

The
SUGAR
and
SPICE
BOOKSHOP
BAKERY

ALSO BY JENNIFER PAGE

The Little Board Game Café

Love Letters on Hazel Lane

Second Chances at the Board Game Café

Christmas at the Board Game Café

The
SUGAR
and
SPICE
BOOKSHOP
BAKERY

JENNIFER PAGE



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For Abi, whose support and encouragement
helped keep me going.



The Village of



Applethwaite

‘Eating and reading are two pleasures
that combine admirably.’

C.S. Lewis



One

The second Louise spots her, she ducks behind the steering wheel before she can consider how ridiculous she must look. A grown woman trying to hide in a car in broad daylight! For heaven's sake.

But Miss Anderson is the last person she wants to see right now.

She reaches down under the seat, finds the lever and presses it, moving the driver's seat as far back as it will go. Then she slides down into the footwell. It's a tight squeeze, even though she's only five foot five.

Her heart is thumping, her breath uneven. Every cell in her body is on high alert, fight or flight mode, and all because of a woman who must be what? Seventy? Seventy-five?

'She's a bully,' she whispers to herself, to justify her actions.

Miss Anderson was her English teacher at secondary school. It was the one subject she really excelled in. She *should* have been her favourite teacher, and Louise *should* have been her favourite pupil, but that woman thrived on putting students down. She had quite the repertoire of cutting barbs, and quashed Louise's dreams of becoming a writer, telling her she didn't have any talent and would never

make it. Even now, as a grown woman, Louise crouches in the car, feeling like a demoralised teenager, with Miss Anderson's mean comments echoing in her mind.

You're an adult, she tells herself. With a university degree and a successful career in publishing behind you. Well, successful for the first eighteen years at least. You do not need to be intimidated by one of your old teachers, no matter how mean she was.

Nevertheless, she stays in the footwell. Just in case.

Despite Miss Anderson, English remained Louise's favourite subject because she loved books. Couldn't get enough of them. She gave up on the whole writer dream – and she knew now that Miss Anderson had been right; it *was* notoriously difficult to earn a living writing novels and Louise probably wouldn't have made the grade – and decided instead that one day she'd run her own bookshop. Failing that, she'd become a librarian or an English teacher herself, the kind who actually encouraged their students, like Robin Williams in *Dead Poets' Society* as opposed to Miss Anderson, who was more of a Miss Trunchbull. It was only when she went to university and studied English Literature that she realised a career in publishing might be open to her.

She sighs. She'd loved being an editor.

Miss Anderson must be gone by now, surely.

Louise reaches up, pulls the handle to open the door and somehow extricates herself from the footwell, tumbling out of the car onto the pavement. It's far from elegant. This isn't the moment when she wants the man of her dreams to happen to be walking by, but he's hardly likely to be. That kind of thing happens in the romance novels she

edits – edited, she reminds herself; past tense now, since that part of her life is over – but not in reality.

She straightens up, smooths down her skirt, turns around and...

‘Louise!’

Miss Anderson is standing behind her, that perpetual look of disapproval on her face.

‘I heard you were coming back. Things didn’t work out for you in London then?’

Things didn’t work out...?

Louise’s cheeks grow hot. She’s come here to escape the shame of it all, hasn’t even told her mother the real reason why she’s returned. Miss Anderson can’t know, surely. Can she?

‘Lovely to see you, Miss Anderson,’ Louise says, even though it isn’t. ‘Now if you’ll excuse me.’

She opens the boot of the car and stands there, looking at her bulging, heavy bags. Lifting them in had been bad enough. She can’t summon the energy to haul them out.

Miss Anderson shuffles past on the pavement, puts her key in her front door, and with a last disdainful glance at Louise, steps into her house and closes the door behind her.

She’s gone.

‘Take a deep breath, Louise,’ she says to herself. ‘Don’t let her bother you. This is a fresh start, remember? Like Elspeth in *Finding Forever in Florence* and Sally in *Love at Lighthouse Cottage*.’

Louise had worked her socks off when she landed her first job at Austen and Green, rising rapidly through the ranks until she was a senior editor. Some of the most well-known and well-loved authors of commercial fiction were

her authors, including crime writer Sheila Penhaligon and romance author Rosie Hartwell. Over the years, she'd edited countless romances that all began with the main character losing their job through some terrible injustice, and moving to a cosy little village in the countryside in Cornwall or Scotland or somewhere equally charming. They'd embark on a new life, running a café or sweet shop or some other delightful little business. If Louise were the heroine of such a novel, the business in question would be a bakery; her mother, Elizabeth, and her mother before her, ran the bakery here in Applethwaite until recently, when Elizabeth reluctantly decided to retire – she couldn't manage the long hours, especially not after her right-hand woman, Mrs Danes, decided to go and live in Spain to be near her daughter. Now, the building is empty and Louise suspects it's her mother's dearest wish that she should take over. Continue the family tradition.

And if this *were* a novel, that's exactly what she'd do, and it would all work out beautifully in the end. The business would be a roaring success – after a few hiccups along the way – and of course, she'd meet some gorgeous hunky bloke and fall madly in love and – after a few more hiccups – live happily ever after.

But this isn't one of those novels. This is her life. Her actual sodding life. And she hasn't lost her job because of some terrible injustice, but because she made a careless error that she can't bear to think about. She's so ashamed. And much as she loves baking, she has never wanted to run the family bakery. And the chances of a gorgeous hunky bloke suddenly materialising in Applethwaite? Unlikely.

Unlikely, and yet, she pictures the text in her head.

Suddenly, from nowhere, he appears beside her, and peers at her heavy bags in the boot of the car. 'May I take those for you?'

'Thank you,' she murmurs, looking up into his deep blue eyes.

Or brown eyes?

Yes, brown. She loves brown eyes. Eyes that shine like horse chestnuts, rich and warm.

Or maybe she'd hoist one of the bags out of the boot herself, and put it down on the pavement, tripping up some divine-looking but moody man who'd curse at her. She'd then run into him at the most inopportune moments for several weeks, his scowl growing bigger every time he sees her, before eventually they realise their dislike of each other has all been one terrible misunderstanding, and they fall into bed and have the most marvellous time, and decide they're soulmates.

The classic enemies-to-lovers trope.

She loves reading them. Used to love editing them. But does anyone ever really start off as enemies and then fall madly in love?

In Louise's experience, it's more likely to happen the other way round: you fall madly in love then end up as enemies. She'd be quite happy never to see any of her exes again.

And then she sees him.

There *is* a man coming towards her on the pavement, talking on his mobile. A dark-haired Mediterranean-looking man. Too far away to ascertain the exact shade of his eyes, but with his colouring, they're bound to be brown.

She stands by the boot, watching him getting nearer, hoping he'll stop. He needn't fall in love with her, but it would be nice if he'd offer to carry the bags.

But he's so engrossed in his phone call that he doesn't even notice her. He's speaking – what is that? Spanish? Italian?

Definitely Italian.

And then he's passed by her, without so much as a glance. She can't help but feel disappointed. She's never had the looks to turn heads exactly, but she isn't unattractive. In fact, she thinks she's pretty good for forty-one. Her face is a little too round, perhaps, and she's conscious of the crinkly lines under her eyes, but she likes her caramel-coloured, shoulder-length hair with its soft layers and natural-looking blond highlights – at least she hopes they look natural. And people always say she has a lovely smile.

Not that she's got much to smile about now. Those bulging bags aren't going to lift themselves out of the boot – whoa! Too much alliteration! This is an occupational hazard, editing her thoughts as if they were words in a book.

The sooner she gets on with shifting her stuff, the sooner her new life can begin.

New life!

Nothing says failure like ditching your job and running back to the small Yorkshire village where you grew up.

Nothing says failure like sleeping in your old bed – single, obviously – in your old bedroom, no doubt with the old posters of boy bands still plastered over the walls. If one of her authors wrote *that* scenario in a novel, she'd suggest it was a bit of a cliché.

If only she could edit real life the way she could edit

things on a page. She'd flip back a few chapters, to the moment right before she sent the final manuscript of Sheila Penhaligon's latest book to the typesetters.

Fresh start, she reminds herself. New beginning. Elspeth and Sally did it. And she can too.

And it will be good to spend some quality time with her mother. They've always got on, yet Louise hasn't seen much of her in recent years. As daughters go, she knows she's been a bit of a let-down. The two hundred miles of busy M1 between London and Applethwaite never seemed like an appealing prospect on a Friday night after a busy working week. So many times she'd promised to come up here, only to end up texting yet again, saying she was too exhausted. Instead, she'd stay home with a takeaway and tackle her enormous TBR – 'To Be Read' – pile.

But yes, it will be good to spend more time with her mother Elizabeth. Louise just hopes she doesn't ask too many questions.

'Louise! You made it!'

It's her mother, standing on the doorstep of the terraced stone cottage where she's lived since before Louise was born.

Despite the fact that it's been a while, her mother hasn't aged much since Louise last saw her. They are unmistakably mother and daughter – the same round face, broad smile and caramel-blond hair. Only Elizabeth's hair has silver highlights now and it's cut short in a practical, no-nonsense crop with choppy layers. Perhaps it's the new haircut, Louise decides. Perhaps that's why her mother looks so good for her sixty-five years.

'Come on, Louise. Why are you just standing there?' her mother says.

‘I was hoping to bump into a gorgeous stranger who’d offer to carry my bags. That’s how it’s supposed to work when a woman arrives in a new village ready to start her new life. At least, it always does in novels.’

Elizabeth laughs. ‘This isn’t a new village! This is your home! And the only person you’ll bump into standing there is Mr Grundy from number twenty-eight. Or rather he’ll bump into you. I’m a bit worried about his eyesight, poor dear. Anyway, come here and give me a hug. It’s been far too long.’

They embrace right there, on the pavement, Louise with only one arm round her mother as she still has the bag in the other.

‘Right, come on!’ her mother says, walking away from her house.

Louise is confused. ‘Aren’t I staying at yours?’

‘Your room’s my craft room now,’ her mother says. ‘I thought you’d stay in the flat.’

‘The flat over the bakery?’

‘Yes. I thought you’d prefer to have your own space. But if you’d *prefer* your old room, I can clear it out.’

‘No, no, the flat’s fine,’ Louise says, but her heart sinks. Because although nothing says failure more than sleeping in the single bed in the room you slept in as a child, suddenly nothing says *comfort* more than being cocooned in your old duvet, with your lovely mum sleeping in the neighbouring room.

The bakery is at the end of a long row of terraced houses, next to her mother’s house, where Louise grew up. Between the door of the bakery and the door of the house is another door, one that leads to the flat. Elizabeth unlocks that door now, and heads up the staircase. Louise lags behind, lugging

one of the bags. It's been years since she's been in the flat; she remembers it as a cold, unwelcoming space, used as a storeroom for the bakery, and stuffed full of old tables and chairs that had seen better days.

Still, it won't be for long. She's going to stay a few weeks, hunker down and lick her wounds, whilst she figures out what she wants to do with the rest of her life.

She follows her mother into the flat and plonks the bag down onto the floor.

'Well, what do you think?' Her mother's eyes are bright and excited.

Louise glances around her. To her surprise, the space is warm and inviting. The main room comprises an open-plan lounge and kitchen, with a small dining table by the window, overlooking the back garden. The kitchen units are old-fashioned and have definitely seen better days, but they've been repainted dark blue, a shade her editor's brain immediately labels as 'cobalt'. The sofa is almost the exact same colour, the walls pale and neutral, and there are scatter cushions in autumn tones, oranges and golds.

This is *far* nicer than her old bedroom.

'It's gorgeous,' Louise says. 'It must have taken ages.'

It must have taken ages.

She can't remember the last time someone did something for her, without wanting anything in return.

And then it dawns on her.

She only told her mother she was coming home three days ago. There's no way this flat was transformed into this delightful, welcoming space in three days.

She told Elizabeth that she'd left her job, but she didn't explain why.

There'd been that phone call, three months ago, during that crazily busy period at work. Around the time when she made her big screw-up. Louise can't remember exactly what they'd said. She'd been preoccupied. Her mother had mentioned how since Mrs Danes had left, the bakery was proving too much for her so she'd decided it was time to retire and...

Oh God.

Louise suddenly realises what's going on here.

She's come home for a bit of R and R.

To take a break from the world.

To breathe.

To hibernate.

For a few days or weeks or however long it takes to get over the shame and the trauma of her big mistake and having to leave her job.

Her mother thinks she's come home to run the bakery.