

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, **Love**reading**** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Forever House

Written by Veronica Henry

Published by Orion Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to **Love**reading****.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE FOREVER HOUSE

Veronica Henry



First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Veronica Henry 2017

The moral right of Veronica Henry to be identified as
the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the
prior permission of both the copyright owner and the
above publisher of this book.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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

ISBN 978 1 4091 6657 3

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Somerset

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



www.orionbooks.co.uk

Belinda Baxter Estate Agents

Could this be your 'forever house'?

FOR SALE

HUNTER'S MOON

Set in idyllic gardens and grounds in the Peasebrook Valley, Hunter's Moon is in need of some updating, but its perfect proportions and enchanting features will delight the potential purchaser.

It is here that the novelist Margot Willoughby penned her most famous works, no doubt inspired by the breathtaking views.

It enjoys complete privacy yet is only two miles from the Cotswold town of Peasebrook, with regular trains to London Paddington.

It is expected that interest in Hunter's Moon will be high, so an early viewing is advised.

The Forever House

Two miles out of the Cotswold town of Peasebrook, you must keep your eyes peeled for a left-hand turn into a tiny narrow road: there is no signpost, so be careful or you might easily miss it. The road is no wider than a tractor, and it meanders between high hedges for half a mile before plunging into woodland. The branches of the trees meet overhead, like a guard of honour, and the grass grows down the middle of the tarmac, leaving a trail for you to follow.

You will wonder more than once if you are on the right road, for it seems endless and to lead nowhere. Your stomach will swoop as you go over a tiny humpback bridge, and eventually you will arrive at a set of square pillars, each topped by a golden ball of stone. Moss has set in, and the gates are hanging off their hinges, but you will know you have arrived at Hunter's Moon even though there is no sign.

Swish through the pillars and along the drive. You'll find the house at the end, nestled in the cleavage of two hills, overlooking a tiny tributary of the River Pease. In spring, which it is now, it is surrounded by a swathe of bluebells.

In summer, fat bees sway drunkenly about the flowerbeds.

In winter, a dredging of snow settles upon it like a white fur stole on a woman's shoulders.

In autumn, as the last of the leaves cling to the trees in a

blaze of copper glory, the hunter's moon lights up the valley at night. The hunter's moon that gives the house its name.

Hunter's Moon looks perfect in whatever it wears.

And it is just the right size. Not so large as to be unmanageable, but with plenty of hiding places. And room for parties: impromptu gatherings which turn into laughter and dancing at the drop of a hat. Yet snug and cosy when all you want is to curl up by the fire.

For the very best houses can be whatever you want them to be, depending on the mood and the season and the occasion.

Hunter's Moon is the perfect forever house.

But nothing, as we know, lasts forever.

I

Belinda was able to find Hunter's Moon easily, because she'd done a dry run the day before to make sure she wouldn't be late.

She'd been caught out once too often, lost down a country lane with no landmarks, so she always did a recce before a valuation. That way she arrived for her appointment prompt and unflustered. There was nothing worse than driving around in circles, sweating and swearing at the sat nav.

After twelve years in the business she'd got serenity down to a fine art. A dry run and a fine dusting of face powder to her cheeks, which had a tendency to rosiness, and she always appeared calm, even if she didn't feel it. Often there wasn't much time between appointments, so she was perpetually running late.

Today, though, she was bang on time. This was an important viewing. She had a feeling it had the potential for a bidding war. As far as she could make out, it was perfect. Big, but not *too* big. Plenty of land, but not *too* much – no one wanted lots of land any more because it cost so much to keep, yet everyone wanted privacy. As far as she could see, nothing awful had been done to it. There were no electricity pylons, no planning permission for a nearby

housing estate, no restrictive covenants. Of course, something might become apparent when she actually got there and had a chance to look around. But she felt hopeful.

And it had one unique selling point: Hunter's Moon had once been owned by the novelist Margot Willoughby. Of course that wouldn't add much to the value, but it added to the romance. Almost every house she went to view had a copy of one of Margot's books somewhere on its shelves. No one admitted to reading them but everyone did. Belinda remembered the tattered cover of her most famous bestseller as it was passed around school. She smiled. She'd learnt a lot from that book.

A high-profile house with a bit of history in the shop window would be a fantastic marketing tool. She could already imagine her sign up on the main road: FOR SALE – BELINDA BAXTER with a little white arrow pointing down the lane.

She slowed down as she rumbled along between the hedges, the road beneath riddled with bumps and pot-holes. She didn't want to risk damaging the underside or to scratch the bodywork on the hedges, even though her car was a four-wheel drive, specifically bought to deal with the winding narrow lanes around Peasebrook. It was over fifteen years old, but she looked after it carefully. In her business you had to look successful, and the easiest way to convince people of that was to have an immaculate car.

As she approached the entrance she felt her pulse quicken. It was almost like stage fright, this moment, because everything depended on her performance. If she said the wrong thing, delivered the wrong line, she would lose the commission. She'd rehearsed her spiel, but of course there was always an element of improvisation.

She had to take her cues from the vendor. She could usually predict what they were going to say, but sometimes she was wrong-footed – that was why she prepared so thoroughly before she went out to do valuations. People couldn't argue with facts.

She looked at the entrance. The stone posts were impressive but the iron gates had long since fallen off their hinges, resting drunkenly in the hedge. In her head, she began her snag list: all the repairs and cosmetic touches that would need doing before the property went on the market. People protested, but presentation was paramount if you wanted top dollar. Painting and oiling the gates and putting them back on their hinges would make all the difference.

She felt her tyres bounce over the potholes as she turned into the drive. It was cool and tree-lined, reassuring oaks meeting overhead and blocking out the light. She glanced down at the passenger seat to check she had everything she needed. Her iPad in a sleek cover and a notebook and pen. Laser tape measure. Sample brochures of other high-end houses she'd handled. In the boot were a wax coat and a pair of Hunters for walking the land.

The accessories were superfluous, though, because she knew it would be her charm and her expertise that would win her the job. She made people feel safe, by allaying their fears and taking all of the hassle out of the process. 'We can do that for you,' was her favourite phrase, whether it was going to the council for a completion certificate or arranging for a delivery of freshly cut logs to put by a fireplace.

She stopped the car just before turning the final corner and pulled down the mirror to check her appearance. She

wasn't vain, but she didn't want mascara smudges or lipstick on her teeth. She had to look her best for her clients: perfectly turned out, yet not a threat. Though she didn't flatter herself that she would ever be that. Belinda knew she was easier to jump over than walk around, if you were being rude like her father. Curvaceous if you were being polite. She had learned to dress for it: fitted jackets and pencil skirts or tea dresses. She had dark hair, which she wore in a French pleat, sludgy green eyes and what she'd been told was a very kissable mouth. She touched up her rose pink lipstick and pushed the mirror back.

Then she had her ritual moment of contemplation, when she wished happiness for all the people who were going to be affected by the sale. It was never just about the vendor: if it was a big chain, dozens of lives could be altered.

She still didn't know why Hunter's Moon was going on the market. The three Ds – Death, Divorce and Debt – were the most common reasons for selling a house. Those clients had to be treated with particular care. There were all sorts of emotions to negotiate: grief, stress, regret, pride, fear . . . The trouble was, people liked to lie and cover things up. They insisted on pretending everything was all right, when actually they had all sorts of skeletons in the closet.

Of course this could be just a fishing expedition. She got a lot of those. Time wasters were an occupational hazard. They saw the house of their dreams in the paper or on the Internet and wanted to put their own on the market, but all too often the numbers didn't add up, especially now it was increasingly difficult to get a mortgage.

She didn't think that was the case here, though. As she

drove around the corner, the trees finished and the pale gold April sun hit her in the eyes, dazzling her. She put a hand up to shade herself from the light, and she could see immediately that Hunter's Moon wasn't the sort of house you moved from unless you had to.

She inched over the pale chippings, manoeuvring round the fountain in the middle. It was crumbling and covered in moss – a dolphin entwined around a cherub – but she smiled in approval. These were the features that made people fall head over heels in love.

She turned to look up at the house itself, and her heart skipped a beat. If she could have described the perfect house, this was it. Built of pale Cotswold limestone and softened with lichen, she guessed it was about two hundred years old. It was three storeys high and the perfect width for its height, with large latticed windows that winked in the sunshine. A steep grey roof was flanked by two sturdy chimney pots. Wide stone steps led up to a canary yellow front door, guarded by two square lead planters holding balls of box. A thick, gnarled wisteria made its way over the top of the two ground floor windows.

In front of the circular drive, another set of steps went down to a formal garden: square herbaceous beds clustered around a lily pond. It was protected by a thick beech hedge; she couldn't see immediately beyond it, but in the distance were gentle rolling hills dotted with sheep and a glittering silver thread which must be a tributary of the River Pease.

Belinda gave a sigh that was part contentment, part envy, just as the front door popped open and a cluster of golden curls hurtled towards her with a joyous bark, barrelling into her legs. She'd trained herself long ago not to

be intimidated by over-exuberant dogs, so she bent down to make a fuss.

The dog was swiftly followed by a slight woman in faded skinny jeans, a billowing white linen shirt, and sneakers.

‘Teddy!’ The woman admonished the dog with fond resignation, bending down to grab his collar. ‘Honestly, he’s the dimmest dog but such a sweetheart. Sit, Teddy.’

Teddy tried to sit but couldn’t quite resist continuing to nose Belinda’s shins.

‘He won’t hurt you.’

Belinda didn’t like to say that all owners said that, even when their dogs were sinking their teeth into your hand, but she could tell Teddy was harmless. She scratched his head.

‘What is he?’

‘The mother’s a poodle but the father is anyone’s guess.’

‘He’s gorgeous.’

‘He’s a liability. He’s a dreadful thief and a chewer. I was hoping he might have grown out of it by now.’ The woman smiled and held out her hand. ‘I’m Sally. You must be Belinda?’

‘I am.’ Belinda took her hand, which was dry and cool. She’d thought the woman was blonde at first, but now she could see her hair was a pale shade of honeyed grey. Her eyes were a brilliant blue, kind but observant. Her skin was relatively unlined though she must be in her late sixties. Good bone structure and a pleasant life probably accounted for her youthful looks. She wore a chunky amber necklace: it was real, Belinda guessed, rather than costume jewellery, and there was a very nice emerald on her left hand that flashed in the sunlight. Jewellery was

very useful for summing people up. This woman belonged in this house – and suited it.

‘Welcome to Hunter’s Moon,’ said Sally, and Belinda saw a momentary flicker of something in her expression. Worry, anxiety, doubt?

She wanted to tell her how wonderful the house was, how perfect, but she had trained herself not to gush.

‘Thank you so much for asking me to come and see you,’ she said instead.

They both stood for a moment, looking out over the grounds, a few pom-pom clouds bobbing across the blue sky. The air was sharp with the scent of a bonfire – there was a white plume rising up from further down the garden. Teddy’s tail thumped up and down on the gravel. It was a moment of perfect peace, just before a conversation that was about to change the future, and Belinda sensed Sally knew that.

‘Would you like a coffee?’

‘Good idea. We can get all the formalities out of the way.’

She was reluctant to sit this woman down and bombard her with her sales pitch. She decided she was going to take a more relaxed approach. That was the beauty of being the boss. Somehow, she didn’t think Sally was going to respond to pie charts and percentages. She recognised her type: she was a doer, a decision maker, switched on and pragmatic. Not one to suffer fools. She wouldn’t quibble but she would expect great service.

A woman after Belinda’s own heart.

‘Come on in, then.’ Sally led the way across the gravel and up the steps, pushing open the door.