THE LITTLE BOARD GAME CAFÉ

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For my lovely mum

Unlike Emily's mum, she can't cook, but she taught me to read and passed on her love of books, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Prologue

Most teenagers, if asked how they'd spend their ideal summer, would say surfing on a Cornish beach or backpacking round Europe or even just hanging out with their mates.

Not many would choose working as a waitress, especially not in the same café as their mother.

But Emily was having her best summer ever.

Mind you, she was looking forward to going back to school; she needed a rest.

She arrived home most evenings with an aching back, an aching head from adding up bills all day – the café needed a new till but that would have to wait until the owner got back – and aching feet despite wearing flat shoes. Granny shoes, she thought on her first day, hoping that none of her classmates would come in and see her. But Mum had been right to insist that she wore them; you definitely needed comfy soles in a job like this.

They'd forgone their usual fortnight in Devon. Dad hadn't minded. 'There'll be plenty more summers for family holidays,' he'd said, though he knew in his heart of hearts that wasn't strictly true; his little girl was growing up.

Mum had squeezed his arm. 'Are you sure you don't

mind?' she'd said. 'Only it'd be like a trial run. For the day when Em and I have our own place.'

'Of course I don't mind,' he'd said, smiling at her.

He probably did mind, thought Emily. He loved Sidmouth. He was less keen on the six-hour drive, the traffic jams on the M5 and the petrol prices at the service stations, but once they arrived, he was in his element. But he never refused Diane anything. It was a bit embarrassing sometimes, Emily thought, how he still looked at his wife. How they walked down Thornholme's high street, hand in hand like a pair of teenagers themselves. She'd even caught them snogging on the sofa when they thought she'd gone to bed.

'It's too good an opportunity to miss,' Dad had said to them both. 'You should definitely say yes.'

Mrs Benton, who ran Tricia's Treats, was going on a six-week cruise with a man she'd met through a dating agency. She'd asked Diane, Emily's mum, to run the café in her absence. The plan was for Diane to take over the kitchen – a move she'd been longing to make for years but Mrs Benton liked to do all the cooking and baking herself – whilst Emily did Diane's job waiting tables.

'Imagine if this were ours,' Mum had said as they'd opened up on the first morning. 'What would we do?'

'Fresh white tablecloths. Much classier than these wipe-clean things.'

'That's a lot of laundry, Em.'

'And a better menu. Steak and kidney pudding. Liver and onions.' She screwed up her face. 'I'd get rid of those for a start. Why does Mrs Benton serve that stuff?'

'Cheap, nutritious and the customers like it. Well, the older ones anyway.'

'And the walls are such a dull colour. How about sunshine yellow? Or pale blue?'

And so it had gone on. A whole summer of playing fantasy café owners together. If Emily had had a pound for every time one of them said, 'If this was our place, we could…' she'd have had far more money than the contents of the tips jar.

By the time the bushes down by the river were covered in juicy blackberries and the leaves in the park were yellowing, Em knew this was definitely, definitely what she wanted to do with her life. She and Mum would run their own café one day. Her parents both agreed that she should get some kind of qualification so she'd go to university first; do a business course perhaps, or marketing like her best friend Kate was intending to study. She had wondered about catering college, but her mum was such a good cook that they had that side of things covered. It wasn't as if they wanted to run an haute cuisine restaurant or anything; just a down-to-earth café for ordinary people like themselves. Somewhere that would be the beating heart of a community.

But she'd only been back at school a fortnight when everything changed.

Chapter One

'You're firing me? Seriously?'

Emily slumped back in the chair and folded her arms.

'I wouldn't say firing, exactly.' He pressed his hands together in a prayer-like pose under his chin and fixed her with a steely gaze. 'With regret, I am making you redundant.'

'With regret? That's what Lord Sugar always says in *The Apprentice*, when he *fires* people.'

'It isn't personal. We're having to let a few people go.'

She stood up. 'How? How can this not be personal?'

'Do you think you could keep your voice down a little, please? We don't want everyone to hear now, do we?' He stood up too and walked past her to the windows that separated his private office from the rest of the open-plan area. She turned to watch as he closed the venetian blinds, obliterating the view of Annie from Accounts who was staring, open-mouthed. Annie would probably put a glass to the wall if she thought she could get away with it. Not that you needed a glass with these walls; they were paper-thin.

He turned back to Emily, put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back down into the chair. It was a cheap office chair with scant foam padding and she sat down

with a bump. He returned to his side of the desk, to his deluxe leather chair, his own arse cushioned by precision-engineered springs and the down from three hundred small ducklings. It was a very nice arse, admittedly, but Emily didn't see why it was deserving of a softer landing than her own.

'Let's start again, shall we? I am in the very unfortunate position of having to let you go, but, as I said, it's nothing personal…'

She made an odd noise at this point, something midway between a harrumph and a snort. *He* was in a very unfortunate position?

'…it's nothing personal. You're just surplus to requirements.'

'Surplus to requirements…?' Her voice had reached a high pitch now, somewhere between wailing cat and warbling soprano.

'We're letting you go at the end of the month. You won't be entitled to much of a pay-out since you've not been here long – but there'll be something. I'll put that in writing.'

He'd put that in writing! And no doubt – since she did all his typing – she'd be writing that letter to herself.

'Fine,' she said, standing up again. 'I'd better get back to work then.'

'Look, I can see this has come as a shock. Why don't you take the rest of the afternoon off? Go home. Chill out. Put your feet up.'

'Thanks. I'll do that.'

She turned away from him and walked towards the door with as much dignity as she could muster. Which wasn't

much. She placed a trembling hand on the handle and was about to open the door when he cleared his throat.

'One more thing, Em,' he said. 'Do you think you could pick up some semi-skimmed on the way home?'

Emily was outside on the pavement, underneath the enormous sign that read *Peter Ridley Engineering Ltd*, when the tears began to roll. On autopilot, she rummaged in her pockets for a tissue then realised she had no pockets. Damn. She'd left her coat in the office. There was no way she was going back in for it.

It was bad enough that she'd Just Been Fired in front of everyone. What made it worse, so much worse, was the fact that the man who'd fired her – or, as he insisted on calling it, 'made her redundant' – was her fiancé.

She hadn't even wanted to work at Peter Ridley Engineering Ltd and she'd never fitted in. The boss giving his other half a job – well, that move was never going to be popular with the workforce, was it? They were probably cheering now that he was letting her go.

It was chilly outside. Emily wanted to walk through the park to clear her head, but without her coat?

Oxfam, she decided. She needed a 'new' coat anyway.

She turned left towards the small centre of town. Essendale lay nestled in a little valley in the West Yorkshire Pennines. It mightn't have been quite as picture-box pretty as towns in nearby North Yorkshire, but it had its own quirky charm. A chimney still stood, towering over the town, though the mill it was once part of was long gone. Higgledy-piggledy

terraced houses were tucked into the hillside below fields and tumbling drystone walls. Some of the cobbles had now been tarmacked over, but on sunny days, lines of washing crisscrossed the narrow streets between the houses. Not that there were that many sunny days; this was the Pennines. The skies were often grey, the valley often misty and if it wasn't raining properly, it was usually drizzling.

You never saw a policeman in Essendale – well, there wasn't much crime – but the town had its own super-vigilant neighbourhood watch: a group of somewhat aggressive white geese who patrolled the streets, held up the traffic on a regular basis and hissed at any dog who dared get too close.

They were gathered now outside the small library – only open on Tuesdays and Thursdays – so Emily steered around them, keeping her hands well above pecking height.

She'd only walked another hundred metres or so when her phone pinged, and then pinged again shortly afterwards. Peter probably. She ignored it and pressed on, passing Alessandra's, the only clothes shop in town, where her mother-in-law-to-be bought all her outfits. Emily couldn't afford their prices, but even if she could… Well, much as Peter would have liked it, she wasn't ready to turn into a mini version of his mother quite yet.

A man she vaguely recognised nodded and said, 'Eyup' to her as she passed him. Essendale was that sort of place; you greeted people even if you didn't know them. Although most people here did seem to know everyone else. Emily knew Peter, Kate and her old neighbour Marjory, plus all her soon-to-be-former colleagues from Ridley's and that was about it. She'd been here a few years and still felt like an outsider.

She passed the Red Lion, adorned with window boxes and hanging baskets, its sign promising real ales and a log fire. She and Kate spent many an evening there, mulling over the trials and tribulations of Kate's love life.

There were only a handful of shops in Essendale, and each bore an old-fashioned, hand-painted sign. No neon here, the local councillor liked to boast. Emily walked by the mini-supermarket, which Peter always referred to as the grocer's, the florist with its modest collection of potted hyacinths and daffodils on display and the Golden Wok, its windows now boarded up. She missed their chicken chow mein, though Peter wasn't fond of take-aways.

She paused for a moment beside Sweet Delights, the only café in town, peering at the cakes in the window, the bustling waitresses, the happy customers. One day, she thought, one day. Then she pressed on towards her favourite shop in Essendale: Oxfam.

She loved browsing in charity shops, but Peter had banned her from buying second-hand clothes. 'Mother says you'll bring moths into the house and they'll leave holes in all my cashmere,' he'd said. But if Emily chose diligently, he didn't notice that a new item of clothing wasn't actually new. And now she was officially joining the ranks of the unemployed…well, it was the perfect excuse. She would find a coat then go for a walk in the park.

But first, the books. A book would cheer her up. Emily loved the kind of books that made her feel inspired to take up a new hobby or go on an adventure. Of course, she never actually took up the hobby or went on the adventure, but she knew all about mixed media collage, glass painting and drying flowers. In her imagination, she'd wandered the

streets of Montmartre, sipped coffee in a tiny café beside the Seine and sniffed the lightly scented roses in the Jardin des Tuileries. She'd dropped plenty of hints to Peter about her longing to go to the French capital, but he wasn't the most romantic of men and wasn't great at picking up on hints.

She'd seen most of the books on Oxfam's shelves already. In a small town like Essendale, the turnover in the non-fiction section wasn't very high. But she loved browsing. That was the fun part of charity shops. You could order what you liked from the internet, of course. Any book under the sun. But looking for books in charity shops was like digging for treasure; you were never sure what you might find. Some days there was nothing. Like a metal detectorist walking away after a day on the beach with only a couple of ring pulls from Coke cans for his troubles, she'd walk away empty-handed. Yet on other days, she'd strike gold. An out-of-print Peggy Porschen about cake decorating or a photobook of vintage bridal gowns. Books that would make their way onto the pile on her bedside table. You could always tell what Emily was interested in at any given time by looking at the titles by her bed.

A few years back, before she'd met Peter, there'd been several weighty tomes about how to be irresistible, how to meet and keep a boyfriend, and how to apply what somebody or other learned at Harvard Business School to the world of dating. All borrowed from Kate. You wouldn't have needed to be Sherlock Holmes or Inspector Barnaby to work out that Emily was looking for love.

The find-a-man self-help books had now been returned to their owner. In their place were how-to guides about creating hand-made wedding invitations, arranging bridal

bouquets, cake decorating and making tiaras. She fancied being a 'DIY bride'. She didn't have the skills to sew her own dress, but had wanted to try her hand at making her own stationery and she could definitely bake her own cake. A three-tiered gooey chocolate cake, covered in a chocolate mirror glaze, decorated with red sugar-paste roses and shards of dark chocolate.

But Peter's mother had other ideas. She'd insisted on 'proper' save-the-date cards – someone from her Women In Business breakfasts ran a printing company so they'd got a discount – and she was adamant that her son and his bride should have a traditional wedding cake. Fruit cake. White icing with piped swirls. Made by a professional. She'd probably get her way. She usually did.

Emily thumbed her way through Oxfam's self-help section. What she really needed was *How to Stand Up to Your Mother-in-Law*, but if such a title existed, the charity shop was out of stock. Instead she looked for books on job-hunting, selecting one title about re-writing your CV and a second entitled *Surviving Unemployment*. She was wondering if there might be a section on how to cope if it was your own fiancé who'd made you unemployed, when a bright-red book with bold white writing caught her eye: *A Beginner's Guide to Starting Your Own Business*. Perhaps it was a sign.

With all three books tucked under her arm, she rummaged through the coat section. Several black and navy coats. A Barbour that had seen better days. Two red anoraks and a grey quilted thing that reminded her of a duvet. Eventually she settled on a lime-green woollen coat with a small collar, a fitted waist and large buttons. It was a brighter colour

than she'd normally go for, but had hardly been worn and was a perfect fit. The employment gods mightn't be smiling down on her today, but the charity shop gods certainly were.

Behind the counter, a familiar face was waiting to take her cash. Emily knew most of the volunteers in here by sight, although not by name, and this one was her favourite. She always had an encouraging word or two and she didn't disappoint today.

'Your own business – that sounds exciting,' she said as she punched the prices into the till.

Emily smiled, tucking the books into her oversized handbag. 'It would be if I could pluck up the courage.'

'Just go for it. Sometimes you have to take a risk. Shall I put the coat in a bag for you?'

'No, thank you. I'm going to wear it now.'

When she'd paid and the assistant had snipped off the tag for her, Emily went out into the crisp spring sunshine, pulling on the lime-green coat.

In other parks in other towns at this time of year, crocuses and daffodils would be poking their way up through the soil, heralding the arrival of spring. Not in Essendale. The flowerbeds here were planted not with dahlias and pansies, but with herbs and fruit bushes. There was rosemary, mint and thyme for anyone to pick and, in the summer, strawberries and raspberries. It was the same in the churchyard and on the verges, and was another quirk of the little town that Emily loved. She paused to rub a stem of rosemary between her fingers, allowing the heady scent to transport her back to childhood for a moment, and the smell of her mother's roast lamb.

There were few people about today. One mother with a

pushchair, two dog walkers and an elderly couple walking hand in hand. Emily wondered if she and Peter would walk hand in hand through the park one day when they were that age. She couldn't picture it somehow. He wasn't keen on public displays of affection.

She sat down on a bench, wishing she'd thought to buy herself a take-away coffee from Sweet Delights. And then it hit her. She couldn't afford lattes and double chocolate muffins anymore. Not now she was about to be unemployed. The tears began to roll again.

It could have been far, far worse. She knew that. She wouldn't end up homeless. Or hungry. But she'd be dependent on Peter if she didn't find something else pretty soon and she didn't like the thought of that. There was that money from her mum but she tried not to touch it. Her mum had scrimped and saved to build up that little nest egg, and if Emily started dipping into it on a daily basis, it would be gone in no time. No, she wanted to save it, to do something special with it one day.

She watched a squirrel as it ran up a tree, an out-of-control terrier snapping at its heels. The dog owner came panting up behind, waving a lead. In the tiny play area, a giggling toddler was sitting on one end of the seesaw, his mother pumping the other end up and down. Would that ever be her one day with a little Peters? Again, Emily couldn't picture it, though she had no doubt that her fiancé wanted children. If only so he could change the sign to Peter Ridley and Sons Engineering Ltd.

She checked her watch. Ten past three. An afternoon off should feel like a treat, only it didn't. The time stretched ahead of her, empty, purposeless.

Sometimes her feet seemed to have a mind of their own. She stood up and walked, without thinking about where she was going. Back past the library, Sweet Delights and Ridley's. Left down the steps to the tow path by the bridge over the canal.

She stopped and watched as a bright-red narrowboat bumped its w ay into the lock. As one of the boaters closed the lock gates, she walked on, still not sure where she was heading. The rhythm of putting one foot in front of the other and the close proximity of water somehow felt soothing. Losing her job at Ridley's wasn't the end of the world. She'd find another job. Ridley's was the biggest employer in Essendale, but there'd be something, somewhere. Wouldn't there? Even if she had to look a bit further afield. Or perhaps now was the ideal time to… No, she was being silly. Best not to be overambitious. That was a pipe-dream. Another job. She'd get another job.

Emily began to feel calmer. At least she did, until a speeding cyclist forced her to jump into the bushes to avoid being mowed down. Cursing under her breath, she decided that she'd had enough of the towpath for one day. At the next bridge, she scrambled up a rough path onto the road.

She'd never been down this street before. Well, why would she? It was a road of stone terraces, much like any other. Except for one thing. As she walked towards the junction with the main road, there was a gap between the houses where a smaller, one-storey building stood. An unattractive building – more a shack really – constructed of breeze blocks painted an unappealing shade of mustard yellow with a flat roof. It had a shop window, but, from

this distance, Emily couldn't make out what it was. Another charity shop, perhaps?

As she drew closer, she saw it was a café. Tatty-looking and dismal, it immediately made her think of the losers' café in *The Apprentice*, and the failed candidates sitting around a Formica table with their instant coffee in polystyrene cups.

According to the cracked sign above the window that had seen better days, this was Nico's. But according to the red and white estate agent's sign beside that, Nico, whoever he was, didn't want this little place anymore. It was for sale.