

★ STella etc. ★

# FRANKIE, PEACHES & ME



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KAREN M'COMBIE

CHOLASTIC



# STELLA

# FRANKIE PEACHES

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藏书章

# KAREN M'COMBIE

# For Kirsty Etc.<sup>☆</sup> (<sup>☆</sup>Amanda + Tim)

Scholastic Children's Books,  
Commonwealth House, 1-19 New Oxford Street,  
London, WC1A 1NU, UK  
A division of Scholastic Ltd  
London ~ New York ~ Toronto ~ Sydney ~ Auckland  
Mexico City ~ New Delhi ~ Hong Kong

*First published in the UK by Scholastic Ltd, 2004*

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Cover illustration copyright © Spike Gerrell, 2004

ISBN 0 439 97342 2

Printed and bound by Nørhaven Paperback A/S, Denmark

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# STELLA etc.

## Frankie, Peaches and Me

“*Jamie!*” I heard Dad call loudly from the front doorway downstairs. “How many times do I have to tell you?! Biting is very, *very* bad!”

“Sowwy, Stewwa!” Jamie lisped appealingly at me, as he stroked my hair like I was a cat.

“RaaaaRRRGGGHHH!” Jake roared meantime, hurtling himself feet-first, face-to-the-floorboards down the stairs towards Dad and the TV set he was carrying into the house.

The knickers still taped to Jake’s head flopped in time to him thumping his way at top speed down each step. And the Polaroid? Well, all I could see of it was a crumpled white edge peeking from Jake’s tiny clenched fist.

“Bye, Seb. . .” I whispered in my mind, as the baby-toothed dent in my arm throbbed madly.

Bye, the whole of my old life.

And hello . . . *what* exactly?

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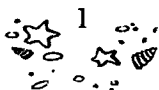
**From:**                \*stella\*  
**To:**                   Frankie  
**Subject:**           Helloooooooooooooo!  
**Attachments:**   "Frankie, Peaches & Me"

Hi Frankie!

Sorry I missed your call – we were all out for a walk down at the beach (got a ton of sand in my ears from play-fighting with Jake and Jamie – still can't hear properly).

So on the message you left you said you had a dream about me last night: you dreamt I'd moved away from London? Well, I guess there are mornings when I wake up and listen to the sound of the sea and the gulls and think, "Er, where am I again?"

But you coming to visit right after we moved here, that was great. OK, so it wasn't great *all* the time, specially not when we were arguing. But when you're marooned 50 metres in the air for half an hour, I guess you've got to pass the time somehow! I know we talked a lot and made up and everything, but anyway, I thought I'd scribble stuff down (see attachment); just stuff about what exactly happened that first week – you know, the move here, and about Peaches, and



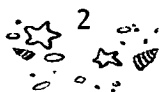
Sugar Bay and you and . . . and the rest.

Oops, got to go – I might have half a beach in my ear but I can *definitely* hear somebody somewhere screaming (wish Jamie would grow out of this annoying biting thing). E-mail me back soon, and in the meantime, give your mum a big cuddle from me, send hugs to Neisha and Lauren and everyone, and . . . well, maybe you could say “hi” to Seb next time you see him (if that’s not too wierd, I mean). . .

Miss you ☹, but m8s 4eva ☺!

\*stella\*

PS Peaches says no hard feelings. (He *actually* said “Prrrp!”, but I’m pretty sure that’s what he meant!)





# Chapter

# 1

## **Just your non-normal, un-average Saturday morning. . .**

"Tinkle, tinkle, lickle star. . .!" Jake crooned in my ear, wafting a toy dumper truck in time to his song, and occasionally thunking it against the side of my head.

My little brother (one of a matching set) was completely oblivious to what was going on, but *I* wasn't. It was Saturday, it was 11.05 a.m., and it was the start of my brand new life. Worse luck.

Meanwhile, in a galaxy far, far away (OK, North London), my friends were probably doing the usual Saturday morning stuff.

Eleni would still be in bed, having a lie-in. (Though how she can sleep while her brother parps his weekend trumpet practice, I just don't know.)

Neisha would be in bed as well, but wide awake, watching telly and getting herself and her duvet covered in toast crumbs.

Lauren would be watching telly too, only in

her living room, with her sister, fighting over the remote control (in a battle of boy bands v cartoons).

Parminder would be at the supermarket, helping her mum do the shopping, daydreaming about cute stuff in TopShop while cruising the frozen food aisle.

Frankie . . . well, round about this time in the morning, Frankie would be thinking about texting everyone to see who was up for a trek to the West End or a mooch around Camden Market in the afternoon. Of course, her Saturday morning would be a bit different just this once, 'cause she'd be clearing up from the party last night. My leaving party – and already it felt like for ever ago. . .

“So, Stella . . . what do you think?” Dad grinned at me hopefully, like a little kid who’s showing you his model of the Tower of London made out of toilet-roll tubes.

I knew Dad wanted me to say something about the house (um, preferably something *nice* about the house), but all I could think of was what a deeply *non-normal*, *un-average* Saturday morning I was having. I mean, I'd got up at six in a practically empty-of-furniture house, watched some removal men cart away our beds to a waiting lorry, waved goodbye to the place I'd

lived in and loved for the 13 years and two months I'd been on the planet, and sat for four hours in our car getting a numb bum and listening to a tape called *Really Annoying Nursery Rhymes That Will Drive You Insane* on a loop.

And now I was here, walking across the crunchy gravel of the driveway with a wriggly toddler in my arms, trying not to cry (I really don't think that was the reaction Dad – or Mum – would have wanted).

"Andy!" Mum shouted, as she lifted another wriggly toddler out of the car. "The removal lorry is here – but I think it's got stuck trying to get round the bend in the lane. Can you go and give the guys a hand?"

I don't know what Dad was meant to do – get a giant hacksaw and cut bits off the side of the lorry so it could get around the corner without scraping the ice-cream-coloured shades of paint off the terrace of tiny cottages next door to us, maybe? Or waft a magic potion at the lorry and make it shrink like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*?

Speaking of fairy tales, I felt like I'd found myself stuck in the middle of one now, and I *don't* mean that in a good way. Apart from spying a sprawling council estate on the way into the

town, the main part of Portbay – the place I was now supposed to think of as “home” – seemed like a higgledy-piggledy, claustrophobic jumble of tiny lanes and centuries-old cottages that tumbled downhill towards the sea. And here was *our* centuries-old cottage, like the house in *Hansel and Gretel*, minus the sweets, but looking suspiciously like a witch might be peeking out of one of the upstairs gabled windows at us.

“It’s just perfect, isn’t it?” Mum sighed, as she let Jamie slither his wriggling way out of her arms and on to the ground.

Perfect? Perfect for a *Houses from Hell* documentary on the telly. Or the set of a murder mystery, maybe.

“Mmm,” I mumbled in reply, wondering if Mum had gone completely mad. The whole building was tatty and crumbly, and I kind of suspected it was only standing upright thanks to the creeping dark-green ivy that was clinging and clawing its way all over it.

“Maybe it’s just as well you couldn’t come that weekend when we first viewed the place – it’s more of a surprise for you now!” Mum smiled, reaching over and taking Jake out of my arms before he blinded me with the scoop of his dumper truck.

“Mmm,” I mumbled again, glad that it was so

sunny. It meant that I could shield my eyes as I pretended to survey the house, and hide the fact that tears were threatening again.

As far as your average parents went, Mum and Dad were great – they were groovier and trendier than any of my mates' mums and dads. They were interested in fashion and music and stuff, which my mates' parents definitely weren't. They were easy to talk to – when they weren't too busy with work or the boys, which was a *lot* of the time. But no matter how cool Mum and Dad were, when it came down to it, they were adults, and I was 13; there were two of them and just one of me, and so when they decided to move from London to Portbay, I really, *really* didn't have a choice. Course I told them I didn't want to go, and cried in front of them at the hideous idea of leaving Kentish Town and Frankie and all my other friends, but it didn't do any good. They just smiled, and hugged me and told me they understood – which translated as, "Sorry, but it's still going to happen, Stella!" After that, I just went quiet on the whole subject of the move, ignoring it as much as possible, pretending I had projects to finish and tests to study for and hiding out at Frankie's whenever Mum and Dad came down to Portbay to house-hunt.

"Are you going to call Frankie and let her know you got here OK?" Mum asked, noticing that I was fishing in the pocket of my denim skirt for my mobile.

"Mmm," I mumbled, forcing a lookalike smile on my face and turning away.

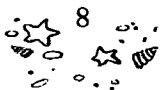
Frankie always teased me that my silver flip-topped phone looked like one of the phasers out of *Star Trek*. I wished it was – then instead of just talking to her, I could ask her to beam me back to London at the speed of light. Or quicker, if possible.

But my heart sank as Frankie's please-leave-a-message kicked in. And it sank even more with full-on, heart-squeezing, gut-wrenching homesickness when I listened to it.

*"Hi guys! I'm having way too much fun to answer the phone right now, so say what you've gotta say and I'll get back to you! Byeeeee!"*

I wished I was back in London having fun with Frankie, instead of being marooned in this freaky little town. I wished I was at her flat now, helping her Hoover up crisp crumbs instead of watching Mum rushing to stop Jamie from eating the gravel in our new driveway.

But at least I had one thing, I suddenly remembered, patting the cord bag on my shoulder, where I'd stashed the photo from last night.



The photo of that amazing moment when –  
**KEEERRRRRRR-UNCH!**

“Omigod!” Mum gasped, glancing around in the direction of the lane with dread.

Well, *that* was a good impression to make on our new neighbours – gouging a chunk out of their wall with our furniture lorry before we’d even moved in. Hey, I might *not* be the only person wishing my family had stayed in London. . .

# CHAPTER

# 2

## Oh, we *don't* like to be beside the seaside. . .

I was holding Jamie upside-down by the ankles – so that the make-up he'd nicked from my bag would fall out of his pockets – when I heard Mum say something on the phone downstairs.

Well, it was more a case of her saying nothing. And that told me *plenty*.

"Me next! Me next!" Jake suddenly demanded over the top of Jamie's giggles.

"Shh!" I tried to hush my brothers, ignoring the fact that Jake had what looked suspiciously like a pair of my knickers fastened to his head with a used section of parcel tape (he must have ripped it off one of the cardboard boxes). Honestly, trying to unpack with these two around was as easy as nailing jelly to a tree. And when it came to getting them to shut up, I had *no* chance.

"Well, the neighbours probably secretly hate us, but they acted very sweet when we offered to pay for the damage. Oh, our place? Well, it's messy



and nothing works, and we're in total chaos, but it's fine."

(*That* was the chunk of Mum's conversation I'd tuned into when I first spotted Jamie shoving my mascara and strawberry lipgloss into his dungaree pockets.)

"Hey, you know what Andy's like, Vanessa – he can't *wait* to get started on the place. He's already eyeing up the sledgehammer, and the removal lorry's still in the driveway!"

(Auntie Vanessa hadn't wasted much time – we'd only left London six hours ago and here she was on the phone, pummelling Mum for an update on the Big Move.)

"The boys?"

(Auntie V must have been asking about Jake and Jamie.)

"They're having a great time – they've been thundering up and down the stairs, and getting in everyone's way!"

(And mostly wrecking what little of my room I'd managed to get halfway organized – which Mum and Dad thought was fine, since it distracted Jamie from biting the removal men and Jake from escaping our clutches and shouting "Boo!" at all the cars coming along the narrow lane next to the house.)