



Truly, Madly Megan

“Er . . . remember that my mum said she’ll give you a lift, Megan!” TJ called out suddenly, loud enough for Megan’s dad to catch.

As Megan relayed that into the phone, just in case her father *hadn’t* caught it, Ellie looked up at TJ in complete confusion.

“But Mum isn’t here!” she said, in her innocent voice. “And she doesn’t have a car!”

“Shhhhh!” TJ shushed her. “It’s called playing for time!”

As soon as he said that, I think me, TJ and Rachel had the exact same thought. If TJ’s mum had a car, then Megan’s parents could expect her and Naomi back at the caravan park in approximately five minutes. And that was *never* going to happen, seeing as there was no Mrs O’Connell, no car, and – most importantly – no Naomi. . .

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TRULY,
MADLY
MEGAN

KAREN M'COMBIE

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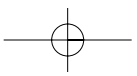
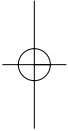
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From: *stella*
To: Frankie
Subject:
Attachments:

Hi Frankie!

How're you doing? I'm prettY
@^\$*^^*****0000000))))))
))))))))))))))))))))))))00000000000000000000
00000000000000000000000000000000@

From: *stella*
To: Frankie
Subject: Whoops!
Attachments: Truly, madly Megan

Sorry about that e-mail you just got, Frankie!

Hope you didn't think I'd gone completely insane (bet you were worried that all the salty seaside air here had fuzzed up my brain!).

Blame my weird cat instead – I'd just written you this great long e-mail and was about to attach the, er, attachment, when Peaches jumped on the desk, walked all over the keyboard – deleting what I'd keyed in and tapping some random rubbish of his own – and



somehow managed to *send* the blimmin' thing.

Y'know, Peaches is definitely getting spookier. I had this dream last night that I was living back in London, and hanging out with you and the girls again. But I couldn't hear what any of you were saying, 'cause your voices were being drowned out by this loud sort of *humming* sound. Then I woke up to find Peaches sitting on my chest, practically nose-to-nose, staring hard at me and purring his head off. I *swear* it was like he wasn't just reading my mind, but sneaking into my dreams too. . .

OK, admit it – now you really *do* think the salty seaside air has fuzzed up my brain, don't you?!

Got to go (before I say anything else mad!), 'cause I promised Megan I'd e-mail her a photo of the time she was modelling in the leopard-skin dress and tea-cosy hat.

Uh-oh . . . that sounds stunningly mad, doesn't it? Well, just read the attachment and you'll see that it's not. *Much*. . .

Miss you ☺, but M8s 4eva ☺!

stella

PS Maybe Peaches was typing in code. Maybe

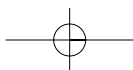
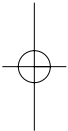


@^\$*^ ^*****0000000
))))))))))))))))))))))))))))))0000000000000000
00000000000000000000000000000000@ means
"helloooooooooooooo from Peaches". Or
maybe not. . .



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CHAPTER 1

A whiff, an oink and a splat

It couldn't last long; being relaxed, I mean. Not with a dog that farts in its sleep.

"What's that stink?" asked Rachel, wrinkling up her pretty nose, and looking around the beach for a mountain of rotting seaweed or whatever else might be causing the current whiff.

"Sorry – it's cat food," said TJ with a shrug.

Rachel looked confused, but then she'd only been best friends with me and TJ for a week, and didn't know us – or Bob the dog's occasional bottom problems – very well yet.

"TJ's local corner shop only sells cat food," I started to explain, gazing at the hairy Alsatian sprawled out and snoring like a living shaggy rug on the sand next to us. "And if TJ's mum forgets to buy dog biscuits at the supermarket, then they have to feed Bob cat food. Which gives him the . . . er . . . *problem* you can smell."

I didn't want to say the "fart" word out loud –

not when my two-and-a-bit-year-old twin brothers were within earshot. I didn't want to spoil a lovely, lazy, sunny morning by having Jake and Jamie parroting "FARTFARTFARTFART FART!!" at the top of their voices. . .

"Yewww!" mumbled Rachel, wafting her hand under her nose.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Ellie – TJ's kid sister – suddenly start fanning herself in the same way. In between building sand-castles and singing annoying nursery rhymes with my brothers, she'd had her eyes totally glued to Rachel. I was pretty sure there was a serious case of hero worship developing there. If you were five, thirteen-year-old Rachel must look like the most gorgeous, grown-up girl in the world. Mind you, *I* was thirteen and thought much the same. . .

"Here, have a sniff of that – it'll take your mind off the pong!" TJ grinned, lungeing towards Rachel, holding one of his kicked-off trainers.

(TJ got a real buzz from teasing Rach – not so long ago she'd been part of a bitchy little clique who gave him a hard time, and he hadn't been friends with her long enough to completely forgive her *just* yet. . .)

"Gerroff!! God, why do boys have to be so

horrible?” groaned Rachel, ducking back out of smelly-trainer range.

“They’re just born that way, they can’t help it, the poor things!” I grinned, earning a smelly trainer in my lap as punishment.

“Y’know, speaking of how horrible boys can be, my brother is such a *pig!*” Rachel suddenly moaned, leaning her arms back in the sand and lazily watching the arc of the trainer as I chucked it *way* over TJ’s head to safety.

“How come?” I asked.

Now I spotted something *else* out of the corner of my eye . . . when Rachel spoke just now, Jake and Jamie glanced at each other and started to giggle. Which is always a worrying sign.

“Well, last night I went into his room and—”

“Oink!”

“Oink, oink!”

“Jake. . . Jamie. . . Shut up, please – Rachel is talking,” I warned them sternly. “Carry on, Rachel.”

“Yeah, go on!” said TJ. “I’m *dying* to hear why you think Si is such a pig!”

“Oink! Oink! Hee, hee, hee!” giggled Jake.

“Oi—”

Before Jamie could properly join in with the barnyard noises again, I slapped my hand across his mouth.



“Sorry, Rachel,” I mumbled. “Hey, *yuck!*! That is *disgusting*, Jamie!”

Quickly, I grabbed my drooled-on hand away from Jamie’s grinning face, and scrambled about in my skirt pocket for a tissue.

“OINK!” yelled Jamie, now that his mouth had been liberated.

Of course, Jake couldn’t be outdone like that.

“OINK!OINK!OINK!OINK!OINK!OINK!
OINK. . .”

Good grief.

It was Monday, the start of my fourth week in my new home town of Portbay. My parents decided to drag our family here from London because they said stuff about us all having “a better quality of life” in this super-sleepy seaside town. Well, OK, I guess it *was* pretty nice to spend a summery Monday morning sitting on a sunny beach like I was doing right now. But the only way my “quality of life” could *really* be improved was if Mum and Dad had decided to leave the twins behind in London when we moved. (Only joking. Kind of.)

“ . . .OINK!OINK!OINK!OINK. . .”

“Stella, will I take them away to play?” asked Ellie, scrambling to her feet.

I could have kissed her.



Ellie was sometimes tiringly bouncy, and her habit of bursting into song or tap-dancing on the slightest hard surface could drive you mad. But she really was a nice, thoughtful little kid. I hoped the twins would outgrow this drooling/biting/roaring/wrecking phase they were going through and start acting more like Ellie soon, but I can't say I held out much hope for that.

"Yes, please!" I half-said, half-sighed in relief.

Me, TJ and Rachel stayed silent, till Ellie grabbed hands with Jake and Jamie and waddled them – still oinking – a little way along the beach, where the boys immediately began entertaining themselves by kicking down the big, ornate sandcastle some kid had lovingly built and left behind.

"So, you were saying . . . *why* exactly is Si supposed to be a pig?" asked TJ.

Ellie might be showing signs of hero-worshipping Rachel, but I had a sneaking suspicion that TJ ever-so-slightly hero-worshipped her big brother Simon. And just like Ellie, I could understand why. Si might look a little on the scary side with his pierced lip and black eyeliner, but he was also frighteningly cool and spookily handsome (yeah, even *with* the lip-ring and eyeliner). And he happened to have a summer job in The Vault, TJ's



favourite shop in town. It was this dark, dingy and very hip CD and comic store in a back lane off the high street; the sort of place you suspected you could stumble upon really rare records and plague germs in the darkest, dustiest, unswept corners.

“Well, I was forced to go in his pit of a room last night to find the hairdryer,” Rachel started up her story again, “and when I bent down to pick it up off the floor, I saw all this *stuff* under his bed!”

“Stuff?” I asked nervously, not exactly sure what seventeen-year-old boys kept under their beds.

“Plates – loads of plates with old, dried-up mouldy bits of pizza and food on them!” Rachel said with a grimace. “*And* wrinkled piles of smelly socks!”

“Gross!” I mumbled.

TJ, meanwhile, just sniggered a bit. Did he have the odd half-a-sandwich and lost sock under his bed too?

“I don’t know how Si gets so many girls crawling after him,” said Rachel, rolling her eyes. “He’s such a freak. But they all have crushes on him – specially that weirdo Tilda.”

Urgh . . . there was a funny mix of feelings in my chest just then – when Rachel was calling people “freaks” and “weirdos”, I mean. I know I

used those words too, but not with that particular flip, nasty tone in my voice. I guess what bothered me most was that Rachel and her old crew made me feel pretty much like a freak and a weirdo during my first couple of weeks here in Portbay, with their stares and sarky digs.

But then again, I was quite up for hearing more about Tilda. I'd seen her wandering round town on her own a lot, in this bizarro arty outfit of black leather jacket, pink tutu, stripy tights and Doc Marten boots.

"Tilda's all right," shrugged TJ. "I think she's kind of cute, in a . . . a . . ."

"In a weirdo way!" Rachel finished his sentence for him. "Well, she's freaky enough for my brother, but he just can't see it. Keeps saying they're just mates, but she follows him round all over the place like a lovesick puppy. Or looking the way she does, she's more like a lovesick *bat* or something. . ."

PARP!! PARP!!

Call me naïve, but you don't really expect to hear old-fashioned bicycle horns on a beach. Specially not directly in your ear. Which is why the three of us (and Bob) nearly jumped out of our skin/fur.

But then as soon as we saw the pair of clowns

looming over us – all red noses and painted-on grins – we relaxed.

At least, me and TJ did.

“Hi John! Hi Bev!” TJ grinned up at them.

“Hey, call us the Mystic Marzipans while we’re on duty!” the woman clown smiled back his way.

PARP!! PARP!! PARP!! PARP!! parped John/Mr Mystic Marzipan.

Rachel looked as confused as when TJ had come out with the cat-food comment earlier.

“I already told you about Mr and Mrs Mystic Marzipan, Rachel – they’re my sort-of neighbours, remember?” I said, trying to jog her memory. “They’re renting the holiday cottage over the alley from us. They’re doing lots of, er, *stuff* for the Portbay Gala Week.”

“We’re performing in various capacities, that’s correct!” Bev/Mrs Mystic Marzipan nodded at both me and Rachel, making her pink, wiggy head of curls bob back and forth. “And who might *you* be?”

Rachel seemed to be finding it difficult to answer a question addressed by a clown (maybe she was transfixed by the flashing red nose?) so I answered on her behalf.

“This is our friend, Rachel!”

“Pleased to meet you, Rachel,” said Mrs Mystic Marzipan, holding a hand out to her.

Rachel warily went to shake it – but ended up finding a paper flower placed between her fingers as if by magic. And there was *more*.

“If you look in the front pocket of your bag, dear, you’ll find there’s some info on *all* the events taking place during the Gala week.”

“Thanks. . .” mumbled Rachel, plucking one of Mrs Mystic Marzipan’s leaflets from the front pouch of her pink vinyl rucksack.

“Right, better get on – got plenty of these to hand out!” said Mrs Mystic Marzipan, clutching a fat bundle of leaflets and following after her husband, who’d run up PARPing at the squealing, giggling bunch of kids along the beach, who just happened to be my brothers and Ellie.

“Those people are *weird*. . .” mumbled Rachel.

“Those people are *brilliant!*” TJ laughed. “They taught me how to juggle and everything!”

Rachel didn’t look convinced, as if TJ had just tried to tell her tomato sauce on ice-cream was a great idea. But I’d got too sidetracked by something I’d just noticed to join in and argue about why Mr and Mrs Marzipan were absolutely as cool as ketchup.

“*Search for a Gala Princess!*” I read out from the top of a list on the leaflet in Rachel’s hand.

(The rest of the list waffled on about bouncy castles, art exhibitions, puppet shows, plays and a parade on Saturday morning – which would feature, it said, the Gala Princess.)

Don't get me wrong; I wasn't all *excited* about the idea of a Gala Princess competition. After all, I was pretty sure that *I* had about as much chance of being picked to be Gala Princess as a snowball had of staying in one piece in a pizza oven. But reading it just got me imagining the sensation of being stared at by the whole of the town, not to mention heaps of holidaymakers. The very notion of it made every shy molecule in my body (and trust me, I have a kerzillion of 'em) completely *cringe*.

Who'd be confident enough about the way they looked to stand up to *that* kind of attention? (Not to mention all that ogling. . .)

As soon as that thought *pinged* into my head, I found myself gazing at Rachel, and saw that TJ was doing the same. Well, she *was* the prettiest teenager in Portbay (and she knew it), so who else could be the Gala Princess?

"No way! Don't look at *me!*" Rachel suddenly shook her head hard. "It's bad enough having a seizure in front of a café full of people – I don't exactly fancy falling flat on my face in front of the whole town!"

I could see why Rachel was nervous. She'd only just found out she was epileptic, and hadn't exactly enjoyed the couple of shaking, twitching, fainting fits she'd had so far – once at the outdoor swimming pool and once halfway through a song on the karaoke machine at the Shingles café.

“How about this, then?” said TJ, about to read something else he'd spotted on the flyer. “*Talent Show – show us your talents and win a fantastic prize! First round: Tuesday, 10 a.m., The Sea Stage. . .*”

“The Sea Stage?” said Rachel, crinkling up her nose. “Is that what they're putting up along there?”

Before Bob's botty problem had distracted us, we'd been lazily watching a bunch of guys erecting some kind of wide, wooden platform further along the sands. Mind you, we hadn't been that curious about it up till now, since it hadn't been as much fun to watch as the slowly inflating bouncy castle up at the beach car park.

“S'pose it is,” I said with a shrug. “Hey, Rachel – you could do your Kylie song again!”

Yesterday afternoon at the Shingles café, Rachel had managed to put seizures to the back of her mind and made it all the way through “Can't Get You Out of my Head”, and at the end

of it got a standing ovation (instead of a ride in an ambulance, like the first time she'd tried it).

"Not sure if I'd risk it . . . and I can't do it anyway," mumbled Rachel, staring down at the leaflet while idly fixing the paper flower Mrs Mystic Marzipan had magicked up into her long, dark hair. "Mum's made an appointment for me tomorrow morning with the doctor."

Eek . . . *that* wasn't going to be much fun. Especially when it meant that Rachel was going to have to confess her little secret to the doctor; i.e., her little secret about—

"Uh-oh . . . *whoahhhhh!*" I heard TJ say, *just* before I got splatted sideways – and ended up with a face full of beach.

"Oops! God, I'm SOOO sorry!" said someone.

Blinking sand from my eyelashes, I raised my head just enough to see a gangly teenage girl with blonde-ish hair smiling awkwardly down at me.

Then the strangest thing happened – she was all of a sudden upside down.

And then the right way up again.

And then upside down again.

And the right way up again.

And she was getting smaller and smaller all the time. . .

Why did I feel like I was starring in *Alice in Wonderland*? Did I have concussion?!

“Hey, well done, Stella!” said TJ, as he helped me sit up. “You are officially the first person I’ve ever met who’s been the victim of a hit-and-run cartwheel!”

Hit-and-run cartwheel?! I thought dizzily, as I tried to focus on the girl spiralling along the beach away from us.

“Maybe she should try walking, like a normal person,” grumbled Rachel, staring hard after her too.

“Or wear L-plates?!” laughed TJ, rubbing my hair so hard to get the sand out of it that I felt dizzier than ever.

Help, I think I needed to sit down, if I wasn’t sitting down already. . .

CHAPTER 2

"Everybodywantstobeacat!!"

It's funny how my brothers can be maddeningly wide awake when I'd prefer them to be comatose, and then comatose when it would be kind of *fun* for them to be awake.

"Hey, Jake! Jamie! You're missing the balloon animals!" I called down to them snoozling in their buggy.

Nothing.

And they weren't just missing out on the balloon animals (being squidged and twisted together by none other than Mr and Mrs Mystic Marzipan), but all the other acts dotted along the prom for Gala Week too.

"Here, Stella," said Mum, appearing at the side of the parked buggy, with a double-scoop ice-cream cone each for me and her. "Got pistachio and vanilla, or strawberry and vanilla. Which one d'you want?"

My brain can play the strangest tricks on