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ARCHER

*The Importance
of Being
Emma*

DARCY & FRIENDS

The Importance of Being Emma

Juliet Archer

Extract



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Foreword

by Will Darcy

Naturally, nowhere else in England compares to Pemberley. But Ashridge, an estate in Hertfordshire that once belonged to the Duke of Bridgewater, is almost my second home.

Like Pemberley, it has an elegance of architecture and setting that helps me to think and talk more elegantly – or so I tell myself. Very appropriate, since it's a world-renowned business school. And I'll never forget my first visit there some years ago – not so much for the teaching, although the Leadership course I attended was exemplary, but for a conversation about a painting.

You see, I love art – whether expressed through words, music, or brush strokes on canvas. And Ashridge has a little gem by famous eighteenth-century portrait painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, entitled 'A child asleep'. When I first saw it, I had no intention of having any children myself; where in the world was there a woman who would make me want that sort of commitment?

I now realise how much I had to learn.

Back then, however, there was only one child that this painting brought to mind: my sister Georgie. I was in my teens when she was born, and could remember her vividly – so happy and biddable. In that respect, she'd hardly changed ...

Apéritif

~~EMMA~~

‘You could take me, Mark.’

‘You, Mouse? To a posh ball like that?’

‘Yes.’ I tucked my hand in his as we crossed Donwell Abbey’s vast entrance hall, our footsteps drumming on the ancient stone flags. ‘Batty said the other day I looked a lot older than fourteen.’

A basic requirement, of course, for the girl lucky enough to partner Mark Knightley: twenty-five, tall, dark and handsome, and known among my older sister’s crowd as the Sex God.

He laughed. ‘Mary Bates says whatever she thinks you want to hear. Don’t be in a hurry to grow up, it’s not that great.’

And he gently disengaged his hand to open the oak front door. Outside, soft summer rain stained the garden paths and muffled the sounds of men and machinery from nearby fields.

‘But you’ll take me?’ I went on. ‘I’ll get my braces removed, or maybe I’ll just smile enigmatically all evening, and I’ve seen the perfect dress in Kingston.’

He frowned and looked me straight in the eye. ‘I can’t, it would be like taking my little sister.’

I stared up at him. ‘But I’m not your sister.’

‘You are, in a way. Your sister’s married to my brother.’

‘That’s not the same thing at all.’

‘I still think of you as my little sister.’

My eyes filled with tears. I turned away so that he couldn’t see, but it was too late. When he pulled me round to face him, I fixed my gaze on the floor.

‘Mouse?’ He paused, then I heard his sharp intake of breath. ‘Oh God ... You can’t possibly ... You haven’t got a crush on me, have you?’

I said nothing, but my cheeks burned.

‘Shit! You have.’

I pushed past him and ran through the rain, towards the bridle path and home. His voice trailed after me, encumbered by a rare note of entreaty.

‘Mouse ... Emma ... Wait! Come back.’

But I didn’t. Not until a week or so later, when it was all over – both the ball, which he apparently enjoyed in the company of a giggly blonde, and the crush. No crush could survive such a rejection. The bluntness of a big brother, dismissively served. With a double helping of disbelief.

In any case, it was only a short-lived, typically teenage crush. My deeper, longer-lasting passion was for someone else. A man just as handsome, clever and rich as Mark Knightley but far more elusive. A true romantic hero, surrounded by almost myth-like mystery and spin.

Flynn Churchill.

Just his name set my pulses racing. Whenever I heard it, my heart fluttered in some sort of Pavlovian response. Whenever I said it aloud, in the privacy of my room, I punctuated it with a yearning sigh.

You see, although people talked about it each year as something inevitable, like Christmas, Flynn had never set foot in his father’s home town of Highbury. But nobody minded. His progress was still followed with unflinching enthusiasm, his arrival was always contemplated with

breathless anticipation.

And from the age of ten I knew that I, Emma Woodhouse, was destined to become Mrs Emma Churchill. It was meant to be. Our lives were inextricably linked.

I never discussed these thoughts with anyone, of course. Especially Mark Knightley. He'd just laugh at me.

I could wait.

Some day my prince would come.

Chapter One

~~EMMA~~

Good, the boardroom was deserted.

When I was a child, it filled me with awe; dark panelling, solid mahogany furniture, large leather-bound minute books and forbidding photographs of former Highbury Foods Board members, their names usually ending in Woodhouse. Now, although there were no obvious signs of change, it all looked the worse for wear; the photographs faded, the furniture scuffed.

I closed the door and selected a seat at the long table with care. I'd have more privacy here than in my own office, but I still wanted advance warning of anyone approaching.

I flicked through the magazine I'd brought with me and found what I was looking for on page thirty:

Change is in the air at Highbury Foods, one of the nation's most traditional small companies, in the glamorous form of new Marketing Director Emma Woodhouse. But has this enthusiastic novice bitten off more than she can chew?

Emma has everything going for her. She's stunning, highly intelligent and wealthy beyond the wildest dreams of mere mortals, thanks to some shrewd property investment by her great-grandfather. She has one of the most sought-after addresses in England: Highbury. Not the old Arsenal football ground, but a picturesque and prestigious village in Surrey, where her family is well known for its charitable giving, courtesy of the Woodhouse Benevolent Trust. And, for someone whose life reeks of privilege and plenty, Emma seems refreshingly grateful for her good fortune.

Now, at only twenty-three, she has decided that the family business is in need of her talents. Her father Henry has run Highbury Foods along very conservative lines for two decades, following faithfully in the footsteps of previous generations. In fact, the company has had the same game plan for the last 52 years: supplying a range of non-perishable delicacies to upmarket homes and hotels via mail order. It has yet to discover the advantages of selling over the Internet and, until now, did not even see the need for a Marketing Director.

But Emma wants to drag the company into the 21st century and has set herself only twelve months to achieve this.

We say it's mission impossible. Even with an MBA from Stanford, USA. But Ms Woodhouse says, 'Watch this space.'

I threw the magazine down. They'd got it completely wrong; it was Harvard, not Stanford. Hadn't that cretin of a journalist listened – or had he been too busy ogling my legs? He'd certainly chosen a photo that showed not much else; the angle suggested I'd ordered the photographer to grovel at my feet.

If I had, I couldn't remember it.

I didn't read on. It was the usual witless blurb they published in those glossy magazines that came with a couple of forests' worth of Sunday papers. I should have guessed as much from the saucy headline, 'Gentleman's Relish', a reference to the highly seasoned anchovy paste that was one of our most established and successful products.

But this was my first press interview and I'd hoped for something better. I hadn't even expected to see it in print until next weekend, so I was taken aback when Batty, our Company Secretary, handed it to me this morning with a squeal of excitement. Knowing her, she'd already have shown it to the other directors, just when I wanted to make a good impression. This fatuous nonsense portrayed me as having all the subtlety of an Exocet missile.

The September sun warmed my back. I turned my head and gazed at its low rays slanting in through the long dusty windows. I could see the factory, a jumble of squat brick buildings, and, in the distance, the tall copper beech hedge that hid my home from view. Mark Knightley had once observed that it was actually the other way round; the hedge was designed to hide the grim reality of work from the pampered occupants of Hartfield Hall.

Meaning me.

He was wrong, of course. I'd been fascinated by Highbury Foods for as long as I could remember. I came here during school holidays, University vacations, even occasional weekends when only the maintenance team was in. I studied production methods, analysed sales trends and talked to employees – about themselves, as well as their jobs. Our company culture was like that; relationships mattered more than results. And it worked. We turned a nice profit most years while still employing people who were long past their sell-by date, like Batty ...

Lost in thought, I wasn't aware of footsteps outside in the corridor until it was almost too late. The door creaked open and I heard a familiar twittering sound. Talk of the devil: Batty, in full flow. I dived for cover under the table.

'This is where the Board will be meeting, dear – no, don't go in now, I'll show you after we've had a cuppa. That's your main job this morning, to take the minutes at the ... I'll be sitting beside you, in case you need any help. Henry – that's the Managing Director – speaks awfully quietly at times, such a martyr to his chest. You'll be PA to him and his daughter – lovely family, so caring. And I should know, I started work here under Henry's father more years ago than I like to ... I must say, dear, that was a glowing reference from your last temping job at Abbey Mill Haulage, Robert Martin couldn't praise you highly enough and he's never one to ... This way to my office, dear, then I'll tell you all about ... ' At last, Batty and her unfortunate victim moved out of earshot, leaving the door ajar.

With a sigh of relief, I crawled from my hiding place and brushed myself down. I was in no hurry to see Batty again and have her fawning about the magazine article. She might surprise me, of course, and ask exactly how I proposed to drag Highbury Foods into this century; but somehow I doubted it.

Modernising the company was a challenge I'd prepared for over the past five years. I'd focused on the academic side, starting with a BSc at the London School of Economics and following it immediately with my MBA. Wherever possible, I'd made Highbury Foods the subject of my essays and assignments, usually scoring top marks for perception and ingenuity.

Now that I had a formal position with the power – and the budget – to make a difference, I could put my plans into action. And I would start at today's Board meeting ...

Once again a noise interrupted my thoughts. This time it was the buzz of a wasp, high up on the window, sluggishly searching for a way out. I frowned. If Dad saw it, he would postpone the meeting. Convinced he was allergic to any sort of sting or bite, he kept an EpiPen on him at all times although, to my knowledge, he never used it.

I placed a chair next to the window, rolled up the magazine – it might do nothing for my CV,

but it made a great wasp zapper – kicked off my Dior shoes and used the chair to climb onto the sill. My stockinged feet slithered on the wood and I had to grip the sash with my free hand to steady myself.

Eyeball to eyeball with the wasp, I drew back my other arm, took aim and –

‘Mouse! What on earth are you up to?’

Only one person called me Mouse.

The magazine fell to the floor. For a moment there was silence, except for the wasp buzzing nonchalantly, unaware it had escaped certain death.

I took a deep breath and turned round, forcing a smile. ‘Mark. Great to see you after all these years.’

~~MARK~~

Strange being at Highbury Foods. Strange being back in England, full stop. If only temporarily, to take over the reins of Donwell Organics while Father indulged my stepmother in another of her whims, this time a specially extended round-the-world cruise. Several months of binge eating and drinking, constantly in each other’s company; no doubt to be followed by an equally long period at a health farm and/or psychiatric unit, to repair the damage.

I could understand Father wanting to leave Donwell in a safe pair of hands; what I couldn’t understand was why the hands had to be mine or my younger brother John’s. But Father refused point-blank to consider an external interim appointment. And John, who was also our Finance Director, opted out before I could. So I had to come over from India, where I’d spent the last eight years setting up and running our regional operation in Mumbai.

To add to the culture shock, I’d taken on some of Father’s other duties. Occasional speaker at local Chamber of Commerce events; chief judge at the Autumn Flower and Produce Show, a perilous responsibility which I hastily delegated to John; chairman of the Woodhouse Benevolent Trust; and, last but by no means least, non-executive director at Highbury Foods, only two miles down the road from Donwell but light years away in terms of how it was run.

That’s how I came to be invited to their Board meeting, a commitment I could have done without on this particular morning. I’d landed at Gatwick barely four hours earlier, after a delayed flight, and I needed to put in a few phone calls to India before business there closed for the day.

On my way to Henry’s office, I noticed that the boardroom door was open. I glanced in, assuming it was his PA, Kate Taylor, doing what she liked to call her ‘last minute’ preparation – a full hour before the start of the meeting. Then I remembered. Kate Taylor was no more; as of two days ago, she was Mrs Kate Weston. And, although she was coming back to live in the village after her honeymoon, I’d heard she had no intention of returning to Highbury Foods.

My eyes widened as I took in the view from the doorway. Long legs silhouetted against the window, lines and curves in perfect proportion. Short beige skirt stretched taut across more curves – nicely rounded, a pert promise of pleasure. Matching jacket with side vents, no doubt designed to draw the male eye to the symmetry below.

Then, as the vision brandished a rolled-up magazine, I saw her face in profile. It couldn’t be, surely ...

It was.

‘Mouse! What on earth are you up to?’

She jumped, dropped the magazine and, after a pause, turned round.

‘Mark. Great to see you after all these years.’

There was a distinct lack of enthusiasm in her voice. I put down my briefcase and held out my arms.

‘I think I deserve a warmer welcome than that.’

She hesitated, then climbed carefully down from the sill and slipped into four-inch heels; this meant that, when I gave her the usual bear hug, there was less of a height difference than I remembered. I rested my cheek against her dark brown hair and smiled to myself. Underneath all that gloss, I knew she’d still be the same maddening little Mouse.

But she’d certainly overdone the gloss. I leaned back slightly and inspected her face. The hazel eyes flashed and the full red lips tightened, as if she could read my mind.

Undeterred, I gave it to her straight. ‘Too much makeup, you don’t need any at all. Most women would die for your skin, and that stuff round your eyes makes you look like a panda.’

The panda glared at me. ‘Bloody cheek. How would you feel if I criticised your appearance?’

‘Go ahead. You can hardly accuse me of wearing too much make-up.’

‘While you’ve been away I’ve grown up, believe it or not.’

‘Apparently. Although it didn’t look like it when you were dancing about on the window sill. Put me out of my misery, Mouse, what were you doing?’

She moved abruptly away. ‘There was a wasp. And I’d prefer it if you didn’t call me Mouse.’

‘You’re right, it’s not appropriate here. Whenever I’m at Highbury Foods, I’ll forget I know anyone called Mouse.’

Her voice was edgy. ‘I’d prefer you to stop calling me that, period.’

This was something of a turnaround, since I’d called her Mouse for at least fifteen years. It started when she accidentally introduced herself to someone as Emma Woodmouse. I teased her about it, called her Mouse for short and it stuck. Back then it suited her perfectly: such a small, scrawny thing, with big bright eyes. But now ...

Maybe she’d outgrown it. She certainly didn’t look like a mouse any longer; and she’d never behaved much like one.

I grinned. ‘OK, Emma. Where’s the wasp?’

‘Up there, on the middle window. I need to get rid of it before Dad comes.’

‘Naturally.’

Henry Woodhouse was the biggest hypochondriac I’d ever known. He was so obsessed with his ‘fragile’ state of health that he’d become a walking medical dictionary. He was so risk-averse that he was practically a recluse, hardly venturing beyond his home and his company, just a mile apart. Whenever I visited Hartfield, I half expected to be given a clean suit and mask or, at the very least, an antiseptic foot bath and hand wash. Accordingly, he prized the use of conventional pesticides, fertilisers and irradiation to safeguard his company’s products from contamination, almost as much as I valued organic methods to produce mine. In spite of such precautions, he never ate anything labelled ‘Highbury Foods’; he said his digestion was far too delicate.

Nevertheless, he was a long-standing friend of my family and, well, I respected his views and liked him enormously.

‘I’ll sort it,’ I went on. ‘India’s given me plenty of practice in dealing with insects, the humane way of course.’ Crossing to the window, I picked up the magazine, stood on the chair, pulled down the sash and gently manoeuvred the wasp outside, before securing the catch.

As I stepped down from the chair, I unrolled the magazine. What an intriguing headline. And that photo – legs a mile long, inviting smile, eyes looking deep into mine as if we were ...

I gave a disparaging laugh. 'So fame hasn't gone to your head – yet. You obviously weren't planning to keep this for your scrapbook.'

She folded her arms. 'No, I wasn't, it's a pack of lies. I thought they'd at least get their facts right.'

'You've got a lot to learn. Give the press an inch and they'll take a mile.' I looked again at the legs in the photo. 'Shall I dispose of this for you?'

'Give it back to Batty, she brought it in for me. So helpful, as always.'

'Still going strong, is she?' I said, slipping the magazine into my briefcase. 'Poor Henry, he's only got you and her to cosset him now that Kate's gone.'

This was evidently more comfortable ground; she unfolded her arms and managed a pale imitation of the smile in the photo.

'That's a sore point. Dad thinks Kate'll come back, he says she doesn't really want to set up an antique wine business with her new husband. That's why he refused to find a permanent replacement, but fortunately Batty's got a temp in. I'm hoping he'll soon forget all about Kate and then we can advertise her job.'

'From what I remember, she'll be a hard act to follow.'

'Definitely, she kept this place running like clockwork. And she's been such a good friend. If she hadn't been willing to move into Hartfield to keep an eye on Dad, I'd never have gone to Harvard.'

'Ah yes, you went there straight after University.' I paused. 'You know, there's a lot more value in an MBA if you've worked for a few years first.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'You're entitled to your opinion, I suppose.' Then she sighed. 'Anyway, there's Kate married at last – and it's all down to me.'

'What do you mean?' I said.

'I've discovered I'm an expert at matchmaking. When Tom Weston came back here four years ago, I knew he'd be perfect for Kate. And it didn't take much to arrange, even though people said he'd never settle down at his age.'

'So you controlled their every move?'

She nodded, oblivious to my sarcasm. 'Mind you, there were one or two hiccups. For one thing, I would have preferred it if they'd lived together before they got married. Then Tom could have moved into Hartfield with Kate while I was away, which means Dad would have got used to a man about the house.'

'Oh? Why would he want to do that?'

She gave an impish grin. 'In case I meet the man of my dreams. I couldn't possibly leave Dad on his own, so he – whoever *he* is – would have to live at Hartfield.'

'Lucky man,' I said drily. 'And why didn't Tom move in with Kate as ordered – sorry, suggested?'

'Because he'd set his mind on them living together at Randalls and nowhere else. At the time, Randalls wasn't even on the market and, when he did manage to buy the place, it needed a lot of work. Remember, Mrs Sanderson lived there for centuries and never spent anything on it.'

'How annoying for you, to be outmanoeuvred so easily.' I raised one eyebrow. 'Presumably their wedding turned out as you planned?'

'Oh, it was lovely. I know it's a cliché, but Kate looked radiant. And I thought Tom might look old enough to be her father, but he didn't.'

I frowned. 'Don't be ridiculous. He's only fifty or so and Kate must be at least thirty-five.'

'She's thirty-eight, he's forty-nine. Quite an age difference.'

I thought of my girlfriend back in India – she was twenty-six, I was going to be thirty-five in a few weeks – and decided to change the subject.

'Did Flynn Churchill make it to the wedding?' I was referring to Tom's son, who'd achieved cult status in Highbury over the years. All the more incomprehensible since nobody had ever met him, except his doting father.

Emma's face clouded. 'No, he didn't. Kate and Tom were very upset.'

'I'm not surprised.'

'He *was* coming, right up to the last minute, then something cropped up.'

'That man wouldn't turn up to his own funeral if he had the choice.' I added, casually, 'What about me, was I missed?'

'Probably, since you're still meant to be one of the most eligible bachelors in Surrey. And you know what they say, even these days – one wedding leads to another. I'm sure some of the women only accepted the invitation in the hope of seeing you reduced to a romance-sodden wreck at the sight of confetti.'

'Thank God I couldn't get home until today, then.'

She gave me a sidelong glance. 'Still seeing Tamara what's-her-name?'

'Yes.'

'Isn't it about time you got married?'

'Why?'

'Because you've been together for five years.' Her lips tightened. 'What's the point if it's not leading anywhere?'

'We each have certain needs and our arrangement suits us both very well.'

'So it's just for sex?' she said, rather bluntly I thought.

'No, it's not. We help each other out when we need a partner, either for a particular function or simply to scare other people off.' I grimaced. 'If I'd been coming to Kate and Tom's wedding, I'd definitely have brought Tamara.'

She moved towards the door. 'Sounds positively dreary and, you're right, not a good basis for marriage. Anyway, thanks for getting rid of the wasp. Were you on your way to see Dad?'

I didn't answer immediately. She was wrong, what Tamara and I had was anything but dreary. Predictable, yes; and convenient. But that was its appeal; although I had to agree, it was hardly the basis for marriage. Actually, it was better, I had all the advantages of marriage with none of its emotional warfare or financial complications.

'I'm meeting him at nine thirty,' I said curtly.

'I'll come with you. He asked me along for nine thirty as well.'

'How is he, by the way?'

'Same as always. Whatever he may say, he's got no major health problems. But he's sixty-one and sometimes I wonder how much longer he should go on working. I don't mean he's incapable, more that he can't seem to move with the times. Business is done so differently these days.'

I waited until we were walking along the corridor to Henry's office, then said, 'In some ways. But the essentials don't change, you still need things like integrity, and ethical principles, and sound common sense.'

I winced as she burst out laughing.

‘Mark Knightley, they should stuff you and put you in a museum!’

~~EMMA~~

Dad sipped his fennel tea and eyed us over the rim of his cup. ‘My stomach’s terrible, I’m sure it’s because Kate’s not here. And, do you know, I had to boil the kettle myself? The new PA’s nowhere to be found.’

I gave him a reassuring smile. ‘She’s in with Mary, and I told you not to have that second helping of porridge this morning.’

‘You look remarkably well, Henry,’ Mark said.

Dad shook his head as he placed the cup down on its saucer. ‘Ah, Mark, sometimes I just have to battle on regardless. And this is one of those times. Emma’s first day as Marketing Director, the first Board meeting for both of you, my first Monday without Kate ...’ His voice trailed off and I guessed there were too many firsts around for comfort.

‘We’ll manage,’ I said, reaching across the desk and patting his arm.

‘I’ll never be able to get used to – whatever her name is.’

‘Now, Dad, come along, Kate’s been on leave in the past and you’ve coped wonderfully. Just imagine she’s on an extended holiday.’

‘So wise for her age, isn’t she, Mark?’ He gave Mark no chance to agree or, more likely, disagree but continued, ‘I’m worried about you, darling, you’re taking on a lot of responsibility. Kate’s not here to help, and Mary’s not the woman she was ... Neither am I, for that matter ... the *man* I was, I should say.’ He took refuge in another sip of tea.

‘Meaning?’ I prompted, as a nasty, Knightley-shaped suspicion formed in my mind.

Dad turned to Mark. ‘Meaning that, if it’s not too much to ask, I’d like to hire you as a sort of mentor to Emma for the next six months.’

Mark Knightley as my mentor? Bloody hell, more like my tormentor.

‘I don’t need –’ I began, just as Mark said, ‘I’d be delighted.’

Dad looked at him approvingly. ‘You know the food industry inside out and you’ve got such a successful track record, especially on the marketing side.’

I tried again. ‘But we need to be forward-thinking and innovative –’

Mark cut in. ‘Are you suggesting I’m neither?’

I forced a smile. ‘I know you’re very knowledgeable and experienced in the more traditional markets, but that’s not what Highbury Foods needs right now. And, who knows, I might be looking to compete with Donwell Organics in some way. You couldn’t possibly mentor me in those circumstances.’

He laughed. ‘From my outdated knowledge and experience, I’d say any sort of attempt to enter the organic food market at the moment would be commercial suicide.’ Then he was serious again. ‘But I take your point. You’ll simply have to trust me to tell you if I ever feel there’s a conflict of interest.’

I didn’t retaliate, even though I wanted to. Let him win the first battle; his complacency might cost him the war.

‘So I’ll leave it to you two to decide how best to arrange the mentoring,’ Dad said. ‘Now let’s just go over the agenda for the Board meeting –’

There was a knock at the door and Batty peered in.

‘Henry, I thought you’d like to meet your new PA, she’s from Temp Tation, Pam Goddard’s

agency, you know. Although poor Pam's talking of changing the name, she gets the most peculiar calls sometimes, very distressing. There was one young man who – ' She broke off just as her conversation threatened to get interesting. 'Oh Mark, how lovely to have you back in Highbury! I won't interrupt you, we can do this later.'

Dad sighed. 'It's all right, bring her in, you can introduce her to Emma and Mark at the same time.'

As Batty pushed the door open and stood aside, I remembered the fragment of conversation I'd overheard earlier. All I knew about this person was that she'd temped at Abbey Mill Haulage; but it was quite possible I'd met her before. Highbury was such a small place, with people rarely moving away, and we often asked our existing employees to recommend friends or relatives for jobs. So I looked carefully at the young girl who tottered into the room on impossibly high heels, wondering if I'd recognise her.

I didn't – and, in an odd way, I did. On the one hand, she was a complete stranger; on the other, I felt I'd known her for years. With her long wavy blonde hair, spiky black eyelashes and rosebud mouth, she was the spitting image of Lisa, my adorable Annette Himstedt doll that I'd had since I was nine.

Except I'd never have dressed Lisa in such a loud check suit.

'Hiya, I'm Harriet Smith,' the girl squeaked.

And I'd have to do something about that accent, Pseudo Posh meets Estuary English.

Dad got slowly to his feet. 'Good morning, Harriet, I'm Henry Woodhouse. No doubt Mary's been telling you what an old ogre I am.'

Harriet stared at him, obviously unsure how to respond, while Batty tittered, 'Oh Henry, you and your little jokes.'

Dad went on, 'This is my daughter, Emma Woodhouse.'

Harriet took my outstretched hand and managed a shy smile. 'Hiya, Miss Henhouse. Shit – I mean, sorry ...'

I laughed and tried to put her at ease. 'Just call me Emma, Harriet.'

'Hiya, Emma-Harriet.'

My eyes widened. To my right, Mark seemed to be having a coughing fit.

Dad looked at him anxiously. 'And this is Mark Knightley, our friend and non-executive director. Mark, that's a nasty-sounding cough, would you like to chew on a garlic clove? I always keep some handy, with my troublesome throat.'

'Thank you, Henry, but I seem to have recovered. Delighted to meet you, please call me Mark, Harriet.' Mark shook her hand and gave her one of his most dazzling smiles.

The poor girl went crimson. As she opened her mouth to speak, I intervened before she came out with 'Hiya, Mark-Harriet'.

'It must be confusing being bombarded with so many new names. I'm sure Mary will make you a seating plan for the Board meeting, then you'll know who's saying what.'

Batty's face lit up. 'Such a good idea, Emma, as always, I don't know how you ... Harriet dear, come with me and we'll get started.'

They went out and I smiled to myself. More through luck than skill, Batty had found me the perfect PA. First, Harriet's nervousness wasn't a problem. It was even understandable, since Highbury Foods was a big step up from a half-baked outfit like Abbey Mill Haulage; and I much preferred nervousness to brash self-confidence. Second, she was crying out for my help. A

complete makeover was needed and I had plenty of spare time now that my academic studies were at an end. Finally, she had neither the intellect nor the experience to challenge my ideas – or so it seemed. I made a mental note to reserve judgement; anyone would act like a halfwit after a long dose of Batty.

As if he could read my mind, Mark said, ‘Let’s hope Harriet’s up to the job.’

‘Poor Kate, why did she get married?’ Dad spread out his hands in despair.

Mark was incredulous. ‘Poor Kate? More like clever Kate. She’s just halved her workload – only Tom to run round after, instead of you two.’

I noticed a teasing glint in his eye and decided to rise to the bait. ‘Especially when one of us is such a pain.’

‘You took the words right out of my mouth,’ he said, with a grin.

Dad gave a wan smile. ‘I know I can be a bit of a nuisance at times – ’

‘Oh Dad, we didn’t mean you!’ I darted behind the desk to give him a swift kiss on the cheek. ‘Mark thinks I’m the pain, not you. But it doesn’t bother me, we always say whatever we like to each other, then forget all about it.’

Dad shook his head in bewilderment.

‘If that was true, I’d be wasting my time – and Henry’s money – mentoring you for the next six months,’ Mark said, a note of irritation in his voice. ‘Anyway, I’m probably underestimating Kate, I expect she’s already got Tom running round after *her*. And I bet she’s enjoying every single minute.’

Then it hit me. Kate’s life had taken a new direction and she was no longer at my beck and call. I made a big show of arranging the pens on Dad’s desk.

Mark broke the silence. ‘Now, Henry, where’s that agenda you mentioned?’

~~MARK~~

With the mentoring in mind, Henry had suggested I share Emma’s office whenever I was at Highbury Foods. I sat there now, pretending to re-read the Board papers but secretly watching her as she scowled at her PC.

I still couldn’t get over how much she’d changed physically. The only photos I’d seen of her were the slapdash efforts of my sister-in-law Izzy, whose camera lens was always focused on her kids. More often than not Emma was just a blurred face, or hardly visible under a pile of chubby little arms and legs.

So, no more Mouse. It was the end of an era.

But the dawn of a new one, neatly summed up by that headline, ‘Gentleman’s Relish’. Ironic, of course; when I’d first caught sight of her earlier today, my thoughts had been anything but gentlemanly ...

I closed my file with a snap. Time for the Board meeting.

~~EMMA~~

I couldn’t resist checking Batty’s seating plan from across the boardroom table. At one end of a long rectangle she had ‘HLW – Henry Woodhouse, Managing Director’; at the other, ‘MGK – Mark Knightley, Non-Executive Director’. I knew what the G stood for, of course. The Knightleys believed in recycling the same solid old-fashioned names, as if promoting themselves as fine specimens of English manhood; the father was George James and the two sons were Mark

George and John James.

My parents had been more imaginative; my sister and I were named Isabella Maria, Izzy for short, and Emma Carlotta. That was all down to Sophia, our Italian mother, who died in a car crash when I was three and Izzy was twelve. She'd apparently been a breath of fresh air in Highbury – outspoken and headstrong, but charming with it. It made me wonder how she'd coped with Dad, although Mark once told me that he used to be full of energy.

On Batty's plan, I was at right angles to Mark: 'ECW – Emma Woodhouse, Marketing Director'. Next to me was 'PTW – Penny Worthington, HR Director', then 'JM – Jon Marshall, Operations Director' and 'TSW – Terry White, Sales Director'. Opposite was Batty herself, 'MEB – Mary Bates, Company Secretary', then Harriet and finally 'PE – Philip Elton, Finance Director'.

Finance, yawn, was my least favourite MBA subject and Philip himself was new to the company. I'd only met him once before, briefly, whereas I'd known the others for years. One of my priorities was to make them forget I was Henry's little girl and accept me as an equal.

Fortified by a cup of nettle leaf tea, Dad opened the meeting and welcomed the new faces. We went through apologies (none), minutes of the last meeting (approved) and then to the substance of the meeting, the directors' reports.

Everything was fine until my turn came. I'd persuaded Dad to give me a slot on the agenda, as I wanted to share my marketing plans with the Board and get some early buy-in. I'd prepared a presentation on my PC, then found there was no projector, so everyone had a paper copy of my slides instead.

I started with a brief review of our markets and competitive position. I listed the emerging trends in consumer demographics and buying behaviours and other factors, such as some pending EU food legislation which would adversely affect one of our longest-running lines.

'Any questions at this stage?' I asked.

Everyone was silent. Dad had his head in his hands, as if the picture I'd painted was all too much for him. Then Mark, who'd been scribbling notes throughout my presentation, leaned forward. I tensed; somehow I knew a lecture was on its way.

'Your analysis is too limited,' he said. 'You need to look at competition in a broader sense. For example, what are the trends in eating out as opposed to staying in and cooking with Highbury Foods products? And your focus is all UK, you should be selling world-wide. Expat communities would be an ideal target market for your traditional English product lines.'

'Such as Gentleman's Relish,' Terry said, with a wicked grin. 'Now where did I see that mentioned in the press recently?'

I closed my eyes for a moment and debated which of the two to castrate first, metaphorically speaking. I decided to ignore Terry and deal with Mark.

'I assumed the trends in eating out would reflect disposable income and therefore be linked to inflation and the other general economic outlook forecasts.' I selected a page and held it up. 'Those figures were on slide five, as you can see.'

Mark frowned. 'That's OK at this level. But when you get down to the detailed planning, you need to look at something like the Mintel reports. Remember when I did my MBA at Ashridge? As an Alumni member, I can access all sorts of business information at no cost. Just let me know when you're ready and I'll take you there for the day.'

'How kind,' I said, feeling about ten years old. 'Shall we move on?'

I squared my shoulders and prepared for battle. I was about to step on people's toes big time, including Dad's. 'Corporate image. What's our strapline?'

'Purveyor of traditional foods for the discerning palate,' came the chorus from everyone except Mark and Harriet.

'Rather a mouthful, isn't it? And can anyone under sixty relate to it?'

Dad blanched. 'You're not going to change it, are you?'

'Not yet. But I would like to commission some research into corporate image, among other things, for our main product range.' I paused. 'Betty's Best.'

There was a sharp intake of breath around the table.

'Betty's Best?' Batty whispered, as though uttering something sacred.

'Named after my grandmother,' Dad said to Harriet, who was looking baffled. 'Our very first product, fifty-two years ago, was Betty's Best Seville Marmalade. Since then, the range has expanded to almost sixty products and is still going strong.'

I lifted my chin. 'But, as we heard earlier, not as strong as it should be. Philip, remind us of the sales and profit figures for Betty's Best division.'

'Certainly, Emma.' Philip gave me a knowing look and shuffled his papers. 'Sales two percent down in the last quarter, mainly in the South-East, and operating profit down five percent, due to some aggressive discounting by key distributors.'

Dad sighed. 'Yes, Mark picked up on that and Terry agreed to negotiate more favourable terms.'

'But it's getting more and more difficult to hold the price, Henry,' Terry said in a whingeing tone. 'Betty's Best seems to have lost some of its appeal, or maybe its loyal customers are dying off.'

I couldn't help a little smile of triumph. 'Exactly. Now I'm not saying we get rid of this range, far from it. It's still our main cash cow, in spite of the heavy discounting. What I want is a new range brought in to appeal to a customer segment that we're currently neglecting. If you turn to page twelve in the presentation ...'

I'd mocked up a picture showing a very attractive, smartly dressed, young-to-middle-aged blonde at a well-equipped kitchen table, a far cry from homely old Betty and her rolling pin. And underneath I'd used Word Art for the name of the new product range. Except – oh, shit.

Philip's face lit up. 'Victoria's Secret? Isn't that –'

I felt myself go red. 'A US lingerie company? Yes. This is meant to say Victoria's Secret Recipes, but the last word has gone missing somehow.'

To my left, Mark said quietly, 'It's a basic – read through your material before you present it.'

I took a deep breath. Keep calm, retain presence. 'The name's not important, it was just to convey the sort of positioning I'm after. The smart woman of today, single or married, it doesn't matter, juggling a job and/or family with frequent entertaining. She needs a helping hand in the kitchen but wants to give the impression she's made everything herself. I want to re-market Betty's Best to give her products that need the minimum of preparation, with recipes for sophisticated ways of using them. Her guests will think she's done it all herself. That's Victoria's Secret. Or something,' I added, making a mental note to find an alternative to Victoria as soon as possible.

Philip beamed at me. 'Marvellous, Emma.'

'I can certainly identify with Victoria's situation,' Penny said. 'I think it's a great idea.'

Terry chuckled. 'Maybe that US company would be interested in a joint marketing campaign. Victoria, in her kitchen, with our products and dressed in their lingerie. Could appeal to another untapped market, men aged anywhere between twenty and seventy.'

Dad looked horrified. 'Men buying our products, whatever next?'

I glared at Terry. 'Actually, the Victoria I have in mind is above cheap gimmicks. She's cool and efficient and the envy of her friends in everything she does.' I looked around the table. 'I'm sure you can all think of a real-life Victoria.'

There was silence.

Then Harriet spoke for the first time. 'Victoria Beckham?'

Jon burst out laughing. 'No way. Does she even know she's got a kitchen?'

I ignored him and smiled at Harriet, who was pink with embarrassment. 'You've got the right idea, but I'd prefer someone who's not a celebrity. Someone with beauty, class and brains that women in the real world can aspire to be.'

Philip said, 'Well, gentlemen, I'm sure we need look no further than this room –'

Mark interrupted him impatiently. 'Basically, you're looking to revamp Betty's Best products for a younger customer segment?'

'Correct,' I said. I couldn't fault his concise summary.

'Have you done any research to justify this?'

'Of course. Only desk research so far, but I'd like to do some primary research with focus groups. That'll mean spending some money, concept boards with photos and so on. If the Board approves, I'll put together a proposal and some costings for our next meeting.'

'Seems a sensible approach,' Dad said. 'Who's in favour?'

Philip and Penny raised their hands instantly, followed by Batty and Terry. Jon hesitated, then nodded.

Dad looked down the table. 'What about you, Mark?'

'I have some reservations, Henry, but nothing major. And I'm sure that, between us, you and I can keep Emma on the right track.'

I stared at the papers in front of me. He made me sound like a wayward teenager.

'That's settled, then.' Dad sounded relieved. 'Harriet, add Emma's proposal to the agenda for our next meeting. We've got no other business to discuss, so let's finish there. Jon, I'd like a word with you before you disappear off to the factory. And would anyone like to try some nettle leaf tea? It's highly recommended for eliminating waste.'

Pity it couldn't eliminate Mark Knightley. From this boardroom or, better still, from my life. How could Dad ask him to mentor me? It would be like turning the clock back to Mouse. He'd always been one for criticising me and bossing me around; I'd accepted it then, even looked up to him. And there'd always been Kate to restore the balance; in her eyes, I could do no wrong.

But now the last thing I needed was The Tormentor telling me how to do my job. I'd have to make my plans without consulting him, and take action before he noticed.

As I moved towards the door, Philip rushed to open it. I gave him a warm smile, remembering his encouragement and support during the meeting, unlike some I could mention.

He leaned forward and murmured, 'I was really impressed by the way you defended Harriet against that idiot Marshall. Of course, I was about to say something myself, but you beat me to it. I suppose you can guess who my real-life inspiration is for your divine Victoria?'

Just then, I heard a shriek. It was Harriet, knocking over the milk jug as she reached for the last

biscuit. Batty dashed out of the room to fetch a cloth, while Harriet blushed and giggled. She looked the opposite of cool efficiency, yet there was something about her ...

‘There she is,’ I said softly. ‘My divine Victoria, as you call her. Just give her some decent clothes and there’s my mock-up brought to life.’

Behind me, Philip let out a long sigh. ‘Beauty, class *and* brains.’

So that was it, he’d fallen for Harriet! Beauty she certainly had. Class I could give her. Brains? He was taking a flyer there, but I put it down to the delusions of a man already in love.

I turned to him with a mischievous grin. ‘You were going to tell me about your real-life Victoria.’

He went bright red. ‘I’m sure you can guess who she is, it must be obvious to someone as intelligent as you.’

‘I have a pretty good idea,’ I said with a laugh. ‘Anyway, I’d better go and start my research proposal. It’s good to know you’re onsite, I may need some help with the costings.’

His eyes gleamed. ‘I’ve got a standard cost-benefit analysis spreadsheet we could use, quite complicated, but I’m more than happy to go through it with you. How about this afternoon?’

I knew he just wanted an excuse to come and see Harriet. ‘OK, we can at least have an initial chat so that I know what sort of detail you’ll need. Ask Harriet to check my diary.’

I smiled as I left them together in the boardroom; it looked as though my next matchmaking project was underway.

Mark was in my office, looking out of the window. I couldn’t see his face, but his hands were behind his back and he was fidgeting with his watch, always a sign he was worried.

No wonder; Izzy had told me all about Tamara and his carefree expat lifestyle in India. Now he was stuck on his own for six months in Highbury, where the old biddy mafia tracked your every move and the highlight of the social calendar was Batty’s Charity Bridge Drive.

I touched his sleeve. ‘Mark.’

He spun round and gave me a long, serious look. ‘Mouse. I mean Emma. Sorry, I was miles away.’

‘Listen, why don’t you come for dinner tomorrow night? We can catch up properly and you can terrify Dad with tales of Delhi belly. Shall we say seven o’clock? It’ll be just like old times.’

He hesitated and for a moment I thought he was going to refuse.

Then he said simply, ‘Sounds great.’

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About the Author



Juliet describes herself as ‘a nineteenth-century mind in a 21st-century body – actually, some days it’s the other way round’. The youngest of four girls, she was born and bred in North-East England, where she met her future husband. Unlike Anne Elliot in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, she got married despite pressure to wait until she’d finished her degree, and emerged from the University of Nottingham with a First in French and Russian. Thirty years later she is still married, has two teenage children and lives in Harpenden, Hertfordshire.

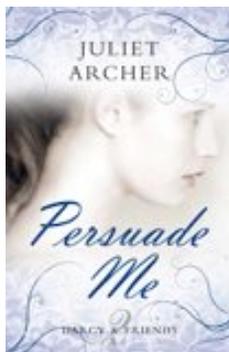
The Importance of Being Emma won The Big Red Reads Fiction Award 2011 and was short-listed for the Melissa Nathan Award for Comedy Romance 2009. Juliet’s second novel, *Persuade Me* was short-listed for the Festival of Romance Best Romantic Read Award 2011.

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