



Sweet-Talking TJ

“STELLAAAA! Don’ stop!” Jake roared, wondering why we weren’t going anywhere any more.

Ignoring my little brother’s demand, I tried yelling again.

“TJ!”

Nothing. If anything, he dropped his head even lower to the ground.

I gripped tightly on to the buggy handle, stunned, as TJ and his mates (and Bob) turned into the alley where The Vault was. One of the lads – couldn’t tell ’em apart yet – turned and gave me a sarky little wave before they disappeared.

I still didn’t move, though I could feel my cheeks flooding pink. I had just been blanked, by my supposed friend. What in Bob’s name was all *that* about?

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SWEET- TALKING TUT

KAREN M'COMBIE

 SCHOLASTIC

**For Alison, who was Alyx (silent "x")
back when we were 14**

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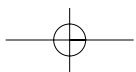
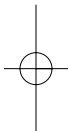
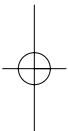
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From: *stella*
To: FFFrankie
Subject: Hope you're bored 'cause here's
more stuff to read!
Attachments: "Sweet-Talking TJ"

Hi FFFrankie!

Wow . . . Lauren just e-mailed THE most boring e-mail I have ever had in my lifffe. I really miss you lot in London and love hearing fffrom you, but did Lauren *really* need to tell me the shape she fffiled her nails into? I wrote back and told her that ifff she was really fffed up, she should ask her mum and dad ifff she could come and visit me, and we could just have fffun, hanging out at the beach fffeeding fffairy cakes to the psycho seagull and stuff. She hasn't got back to me yet – d'you think I scared her off by mentioning the psycho seagull?!

Talking about e-mails, in the last one you sent, I couldn't fffigure out what you were on about in your PS – the bit about "who was the boy that answered your mobile?". It did my head in fffor ages, and then it suddenly hit me, and I realized. . .

Hey, you know something? I'm not going to



tell you here, 'cause that'll spoil the surprise. I thought it'd be better iff I wrote the whole thing down, starting fffrom the night after you got the train back to London, 'cause that's when . . . oops! Nearly blew it again!

Look, just read the attachment and it'll all make sense. (Er. . .)

Miss you ☹, but M8s 4eva ☺!

stella

PS It took me ages to input this because Peaches is sprawled out and snoring *right* in fffront of the keyboard. I have to hit the "FFF" key really hard 'cause of a wodge of ginger fffur stuck under there. . .



CHAPTER 1

Fuzzy eyeballs

Y'know . . . when you cross your eyes, things look really different. (Including you; it makes you look like a right idiot.)

At this moment, my idiotically crossed eyes were gawping across the jumble of tiled rooftops outside my bedroom window, vaguely focusing on the faraway fairground down by the beach. When I squeezed my fuzzy eyeballs together, all the jewel-coloured bulbs on the Big Wheel looked blurrily beautiful, like gently pulsating lights on some alien spacecraft, hovering in the sunset over Portbay. . .

Hey, that was pretty poetic.

Or maybe it just sounds like the rantings of a nutter; I don't know.

Blame my sudden genius/nutter rantings on the fact that it was nine-ish on Sunday night and I was *completely* pour-me-into-bed tired after the weekend. It had all been a bit like the roller



coaster me and Frankie had whizzed around on last night, hanging on for dear life and not knowing whether to shriek in total fear or burst into a bad case of the giggles.

So how'd you describe the weekend I'd just had?

Put it this way, if I saw the words "GREAT", "TERRIBLE", "EVEN MORE TERRIBLE", "EMOTIONAL", "FUN", and "ZONKED" on a form with tick boxes, I'd tick *every* single one.

I'd tick "GREAT", 'cause Frankie had come to visit me here at the new house (and new town).

I'd tick "TERRIBLE", 'cause she'd acted weird, making me homesick for London, homesick for Seb (the boyfriend I *might* have had), homesick for all my old friends, and homesick for the best, most brilliant mate that Frankie (usually) was.

I'd tick "EVEN MORE TERRIBLE", 'cause of Frankie admitting last night that she was the girlfriend Seb definitely *did* have (urgh). And the fact that she admitted it while we were marooned at the top of a broken-down Big Wheel ride didn't exactly help (but that's another story).

I'd tick "EMOTIONAL", 'cause of Frankie and me falling out, then making up again, promising to be friends for ever, and never to let boys and long distances get in the way.



I'd tick "FUN", 'cause of this afternoon's house-warming party – having Auntie V here, as well as Frankie, was ace. And then, through our new neighbour, I got to find out lots of info on the mysterious person who used to live in our house.

And finally, I'd tick "ZONKED", 'cause of all the post-party tidying that had to be done, *and* 'cause of all of the above added together. . .

"Hey, Stella – that was your Aunt Vanessa on the phone!" I heard Dad call up from downstairs. "She's just got back home, but she told me to let you know that she and Frankie managed to get a seat together on the train back to London!"

Actually, I'd just e-mailed Frankie about twenty minutes ago, asking how the trip home had gone (probably had a million spelling mistakes in it I was so tired). I was glad to hear it went OK – even if I wasn't hearing it from *her*.

"Great!" I called out in reply.

I could make out Mum shushing Dad from somewhere, annoyed with him for risking waking the twins. Ha! If they were half as tired as I was, you could yell the theme tune of *EastEnders* through a megaphone at them and they wouldn't move a muscle.

I should've given in and headed for my bed and early snoozeland too, but I didn't have the energy



to get up from my kneeling (OK, *slouching*) position on the floor of my room. So I just let my elbows slither further apart on the windowsill and stared – kind of contentedly – into space.

That was until my hazy view of the twinkling Big Wheel was suddenly obscured by a huge black shadow. . .

OK, OK, so it was more of a huge, *ginger* shadow. A ginger shadow that looked fuzzy even once I'd uncrossed my eyes.

"Hi, Peaches!" I smiled at the huge scruffy cat that had silently hopped up on the windowsill and settled its purring self *right* in front of my face.

"Prrrrp!"

I couldn't be absolutely sure what "prrrrp!" meant, but I had a funny feeling that it translated as "I've been curled up in your den in the garden, hiding away from your demented little brothers".

I couldn't blame Peaches if he *had* hidden away; at this afternoon's house-warming party, the twins had somehow managed to eat a whole trifle between them when no one was looking, and spent the next hour roaring around on a sugar high, causing mayhem and resisting all attempts to be caught and have the cream and coloured sugar sprinkles washed off their faces/hands/hair/clothes.

“Hey, I saved you some leftover hot dog,” I told my cool cat, taking my elbows off the sill to make more room for His Tubbiness. “It’s in your bowl in the kitchen. I even washed off the mustard so you don’t burn your tongue!”

Peaches’ green eyes stared deep into mine, as if he was slowly devouring that edible piece of information. Then he stretched forward, catty nostrils working overtime, until he gently touched his inquisitive nose on to mine, making my eyes go crossed all over again.

By the time I blinked my eyes into focus, he was gone, bounding out of the open window, landing on the kitchen roof with a powder-soft *doofff*, and then padding and pouncing off somewhere wherever. And there I was, left lounging on my bedroom floor, wondering what exactly I smelled of (leftover hot dog?) and if I’d just been given the feline version of a nose-rubbing Eskimo kiss.

“Except the *proper* name for Eskimos is Inuits,” I murmured to myself, some module we’d done in geography about societies around the world popping pointlessly into my mushy brain. Of course, I’d learned that at my *old* school, back in London. After the holidays, I’d have a new school, a new geography teacher, and new



classmates (gulp). Only five weeks to go (double gulp). . .

To take my mind off that distressing thought, I grabbed a hunk of my T-shirt and sniffed hard, trying to suss out what exactly had got up Peaches' nose just now. Aha – it seemed that today's party and the tidying-up afterwards had left me with barbecue-scented hair and a general waft of Fairy Liquid. Nice. . .

Bleep!

It was only a tiny, high-pitched noise, but the sound of that incoming text message acted like a big, flashing, neon "GO!!" to my nervous system and I practically *scrambled* over to my bed, grabbing the flashing phone that I'd tossed on there earlier.

Remember – every day! was all it said, but it made me smile. It was from Frankie, that was for sure, reminding me of the promise we'd made to each other on the platform of Portbay station, earlier this evening. From now on, we'd keep in touch – by text, e-mail, letter, phone, jokey postcard or carrier pigeon – every single day, so that the distance between us didn't matter.

"M8s 4eva!" I keyed back to her, thinking how strange it was that she was back in London, and how strange it was that I didn't ache to be there



too, considering how bad I felt about being dragged to this bizarre-o little town only a few days or so ago. But then, so much had changed in such a tiny amount of time: last Sunday, I'd been so miserable about moving to Portbay that it felt like someone had cut out my heart and stuffed a sack of sludge in its place. Then all the weird and kind of wonderful stuff started happening: Peaches moving in, like he'd always lived here; meeting the mad old lady (Mrs Sticky Toffee) with her even madder "pet" (a bad-tempered seagull with a sweet tooth); discovering Sugar Bay, and the secrets of the old, not-so-grand house there.

Amazingly, tonight, instead of yearning for my old life in Kentish Town, I was yearning for tomorrow to come, just to see what other secrets and surprises Portbay had in store for me. . .

Well, my newly reactivated brain might have been mostly full of vibey thoughts, but a tiny part of it was alerting me to an odd noise coming from somewhere outside.

"Bark!" [thump] "Bark!" [thump] "Bark!"

Dropping the phone back down on the duvet, I got up and wandered over to the open window.

"Bark!" [thump] "Bark!" [thump] "Bark!"

At the end of our overgrown tangle of a back



garden, just over the tall brick wall that you can hardly see for tangle, there's a tiny lane that ambles between all the mismatching houses and cottages in our corner of the town. Right now, just above the top of the wall, I could make out a furry brown head – which appeared with a bark, before disappearing with a thump.

What's that dumb dog up to? I wondered to myself, watching its Jack-in-the-box routine.

And then I got it: Peaches.

In the couple of minutes since he'd flounced off the windowsill and left me to my mobile messaging, Peaches had perched himself comfortably on the garden wall, all the better to peer at passers-by – human and canine – on this warm, summer's evening. And now he was being peered at himself, by an over-enthusiastic four-legged "friend".

For a second there, I panicked, feeling a protective flurry of worry for Peaches, but then I realized I was wasting my time. I mean, I guess that any *normal* cat – faced with barking and big teeth at close quarters – would now be off like a shot, hissing and spitting, doing the whole arched-back thing. But not my Peaches. He was calmly squatting, paws tucked under his ample belly, watching this frantic, manic dog with nothing

more than mild interest, the way you might let your eyes settle on a meandering dust-speck if you were spectacularly bored.

“Bob! C’mere! Leave the puss alone!” I heard a boy’s voice suddenly urge.

I was glad to hear that someone was in charge of the mental mutt, but it couldn’t have been a very grown-up or tall someone – I couldn’t see a hint of anyone above the adult-sized wall.

“Bark!” [thump] “Bark!” [thump] “Bark!”

“Bob! I said *down*, boy!”

Whoever the kid was and however young he was, the dog thankfully did what he was told and gave up with a gruff “Awww, spoilsport!” grumble.

“You idiot! Don’t you remember the *last* time you tried to lick a cat?” I heard a voice chatter, as the kid and “Bob” set off down the lane. “It took *months* for your nose to heal. . .”

As the voice, the dog-panting, footsteps and claw-taps faded away along the cobblestoned lane, I gazed down at Peaches, who at that exact same second turned and looked up at me. And *winked*.

Wow, that cat sure was weird. . .

CHAPTER 2

Bob, the boy and the dive-bombing bird

Well, shock, horror: Jake and Jamie were playing nicely.

OAPs strolling past us on the beach cooed at the boys, who were happily digging and patting at their sandcastle, chubby hands clutched around plastic buckets and spades.

“Aren’t they adorable!” said one older lady, stopping to smile down at the general cuteness.

“Like little angels!” said her friend, tilting her white-haired head.

“Mmmm!” I mumbled in reply, shading the sun from my eyes with my hand as I smiled up at the two elderly ladies who were obviously besotted with my brothers. Ha! They wouldn’t have called Jake and Jamie angels if they had seen them this morning, having joint toddler tantrums and then a kicking competition, all over a quarrel about a piece of jammy toast.

“Er, Louise. . .” my dad had grinned at my