What do we have to do?’

*

It took Henry and the team just two weeks to produce the cardboard prototype of *Lawyer, Lawyer*. Four sets were made and taken home in turn by the Carew workers. Each day they would come in with suggestions, refinements and clearer rules. Finally everyone was in agreement that they had the definitive version. A game of cat and mouse between the law and the citizen. Reg oversaw the first factory-made prototype as it came off the production line.

It was beautiful. The box lid depicted Number One Court of the Old Bailey. In the dock stood a decent but anxious-looking man. On the bench sat a hideous

gargoyle of a judge bearing an uncanny resemblance to Henry's bank manager. And taking the floor was a smart lawyer, thumbs in his lapels and smiling wolfishly at the jury.

Reg carried it with pride to the boardroom and placed it on the elliptical table. The workers came and filed past it as it lay in state.

That afternoon, Dorothy dialled the local Chinese takeaway and ordered a supper for everyone. It was a party not one of them would forget.

On the eve of the World Toy Fair, Henry carefully packed the newly manufactured boxes of Lawyer, Lawyer into the back of his rented Rascal van. Dorothy was already settled in the passenger seat. The entire workforce gathered in the car park to wave them off.

Old Reg leaned in and put his hand on Henry's shoulder. 'Good luck, Mr Henry. Your father would be proud of you.'

Henry put the car in gear and drove carefully out of the factory car park, Dorothy waving from the window while he tooted the horn until they were all out of sight.

The World Toy Fair at Olympia was very familiar to Henry. He'd worked a stand there with his father from the time he was a boy. Only when his father fell ill did they stop attending. His death had left Henry without the cash or wherewithal to organise a stand. Now, he found himself looking forward to it. But at the same time he was consumed with nerves.

He glanced at Dorothy and said, 'What if this doesn't work?'

She smiled back at him. 'It'll work.'

'We could lose every—'

'We could, but we won't.'

Most exhibitors had booked a year in advance. When Dorothy had called to make a reservation four months previously, there were few slots remaining. They were allocated a stand on an outside corner.

‘You wouldn’t put a hen in a space as small as this,’ complained Henry when he saw it.

Dorothy, who was staggering under several boxes of order forms and fliers, ignored his pessimism. ‘Help me with these, will you?’ she said, thrusting the surprisingly heavy boxes towards him. Then she looked around, hands resting on her slender hips. ‘Small but perfect. We’re handy for the loo and the café – think of the footfall we’ll have. Couldn’t be better.’

He grudgingly nodded. ‘Suppose so.’

‘Come on, Prince Charming – two more trips and the van will be unloaded.’

Dorothy was a good organiser. By midnight, their little stall looked inviting and ready for the official opening in the morning. Several other exhibitors broke off setting up their own stands and dropped by to chat and reminisce about Henry’s father. One or two were desperate to get a look inside the Lawyer, Lawyer boxes, but Dorothy was having none of it. ‘The premiere is tomorrow, boys! No peeking till then.’

The four days that followed were the busiest they’d ever known. The opening morning was slow, but that afternoon the buyer for Hamleys came by. After Henry talked him through the rules, he couldn’t resist playing a round. Henry let him win, obviously, and the buyer put an order in for such a large amount that Dorothy thought she’d misheard and left a zero off the end. When the buyer leaned over and corrected her, she couldn’t stop herself from kissing him. After that, word of mouth spread

quickly. Every toyshop chain and department store was clamouring to place an order for the exciting new game.

As soon as they returned to the factory, the production line got into gear. For the first time in the history of the company, the machines were rolling twenty-four hours a day, five days a week. Extra night-shift staff were taken on to meet the orders, which were coming in from as far afield as Australia and Japan.

Within months Lawyer, Lawyer was the game on every family's Christmas list. The fat bank manager invited Henry out for lunch. Henry accepted the invitation and was delighted when he heard the name of the restaurant: very expensive and excellent reviews. Henry selected the most extravagantly priced dishes and wine, enjoying the wincing expression of the slug sitting opposite.

Over coffee, and the finest brandy, the bank manager offered Henry as much money as he needed to expand the business. Henry thanked him, but declined to commit himself immediately.

On his return to the office, Henry immediately set about transferring all his company and personal accounts to a rival bank. Then he dictated a fax to his former bank manager, telling him to get stuffed.

A few days later, an order came through from Buckingham Palace. Henry made sure his Press Office (Dorothy) leaked the news to the Nigel Dempster column in the *Daily Mail*.

The company was now safer than it had been for twenty years, but there was no sitting back on their laurels. It was Old Reg who came up with the next idea. Tapping on Henry's office door, he came in and explained that his son, who had a degree in electronics and computer science, wanted to devise an electronic version of Lawyer, Lawyer.

After discussing the proposal with Dorothy and his new bank manager, Henry began investing in the technology that would produce the first hand-held Carew Family game.

The resulting worldwide sales paid off the mortgage of every Carew employee.

And that was how Henry and his beloved Dorothy came to be sitting in an open-topped Aston Martin on their way to buy Atlantic House, the Cornish holiday home of their dreams.