



## Meet the Real World, Rachel

“Rachel, if you don’t open this door and tell me what’s going on now, I *am* going to go and get your mum!”

For a second there was silence, and then I heard a tiny *ftt!* sound. It was the sound of a bolt being drawn back. Before Rachel got a chance to change her mind, I barged in and shut the door behind me.

And there was Rachel, sitting on the lid of the loo seat, looking like the world had ended.

“Oh, Stella, you are going to think I’m a *complete* freak!”

Uh-oh.

What on earth was coming next? Was she going to admit to being a trainspotter or something? Or was she going to confess to being half-human, half-robot?

I dreaded to think. . .

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meet THE  
REAL WORLD,  
RACHEL

KAREN M'COMBIE

 SCHOLASTIC

## For Justine (my *Just 17* pal)

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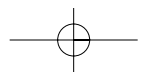
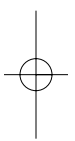
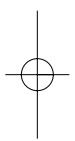
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**From:** \*stella\*  
**To:** Frankie  
**Subject:** Wish you were here! (Sniff!?)  
**Attachments:** Meet the real world, Rachel

Hi Frankie!

Weird question, I know, but do you remember that time when me, you, and the others went to Camden Market and hung out on the little bridge over the lock? We were up for doing some boy-watching, weren't we, except that Lauren got in a right state when she saw a dead duck floating in the canal. Eleni tried to tell her that ducks don't drown, and Parminder said maybe it was just having a lie-down. But Lauren *still* stressed out, till the "duck" got nearer and Neisha pointed out that it was actually a kebab wrapper.

For some dumb reason, that memory of London and you guys *pinged* into my head after the ambulance left the lido last week. Why, I don't know, since the whole lido thing was *properly* scary. I mean, Rachel definitely *wasn't* having a lie-down at the bottom of the pool that day, and she definitely *couldn't* have been mistaken for a kebab wrapper – not wearing that tiny, foxy bikini anyway!



Last time we spoke, you said it was amazing how obnoxious a girl could be, specially to people who'd just saved her life. Well, that's true, but it's a bit more complicated than that. So here's the whole saga as an attachment. Read it and see what you think of Rachel once you've checked it out. . .

OK, I'd better get off the computer – Jake and Jamie are hanging off each of my elbows, demanding to look at the Boohbahs website. (How tragically unglamorous is my life!)

Miss you ☹, but M8s 4eva ☺!

\*stella\*

PS Peaches brought me a present and left it on the bed for me this morning. Wow – how did my fat cat know that I'd *always* wanted a smelly insole for a size 42 trainer?



# CHAPTER 1

## Juggle, juggle, splat

“Ffftttttffffffffff. . .”

Heatwaves and fur – they’re not a great combination.

Peaches – flopped out on the desk in my den in the garden – made a sound like steam slowly hissing out of a leaky pipe.

Maybe all the hot air trapped in his furry body was escaping in that one feline sigh.

“Poor puss. . .” I muttered, wondering if I should put my paintbrush down and reach over to give him a sympathetic stroke – but that might make him even *hotter*.

Unless . . . unless I filled a rubber glove full of ice cubes and tried stroking him with *that*, of course!

Yep, the heatwave was melting my brain, if you hadn’t noticed.

I decided I should just carry on with my painting and try to ignore the fact that I thought I might self-combust.



My painting seemed to distract Peaches too; his eyelids flipped open *just* wide enough for me to spy a glimmer of green and black. His pupils rapidly expanded and contracted as he focussed on the brush, which was daubing watercolours on the thick white paper only a few centimetres from his nose.

Peaches' whiskers twitched, and in a split-second, a hairy, fat paw extended, lazily trying to claw at the darting brush.

"Oi – don't spoil my picture!" I told him, moving the drawing pad closer to me.

Pretending he hadn't heard me, or done anything as silly and undignified as playing, Peaches sighed another sigh, curved his back into a reverse arch/stretch and gazed out of the tiny den window, towards the tent in the garden.

The tent that was bulging – and giggling.

"I bet you a tin of tuna that someone starts crying in the next two minutes," I muttered to Peaches.

The tent was my dad's idea of keeping my two-year-old brothers a) amused, and b) out of the sun. Dad had made a tiny clearing in our rainforest of a garden to put the tent up and then left Jake and Jamie to it, while him and Mum got on with some DIY in our wreck of a house.

So far – from the safety of my den – I'd seen



my twin brothers drag many (unexpected) things into the tent, including a box of cornflakes, their entire soft toy collection, both their tricycles, a potty, a tin of cat food, a wooden spoon, the clothes-peg bag, a plastic fireman's helmet, and my friend TJ's little sister Ellie.

TJ had dropped Ellie round here while he went to the house over the lane for a juggling lesson with the clowns who lived there.

Good grief. . .

Can you believe I just said that? Two weeks ago, I was living in a smart flat, in a trendy part of London, with a great room of my own and a bunch of very cool friends to hang out with.

Now I lived in a crumbly cottage in a snoozy seaside resort, hung out in a glorified garden shed, was best mates with a short lad with a big dog, and had *clowns* for neighbours.

At least one thing in my upside-down life hadn't changed. At least I still had my drawing and my painting – and even a sort of art studio to do it in, if you tried to forget that what I was sitting in used to be an ancient outside loo or laundry room once upon a time.

*Boing.*

That was one of my (zillions of) springs of hair, escaping from the scrunchie I'd bundled it into.



I'd also tried to keep my over-enthusiastic hair at bay on this meltingly hot Monday afternoon by clipping it back off my face with a mismatching collection of star, flower and fruit-shaped hair-grips.

*Boing.*

Great – another curl making its bid for freedom. Soon they'd all be sproinging and boinging in front of my face and I'd never be able to concentrate on the funky (i.e. not corny) fairy I was painting.

“Ahh-woooooo. . .!” a hairy someone suddenly sighed.

Hey, what was I complaining about? In heatwaves like this, at least I could wear a vest-top and mini. Poor old Bob the dog was stuck with his thick, furry coat. It must be like wandering around with a duvet superglued to you. . .

Feeling sorry for him, I grabbed the old jam jar of water right beside me.

“Want some water?” I asked, glancing down at the hairy hunk of Alsatian panting on the cool-ish floor of my den.

“You can't give him that!” said a voice, as a (short-ish) figure blocked the sun in the doorway. “It's full of blue swirls . . . you've just scooshed your brush around in that, haven't you?”



TJ was right – I had indeed just scooshed, and swirls of Cerulean Blue were suspended in the H<sub>2</sub>O that I'd nearly poured into the saucer by Bob's nose. I had no idea if Cerulean Blue watercolour paint was poisonous or not, but I liked TJ's dog a LOT, and the last thing I wanted to do was kill him. (It wouldn't look too good this early on in mine and TJ's friendship, I didn't suppose. It would be the equivalent of him losing one of my brothers on a stroll or something.)

"How did the juggling lesson go?" I asked TJ, plonking the blue water jar back on the table, while Bob gave a disappointed "humfff!" as the promised liquid didn't materialize.

"Brilliant!" grinned TJ, sticking his hands deep in his baggy skater trousers and pulling out an apple, a plum and a raggedy tennis ball. "Watch!"

As he started juggling, I frowned.

"They taught you to juggle *that* stuff?!" I asked, confused.

Mr and Mrs Mystic Marzipan (not their real names, if you hadn't guessed) were professional jugglers, as well as acrobats, puppeteers and clowns. I didn't think they'd normally recommend that people juggle with the leftovers of the fruit bowl and a tennis ball that looked like it had been chewed and spat out.



“Nah – I learned using some beanbag things of theirs. This ball is Bob’s toy,” panted TJ, trying to concentrate on the whirling three items he was chucking from hand to hand. “The other stuff . . . I sort of helped myself to from your kitchen table just now.”

Aha . . . so it *was* from the fruit bowl. *Our* fruit bowl. Which made us sound like a very healthy family. Just as well no one could see that half a bag of cement and some weird plumbing gubbins were laid out alongside it on the kitchen table cum workbench.

“Did you notice that Ellie’s being held hostage in the tent?” I asked, getting back to my fairy and deciding to paint her wings translucent pink.

“Uh-huh. Bossing two little boys about . . . bet she’s loving it,” said TJ, keeping up with his keepy-up.

“Hmm. . . I wouldn’t bet on it *lasting* though. My brothers might be a few years younger than Ellie, but they’re only going to behave for *so* long before they’ve got her covered in clothes pegs and are forcing her to eat cat food off a wooden spoon.”

“Whatever. At least it gives me a break.”

It might not have sounded like it, but TJ was actually pretty fond of his five-year-old sister.



What he *wasn't* so fond of was the fact that his mum expected him to be Ellie's more-or-less full-time babysitter/playmate/bodyguard for the holidays, and when you're a thirteen-year-old lad, that's just not exactly cool, is it?

"So what're you up to?" TJ asked, not taking his eyes off his whirling fruit and ball.

"Building a full-size replica of the spaceship from *Star Wars* out of dental floss," I mumbled, concentrating hard on not going over the lines with my paintbrush.

"Hey, see your fairy paintings?" TJ chatted on, *obviously* aware of what I was doing (so why did he ask?!) and *obviously* ignoring my sarky comment.

"Yep, I see them," I said, my eyes fixed on the nearly finished one in front of me. "What about them?"

"Well, they remind me of this film my mum forced me to watch once, 'cause she was starring in it."

"What film?" I asked, stopping what I was doing and turning to face the frantically juggling TJ.

From what he'd told me before about his mum (who I'd met a couple of times and didn't like much), she was one of these people who *say*

they're actors but don't actually seem to *do* much acting.

"It was this thing set in the olden days. Like medieval times or something. It was about these two schoolgirls who saw fairies at the bottom of their garden and took photos of them."

"TJ, they didn't *have* cameras in medieval times!"

"Whatever."

I spotted a hint of a grin on TJ's face – and realized I was being wound up, in revenge for my dollop of sarkiness probably.

"So what star part did your mum have in this film anyway?" I asked him, ignoring the wind-up now I'd spotted it.

"A villager in the background, sort of milling about. She was on screen for about three whole seconds."

TJ wasn't especially close to his mum. I think she'd probably be better at *acting* the part of a mum, rather than really being one. It wasn't like she was cruel or horrible to him or anything, it's just that you got the feeling she'd rather be a hotshot big star in swanky West End theatres than be stuck in Portbay with two kids.

"Anyway, for a film about fairies it was pretty good," TJ continued, "cause it was based on a true story."

“You mean, the girls *really* found fairies at the bottom of their garden?” I frowned, quickly glancing at the tangle of weeds, wildflowers and wilderness directly outside the window.

“No, Jamie!” Ellie’s voice suddenly wailed. “*Don t* pull that out too or the whole tent will—”  
“WHAAAAAA!”

I stood up quickly, to see what kind of disaster had struck in the garden, and saw Jamie hovering beside the remains of the tent. He was hugging a fluffy green crocodile who happened to be wearing a cornflakes packet at a jaunty angle on its head.

In Jamie’s hand was a bundle of tent pegs freshly pulled from the ground. He looked very happy watching as Ellie – in a fireman’s hat – dived back into the collapsed tent to rescue the wailing, Jake-sized lump from inside.

“Er. . .”

Now I turned back to see what the “er. . .” was about.

“Sorry, Stella – Jake shouting like that sort of made me *jump*.”

Yeah, well, jumping was one thing; dropping the fruit and ball you were juggling was another, specially when an overripe plum had splatted against my jam jar and sent the blue-swirly water spilling all over my funky fairy.

I lunged forward, hoping I could maybe throw a wodge of tissues on to the picture before the mini-tidal wave did much damage. But I hadn't reckoned on Peaches swishing his huge, hairy tail across the whole sheet of paper, smudging the colours together even more.

"Apple?" asked TJ, holding out a peace-offering piece of fruit and looking like he was worried I might take it and bounce it off his head.

"You'd better think of something to cheer me up in the next five seconds," I told him sternly, before grabbing the apple and biting hard into it. (Mmm! The light dusting of cement powder added an interesting texture and taste. . .)

"I know the *exact* thing to cheer you up," TJ promised, as he tried to restrain Bob from lapping up a blue-ish puddle from the floor of the den.

"As long as it doesn't involve water, I'm happy," I said, rolling up my ruined, dripping artwork and sticking it in the bin.

TJ started choking.

Was it something I said. . .?

## CHAPTER 2

### Bad vibes and bellyflops

“Can you read it?” asked TJ, holding my phone in one hand and using the other as a five-fingered umbrella, keeping the screen in enough shadow for me to see the words that had just been texted to me.

“Yeah, thanks,” I nodded, as I leant my elbows up on to the side of the pool.

*Hi Stell – what u up 2? Love F*

The message was from my best friend Frankie, back in London. The answer to her question – which I couldn’t exactly text back since my fingers were wet – was that I was currently splashing around and generally cooling off in Portbay’s lido, along with half the town, it seemed.

It had been TJ’s idea to come here, right after he’d juggled the contents of the jam jar of water over my painting this morning. And it was a brilliant idea, even if it *did* involve water, *and* big