Second Chances at the Board Game Café

Also by Jennifer Page

The Little Board Game Café
Love Letters on Hazel Lane

Jennifer Page

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An Aria Book

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In memory of my beloved dad.
Miss you every day and always will.

Prologue

Two years earlier

Up until the moment when Taylor saw the display in the window of the hospice shop, she had been having a good day.

It hadn't been raining when they'd set off on the walk to school. For once, Max hadn't argued with her about which route they took – the quickest route (her choice) or the slightly longer route (his) which avoided the white hissing geese who congregated every morning outside Essendale library. He had checked that he had his reading book and packed lunch in his bag only twice, instead of his usual three times.

At the school gates, he'd even agreed to a hug, albeit grudgingly. He wasn't a tactile child, so this had been a win as far as Taylor was concerned, although he'd shrugged her off when she'd ruffled his hair. Then she'd watched him slope off towards the imposing Victorian building with his usual air of resignation. He hated school, but maybe he'd have a better day today.

She'd been feeling optimistic as she caught the train to the neighbouring town of Hebbleswick. She was going to measure the windows in a very elegant dining room. Mrs Jones, one of her fussier clients, had commissioned her to make two sets of full-length curtains complete with tie-backs and swags. It would be a lucrative commission, but that wasn't the only reason why Taylor was excited; Mrs Jones had mentioned she'd chosen exceptionally beautiful fabric.

By the time she'd left Mrs Jones's house a little while later, her mood had lifted even more. She'd had a spring in her step as she set off towards the station. She'd crossed the old packhorse bridge over the river, and turned right towards the town centre, picturing the curtains in her mind's eye. They were going to look fabulous. The fabric was gorgeous: a lightweight velvet with turquoise peacock feathers, which seemed almost iridescent against the deep blue background. Taylor couldn't wait to get started; she loved colour and the velvet felt so luxurious. Plus it was going to make a welcome change from her usual day-to-day work.

As a teenager, Taylor had dreamed of being a dress designer, but falling pregnant with Max had put paid to that. Instead, she had set up her little sewing business. She'd been hoping for some creative projects – the odd prom or bridal dress, perhaps. But despite her best efforts to publicise her creations on Instagram – she'd all but given up now – she'd had only one dress commission. Other than that, it had been the same old, same old. Mending ripped seams. Replacing zips and buttons. Shortening trousers. Letting out waistlines. Alterations, alterations, alterations.

And the occasional altercation too. There'd been one woman who'd lost weight for her wedding and asked Taylor to take in her bridal gown. Days before the wedding she'd been back, claiming Taylor had taken it in too much and demanding that she let it out again. Taylor hadn't liked to point out that the bride-to-be had put some of the weight back on. Overindulgence at the hen do, perhaps?

Still thinking about Mrs Jones's drapes, she walked up the high street towards the station, singing to herself. Midway through the chorus of Pharrell Williams's 'Happy', she stopped abruptly when she spotted the dress in the hospice shop window. That was *her* handiwork. Her one and only commissioned made-to-measure garment. The Scrabble pinafore.

A few months ago, she'd thought that things were looking up when she'd been asked to make that pinafore. Kate, the

client, had wanted it to be a surprise for her best friend and had bought several metres of crisp cotton fabric printed to look like a Scrabble board. Taylor still had some of it in her remnants box. Using an old pinafore that belonged to Kate's friend, Taylor had made a pattern. The dress had turned out beautifully but now here it was. Dumped in the charity shop.

She crossed the road to take a closer look, dodging the cars rather than walking back to the zebra crossing. She peered through the window, staring at the garment, wanting to be one hundred per cent certain that it was hers, though she knew full well it was. As if there could be two Scrabble pinafore dresses in this small valley!

It made a very eye-catching feature in the window, that was for sure. The shop assistants had displayed it to perfection on a mannequin, the waist pinned to fit, which made it look a smaller size. For a moment, she'd felt a surge of pride that she had made that beautiful, unique garment, but that was quickly followed by indignation that its recipient hadn't wanted it.

Who gave a gift away so quickly? Especially a handmade gift.

And why?

Had Kate had this pinafore made for a special occasion, and once it was over, the best friend, whoever she was, had no further use for it?

Or, worse still, had the friend simply not liked it?

Taylor took a step closer to the window, almost pressing her nose against the glass and cupping her hands around her face so she could see the dress clearly. She ran her eyes over the seams, all beautifully pattern-matched, the top stitching, the perfect hem. She had lovingly toiled over every detail of this pinafore, never imagining that she'd see it here, in a charity shop window, no doubt bearing a bargain price tag. Her creation. Unwanted.

1

The morning began as it always did: Taylor packed the sofa bed away and crammed her duvet and pillows into a blue IKEA bag that she kept especially for the purpose. She shoved the bag into the cupboard in her tiny hallway, had a quick shower, and opened her wardrobe.

Choosing what to wear was her favourite part of the day. It wasn't about being fashionable or even looking good. Clothes meant so much more to her than that. She didn't follow trends and she didn't understand why others did: why would you want to look like everyone else? Taylor expressed herself by what she wore; it was how she told the world who she was and what mood she was in.

She usually chose bright colours, but today she chose the dullest item in her wardrobe, a plum-coloured jersey dress. She'd had yet another uncomfortable night on that sofa bed and her back was aching. As sofa beds went, this was a pretty good one, but it was designed for occasional use and Taylor slept on it every night. Well, except when Max had a nightmare; she ended up squashing into his bed then. They really couldn't go on like this for much longer.

Ten years ago, she'd had ambitions of studying fashion at college and getting a job in the industry. Now, her only ambition was to sleep in a proper bed in a bedroom of her own. Once she'd dreamt of catwalks and photo shoots and beautiful models

wearing her designs. Now she dreamt of a bathroom with a bath, rather than just a shower. Preferably one of those deep, old-fashioned baths with claw feet and a shelf nearby for a glass of wine and a scented candle. She imagined the bath sometimes, full almost to the brim with steaming hot water and bubbles, how she'd lie in it for hours in the flickering light and ease her aching back. Although the truth was that even if she did have such a bath, she hadn't the time for a long, luxurious soak.

But the lack of a bedroom and a bath weren't the only dissatisfactions in Taylor's life. The worst thing by far was the routine. She used to joke that 'spontaneous' was her middle name. She'd drop everything when her best mate Sasha said that a trendy new clothes shop was opening in Leeds, and did she want to go? Or when her then boyfriend John had somehow got last-minute tickets for Glastonbury.

Glastonbury.

It had been the best weekend of her life, but sometimes she wished she hadn't gone, because that was the weekend everything changed. That was the weekend she'd got pregnant and waved those dreams of being a fashion designer goodbye.

And although she wouldn't swap Max for anything, she did sometimes wonder what her life would have been like if she hadn't met John. Would she now be designing beautiful clothes, mixing with creative types and doing things on the spur of the moment?

Milan? This weekend? Yeah, sure, that'd be lovely.

A spare ticket for Paris Fashion Week? Thank you, yes, that sounds wonderful.

Whereas now, even her weekends were dogged with routine. Haring off on last-minute adventures and being a single mum didn't exactly go hand in hand. At least, not when you were a single mum to a child like Max.

Feeling guilty that she'd once again been dreaming of what her life might have been like if he hadn't arrived on the scene, she went into his room to wake him, and sat on his bed for a

minute, admiring the delicate features of her boy's face. At eight years old, he was still baby-faced, with a mop of curly blond hair a little fairer than her own. In sleep, he looked calm and untroubled. Contented even. She leaned over and breathed in his scent, as she'd loved to do when he was an infant. She stroked his hair, and then his cheek, marvelling at the softness of his skin under her fingertips. He stirred slightly, opened his eyes and pushed her hand away.

For the next half hour, Taylor was on autopilot. She bundled Max into the shower and cajoled him into putting on his uniform: slate grey trousers, a white shirt, grey tie and a jumper in a slightly lighter shade of grey. If you were going to make children all dress like clones of each other, you could at least choose something colourful, something fun, for them to wear. Something bright that said, 'We're children'. He looked like a mini office worker, like he should be tucking a briefcase under his arm, catching the train to Halifax and doing accounts all day.

She gave him his breakfast – porridge with three-quarters of a tablespoon of honey, exactly as he liked it – and told him to brush his teeth and grab his school things. As they left the flat, he made her double-check that the door was definitely locked.

It was drizzling when they set off for school, along the uneven pavements and cobbled back alleys of Essendale.

The little town lay nestled in amongst the hills of the West Yorkshire Pennines. Scraggly sheep grazed the higher slopes overlooking the higgledy-piggledy streets and stone terraced houses. There was a board game café and across the road, a Costa coffee shop, a florist, an Oxfam shop and a dress shop that sold the kind of outfits Taylor thought of as that 'mother-of-the-bride' look. They weren't to Taylor's taste, but she kept quiet about that, as they sometimes sent customers her way in search of alterations.

A chimney still towered over the town, a permanent reminder of its industrial past. This valley was once home to many cotton mills. There'd been factories too, where rows of machinists

stitched the cloth from the mills into garments. At one time, the clothing industry was the major employer in this town; if you didn't work in a mill or a factory yourself, you would have certainly known someone who did. It was, Taylor often thought, a fitting place for her to live, although it hadn't actually been her choice.

This morning, the white geese were guarding the door of the board game café, but she and Max gave them a wide berth. As they walked, she tested him – at his insistence – on his seventeen times table, which she was sure *wasn't* a thing he had to learn for school, but Max had known all his times tables up to twelve by the time he was seven. He got every question right – at least, she thought he did, but she wasn't certain because her son was quicker at mental arithmetic than she was.

At the school gates, she ruffled his hair, and he batted her away as always, shuffling towards the imposing Victorian building with his usual air of resignation. Things weren't getting any better as far as school was concerned.

She didn't have time to stop and chat at the school gates with the other parents, nor the inclination to be honest. It was awkward really, always had been, since Max didn't gel with any of their children, was never invited to parties – well, not unless the entire class was invited anyway – and a couple of them seemed to bear grudges against her that they'd harboured for years. Amelia's mum, for example, didn't speak to her over some incident at nursery when Max had lashed out. And a few mums looked down on her, she knew they did, because she was a single mother. For heaven's sake, this was the twenty-first century.

But as school runs went, it had been a good one, and her mood was beginning to lift as she walked away from Essendale Primary and back towards home.

Taylor lived with Max on the first floor of a small terraced house that had been divided into two even smaller flats. She didn't know her downstairs neighbour; their interactions over the six years that she and Max had lived here were limited to

complaints about noise. Old Mr Russell didn't appreciate having a child upstairs, even though as children went, Max was a quiet, gentle boy. Clever too, she thought proudly.

She made herself a mug of Nescafé – she usually bought supermarket own brand but this jar had been yellow-stickered – and went to sit on the sofa for a moment's peace before she began work. She always had loads to do and ought to get started, but at least she didn't have a long commute – only two metres, in fact, to the large wooden table that was home to her beloved Janome sewing machine. Because this room was not only her bedroom, and their lounge. It was also her workplace.

Taylor's first task that morning was replacing a zip in a smart but hideously boring pair of men's trousers. As she unpicked the stitching on the old zip, she wondered if today might be the day that someone phoned and asked, 'Do you make wedding dresses?'

Probably not.

She'd had only two dress commissions in all these years of running her little business.

The first – the Scrabble pinafore – had ended up in the charity shop. Seeing it there had stung so much. Almost as much as being rejected by John.

Okay, perhaps not *that* much, but it had been painful. She'd been so excited about making that dress, and it had been so unusual, so eye-catching. She'd allowed herself to fantasise about it kickstarting her dress-making business, and that other women would want her to make bespoke dresses for them too. She'd even put it on her Instagram, hoping another Scrabble fan would want one – although she didn't have a clue where Kate had bought the fabric – but no-one had even enquired about it, let alone made an order.

Then a weird thing had happened. Not long after the Scrabble dress had made its appearance in the charity shop, Kate had appeared on her doorstep again, wanting a second pinafore for the same friend. This time, the fabric had been even more

unusual; a softer cotton printed with what appeared to be little gingerbread men, only they weren't gingerbread-coloured – they were red, green, blue and yellow. Weebles, Kate had called them. Something like that anyway.

Taylor hadn't liked to ask what weebles were, or to ask why the first dress hadn't been wanted. After all, perhaps Kate didn't even know that the special gift she'd had made for her friend had been dumped in the charity shop. The woman also seemed in a hurry, so Taylor had accepted the commission, and made a start on the weebles dress.

She looked in the hospice shop window now every time she went to Hebbleswick, wondering if that second pinafore would appear there too. Thankfully it hadn't; Kate's friend had obviously liked it better than the first one.

Taylor often wondered about those frocks. Did Kate's friend ever wear the weebles one? Had anyone bought the Scrabble one from the hospice shop or had it gone to a fabric recycling company? Or worse still, ended up in landfill somewhere? She would never know.

Since those two pinafores, there'd been nothing. No orders. No commissions. Not even any enquiries. It was understandable really; made-to-measure garments were expensive, and couldn't compete with cheap high street fashion chains and online stores. So Taylor tried to be content with being a single mum, living in a one-bedroom flat, sleeping on a sofa bed every night and basically leading a boring life, the highlight of which was watching her idol, the wonderful fashion designer Esme Young, judging the garments on *The Great British Sewing Bee*.

As a teenager, she'd fantasised about one day studying under Esme. Now she resigned herself to mending clothes for a living, when what she really longed to be doing was designing them.

2

Taylor held her Visa against the card reader, but there was no beep; her contactless payment had not gone through. She tried again.

'The card's been declined,' said the check-out woman.

'I er…'

Taylor's cheeks grew hot. She lowered her head so no-one would see her embarrassment, and rooted in her purse, although she knew full well that she didn't have enough cash on her.

'I'll get that,' came a voice from behind.

Taylor turned to see her favourite client, Mr B, standing at the back of the queue. He looked dapper as always, in his smart trousers, waistcoat and a red and purple polka-dot bow tie. Normally she'd take a moment to admire his attire, but this morning, she wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible.

'Excuse me,' he was saying now to the people in front of him. He weaved his way through the queue towards her, holding out his bank card.

'No, Mr B, I couldn't possibly…'

'Yes, Taylor. You could.'

He wasn't just her favourite client, he'd also been her first. She'd met him in Nico's, a scruffy little café that no longer existed. She'd dropped Max off at nursery and, since she'd had a sleepless night with her unsettled boy, had decided to treat herself to tea and toast. She'd noticed Mr B as soon as he walked in

because of his fabulous dress sense, but had been surprised when he'd joined her – uninvited – at her table with his cappuccino and Chorley cake. A lonely old man, she had thought, who wanted someone to talk to, but in fact, she had done most of the talking. She'd found herself telling him about her plans to set up her own sewing business. And he'd said he happened to have a pair of trousers that needed a new zip.

Since then, he'd been a regular. She'd never known a man whose shirts lost so many buttons. She'd offered to show him how to sew them back on himself, but he'd declined saying his eyesight wasn't what it was.

'Take it, Taylor,' he said to her now, still holding out the card.

'No, it's fine. I'll come back later.'

Taylor prided herself on her independence. Her dad had instilled in her the importance of standing on her own two feet, and she'd always lived by that principle. It was better that way; you couldn't rely on other people. She'd thought she and John were for life but look at how that had worked out. These days, she didn't need anyone's help and begrudged anyone who suggested otherwise. She might be a single mum, but she was coping.

She was glad her father couldn't see her now. This whole situation was embarrassing. She didn't want anyone thinking she couldn't afford her shopping, couldn't afford to feed her child. It was probably bloody John, being late with his monthly payment as he so often was. She'd have to transfer some money from her rainy-day savings account. Again.

'I'll go and ring the bank.' She wasn't quite sure who she was saying this to. Mr B? Or the cashier? 'It's probably a mix-up.'

Before she could stop him, Mr B leaned over and tapped his card against the contactless machine. 'There. All done.' He patted her arm. 'Taylor, it's okay to accept help once in a while. And I know you'll pay me back.'

The cashier held out the receipt, uncertain of who to give it to.

Mr B took it and glanced at the amount on the bottom. 'I make that two zip replacements and half a dozen buttons.'

'Thank you,' Taylor said stiffly. She was grateful – for one thing, it would save her having to come back later and she never seemed to have enough time as it was – but she'd still rather he hadn't. 'I'd prefer to pay you back in actual money, if that's okay.'

'As you wish,' said Mr B.

From behind him in the queue, a woman gave an exaggerated sigh, and a man said, 'Can you lot hurry up?'

Taylor picked up her bags and said, 'Thanks again, Mr B,' and walked as quickly as she could towards the exit.

An advert on the community noticeboard by the doors caught her eye.

SPACIOUS, MODERN TWO-BEDROOM FLAT TO RENT

Taylor hesitated, torn between her need to get away from the scene of her embarrassment at being unable to pay for her groceries, and her desire for a bigger place.

She quickly scanned the ad. There were three photos: a very ordinary low-rise block of flats, a grey kitchen and a sterile white bathroom with a bath. An actual bath! The place looked very bland and modern – not exactly her style – but imagine not having the rigmarole of folding up the sofa bed every morning. Imagine being able to forget about cramming her duvet and pillows into a blue IKEA bag and stashing it away in a cupboard. Imagine not having a bad back every day as she bent over the sewing machine. Bliss.

She fumbled in her bag for her phone, intending to take a photo of the ad, but she'd either forgotten it or left it at home. Instead, she made a mental note of the estate agent's name and the street where the flat was situated – the same street where Nico's café had once been, as it happened – and then hurried out of the shop.

Of course, Max wouldn't want to move, she thought as she walked home, thinking about the two-bedroom flat, the

embarrassment in the shop (almost) forgotten. Her boy didn't like change. He didn't like small changes like having fish fingers for tea on a Monday instead of a Tuesday, or using raspberry-scented shampoo instead of his favourite lime. She'd never persuade him to move house.

Back home, Taylor hung up her patchwork coat; she'd started making it soon after Max was born. She'd heard that some babies were lulled to sleep by the motion of being in a car or a pushchair, but it was the whirr of her sewing machine that did it for Max. She loved that coat; not only did it hold the memory of that first precious year with her son, but each piece of fabric was special to her too. The blue cotton square on the left sleeve was left over from the first skirt she'd ever made for herself. A piece at the back was from her late gran's favourite cushion cover; it was a little worn to be honest, which was why she'd positioned it at the back. And there was a tiny piece at the bottom that she'd snipped from Max's favourite blanket, the one he always used to snuggle with. She'd covered the hole in the blanket with an appliqué bunny rabbit.

There had been a small patch from an old sweatshirt of John's too, but she'd managed to replace that after he'd left.

She sighed now as she unpacked the shopping onto the worktop. Flats didn't come up for rent that often these days in Essendale – many landlords were now renting them out as Airbnbs instead – and those that did were snapped up pretty quickly. Especially those as reasonably priced as this one. She was tempted to phone up and arrange a viewing, but what was the point? She couldn't upset Max by moving house, not when things were going so badly for him at school.

In any case, she couldn't remember the name of the estate agent.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of hems and seams and the torn lining of Mrs Ridley's coat. She took extra care over that last one; Mrs Ridley could be a very tricky customer and liked things just so.

Soon it was time for the dreaded school run; dreaded not because she didn't want to see Max, but because she never knew what sort of day he'd have had, never knew if his teacher, Mrs Green, would come out and say in clipped tones to Taylor, 'Can I have a word?' which was what she always said when there had been 'an incident'.

But today there had been no incident. Or at least, if there had, Mrs Green was occupied elsewhere. Max wasn't exactly in a good mood, but he wasn't quite as sullen as usual, so Taylor took the plunge and said, 'Let's go for a walk.'

'A walk?' Max made it sound like the most ludicrous thing he'd ever heard. 'But we *never* go for a walk.'

'Then it'll make a nice change. We'll go through the park and along the canal.'

This, Taylor knew, was the most direct route to the block with the flat for rent. She would jot down the phone number of the estate agent – there was sure to be a board outside – and broach the idea of moving there to Max. As they walked, Taylor put her left hand in her pocket and crossed her fingers. She left her right hand dangling by her side, just in case Max wanted to hold it. Unlikely, but she lived in hope.

The ten-minute walk was punctuated by snatches of conversation. Taylor asked Max how school had been. He mumbled, 'Okay.'

She enquired how the weekly spelling test had gone.

He'd got ten out of ten as usual.

'And how was PE?' she said, regretting the question almost as soon as it left her lips. Max hated PE.

'We did football,' he said. 'And no-one wanted me on their team.'

Taylor sighed. There were no words to make this better for him.

They left the towpath, taking some steps that led up to the road, and a few metres further along she could see their destination: a small, three-storey block of flats, somewhat at odds with the

surrounding properties which were all the traditional Yorkshire-stone terraced houses, so common to the area. This was the exact spot where Nico's café had once stood, she realised. It must have been demolished to make way for the flats. She hadn't been down this road in ages.

The block had clearly been finished only recently, judging by the lack of curtains at the windows and the number of estate agents' boards outside. Most were 'For Sale' boards; only one was 'To Let'. She quickly found her phone and snapped a photo of the phone number, something that didn't escape Max's attention.

'Why are you taking a photo of that sign, Mum?'

She took a deep breath, and crossed the fingers of both hands now.

'Well,' she said, unsure of how to begin. 'There's a flat available to rent. And I was thinking that you and I could move here. It's a lovely street, isn't it? Close to the park. And the canal.'

Please, Max, please agree to this, she thought, but didn't dare look down at his face to see his reaction.