



EMMA READ

Chicken
House

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*To James, for all our time
trapped in the house together.*

Also by Emma Read, for younger readers:

Milton the Mighty
Milton the Megastar

And with Sarah Horne:

Panda in the Spotlight



CHAPTER 1

The End

Deliah McDeery sat cross-legged on the thick carpet of Claude Laurent's lounge doing a Killer Sudoku. She had a feeling she'd put a wrong number in somewhere but carried on regardless. Feelings were not facts and anyway, if she had made a mistake, it wasn't her fault. It was because her mind was elsewhere.

Upstairs to be precise.

She twirled her pen over the combinations of numbers on the page, the possibilities for each

dotted shape, the boxes and lines and rows, all adding up to the same total. Regular, logical . . . comforting. Still, it wasn't enough to properly distract her from the laughter coming from above.

In two days' time, Deliah's supposed best friend, Claude, and his family would be moving to Cornwall. Deliah and her mum were there to say goodbye. To celebrate their decade-long friendship, make promises to visit, hug and cry a bit, and help move boxes.

But somehow Deliah was alone, while Claude and his new best friend from school, Sam, were in the game snug playing *Escape Room II* on the Switch.

And that was fine. Totally fine.

Deliah scribbled over the failed puzzle, folded up the newspaper and threw the pen on top of it. She scanned the room for something else to do but the shelves were bare, apart from a single framed photo, left there, Deliah assumed, for her benefit. It was cringingly awful, an ancient Polaroid of her and Claude in a paddling pool. They couldn't have looked more different – Deliah, all lobster-pink sunburn, next to Claude's brown skin – but

back then they might as well have been the same person. And there was the proof: identical plastic sunglasses, matching T-shirts, his and hers grins.

Claude's mum, Sara, pointed it out all the time. 'Adooooorable!' she'd say, her faint French accent creeping through as she rolled the 'r'. If they were unlucky, they'd get a cheek pinch, as if they were still four years old. 'Look at those gorgeous little smiles.' They did look happy.

Deliah imagined the picture torn down the middle, separating them for ever.

Sara came in with a glass of iced tea for Deliah. 'I hope you're not letting those boys leave you out?'

'I'm fine Sara, honestly. I'm not really a fan of *Escape Room*.'

And anyway, what's the point? Our friendship is done.

Sara Laurent raised her eyebrow and stirred her own tea. 'Well, it's about time you lot got some fresh air anyway.' She strode to the bottom of the stairs. 'Claude, Sam, get your butts down here.'

Apathetic grumblings about 'just saving' drifted from above and then the boys tramped down the

stairs, letting gravity do most of the work.

Claude led the way, looking more like his dad than his dad did. These days he wore designer shirts, even on a Saturday, and his trousers were ironed, with perfect turn-ups to complete the look.

Deliah finished her tea and it tasted of summer.

‘You sure you haven’t played that before, Claude? Anyone would think you have some kind of sixth sense.’ Sam slapped Claude on the back and tied his faded hoody round his waist.

Mrs Laurent took her son gently by the chin. ‘Claude, you’ve got two visitors, remember? And Deliah is a special guest.’

Sam put on a face of mock indignation. ‘Am I not a special guest, Mrs L?’

Claude’s mum scrutinized him. ‘Hmm. You, I can take or leave.’ She smiled warmly and ruffled his shaggy brown hair. ‘But we’ve known De since she was, ooh, this big.’ She indicated something roughly the size of an egg with her thumb and forefinger, and laughed.

‘Now, all three of you – outside. And phones on the table. Devices are banned.’

Deliah could guess what was coming next:

When I was your age . . .

‘When I was your age, we went outside after breakfast and didn’t come home until we were hungry.’

Deliah and Sam groaned in sync but did as they were told, slapping their mobiles on the table.

Claude looked embarrassed. ‘It’s not the dark ages any more. Games like *Escape Room* are the new social. Times have changed, Mum.’

‘Not as much as you might think.’ Sara tapped the table, waiting for Claude to add his phone to the pile, then passed Deliah her rucksack, shoving a packet of chocolate biscuits in the front pocket. ‘Be back before dark, please.’

Despite her complaints, Deliah was glad to be getting out of the house. Sam and Claude had been holed up together for longer than she’d realized and time was running out. Even though Claude had clearly swapped her out, she still wanted to say goodbye to him properly – leave their once firm friendship behind and move on. She’d gone over the plan in her mind several times, and it hadn’t involved Sam Eavis.

She touched a half-piece of ammonite fossil in

her pocket, running her fingers over the rough outside, then the smooth, bumpy form of the ancient creature spiralled inside. All part of the plan. She put it in her rucksack for safekeeping, next to her penknife and torch.

The adults kept calling it ‘the end of an era’, but really, Deliah was relieved. This way it could just be over, rather than suffering the slow and awkward death their friendship seemed to be heading for as they grew further and further apart.

Claude’s dad poked his head out of the conservatory, where all the parents were reminiscing over old times. ‘I guess this is the last time I have to remind you to stay well away from those woods,’ he called, snatching Deliah from her reverie. She did a strictly-on-the-inside eye-roll.

It’s Badwell Woods, not some impenetrable wilderness.

Another voice suddenly shrilled from behind. ‘Hang on, wait for me!’

Claude’s ten-year-old sister, Amity, charged past them and out on to the patio, her gold-sequined rucksack bouncing, tasselled shawl flying out behind her like a cape.

Mr Laurent waved a half-eaten accra at Claude.
'Keep an eye on Ami, will you? Cheers bud!'
'Great,' muttered Claude.