



The Lucky Balloon

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What this story is about

When 10 year old Rachel sees a brightly coloured balloon floating free, she tries to catch it, but the balloon blows away in the strong wind.

Then she learns the balloon belongs to Matt, a sick boy who thinks it's a lucky balloon that will help him get through a big operation. Now Matt is sad because his special balloon is missing.

But when Rachel goes hunting for it, things go wrong and she has to come up with a new plan.

Fast!

Chapter One

Rachel saw the balloon for the first time on Monday. It was red, yellow and blue. Her favourite colours.

She was walking home from school, wrapped up against the icy wind in a hooded jacket and gloves. Seeing the balloon swirling around made her forget the cold. It made her laugh.

Rachel wondered if the balloon would cheer up Jake. Her baby brother needed cheering up. All he did these days was cry.

Maybe I'd cry, too, thought Rachel, if I had sharp baby teeth trying to drill holes through my gums.

It wasn't Jake's fault he was teething. And that he cried all night.

But it meant that everyone, especially Rachel's mother and father, was short of sleep. And grumpy because of it.

Rachel dropped her backpack and pushed back her hood. She might be able to catch the colourful balloon, but she'd have to run really fast. Especially in this wind.

She'd only taken a few steps when the wind suddenly changed direction, sending the balloon racing back towards her.

She couldn't believe her luck. She stood up on her toes and raised her gloved hands like she did playing goalie for her soccer team. No way the balloon would get past.

As it flew at her face, Rachel lunged. And missed as a gust of wind suddenly whipped the balloon up and over her head.

She spotted some trailing string and snatched at it, but the string slipped through her gloved fingers.

In seconds, the balloon picked up speed and disappeared around a corner. No way she'd ever catch it now.

Disappointed, Rachel picked up her backpack, pulled her jacket hood around her face and trudged home.

Chapter Two

That evening, Rachel had just flopped down on the couch to eat an apple when a local story flashed up on the TV news.

The family of a 10 year old boy named Matt - the same age as Rachel - had just moved to town to be close to a big hospital. Matt was going to have an operation. Serious enough that Matt could either live or die.

The operation would be on Wednesday. In two days' time.

Matt's mother told the reporter Matt had lost something special. A balloon which had come loose from Matt's wheelchair and blown away that morning in the high winds.

A red, yellow and blue balloon!

Rachel dropped the apple and jumped up off the couch, her eyes glued to the screen.

The balloon was a gift from one of Matt's friends back home and Matt believed it would bring him good luck. That's why the family was appealing to the public to help them find it.

With the lucky balloon beside him, Matt was sure the operation would go well. But now that he'd lost the balloon he wasn't so confident.

Matt's story ended and the news cut to the weather forecast for the next day. More strong winds and rain.

Rachel didn't care how awful the weather was tomorrow. She'd seen Matt's balloon on the way home from school.

All she had to do was find and get it back to him before his operation on Wednesday.

How difficult could that be?

Chapter Three

Rachel kept her eyes open as she walked to school the next morning. Nothing. Lots of fallen branches and swirling leaves, but no red, yellow and blue balloons.

Some of her school friends had seen the news story, but when Rachel told her teacher about seeing the balloon the previous day, the teacher said it was probably in another town by now.

And the weather was much too wild for the class to go on a balloon hunt.

Rachel knew she'd just have to do her *own* balloon hunting after school. That would still give her time to get the balloon to Matt in hospital before tomorrow's operation.

By the time Rachel ran out of the school gates later that day, the weather had got even worse. Cold, driving wind and rain stung her face. She tugged on the hood of her jacket and pulled it tight around her cheeks.

She'd start the search where she'd last seen the balloon – the corner where it had disappeared yesterday.

She ran to the corner, but no sign of the balloon. The same with the next *ten* corners.

Rachel's heart sank. It could be anywhere. Another town or even another *country*.

She was wrong. The balloon turned out to be much closer.

Rachel couldn't believe her eyes when she spotted it, wedged in the upper branches of a big tree.

She stood at the foot of the tree and looked up. Could she climb that high? Yes. She had to.

For Matt.

Chapter Four

Rachel took off her bulky jacket and backpack and left them at the foot of the tree. She also took off her gloves to get a better grip on the branches.

Slowly she started to climb, all the time keeping her eyes on the balloon.

The wind and rain lashed the tree and soon Rachel was freezing cold and soaked to the skin. But she wouldn't give up. Not when she was this close.

Finally, Rachel reached the branch where the balloon was wedged. She crawled out along the branch towards the balloon, reaching out her right hand to grab the string with her bare fingers. No way her prize would escape. Not again.

Rachel tugged on the string.

The balloon moved, but so did Rachel's hand as it lost its grip on the branch!

Rachel yelled and had to grab the branch with *both* hands to stop herself plunging to the ground.

That pushed the branches apart enough to release the balloon which took off and flew away.

Rachel forced herself not to cry as she scrambled down the tree. She threw her jacket over her wet clothes and started to give chase.

But the balloon flew faster than Rachel could run, bouncing off letterboxes and power poles.

It charged into a hedge and paused briefly as it scraped along the side. Rachel narrowed the lead. A goalie dive might do it.

The dive was bigger than Rachel planned as her foot landed on a pile of wet leaves. Next thing she knew, she was face down in a muddy puddle.

Rachel picked herself up and kept going, leaping around flying newspapers and cans.

The balloon tumbled along the pickets of a freshly painted fence, then flipped off the last picket and flew low along the sidewalk, scooting towards a parked car.

Rachel expected the balloon to bounce off the car's bonnet but she was wrong.

Instead of going up and over, the balloon shot under the car. There was no way through and, in seconds, it was wedged tighter than it had been in the tree.

Rachel sprinted to the car and dropped to her knees on the wet sidewalk.

She wriggled under the car and tied the string to her wrist before dragging the balloon out. Slowly and carefully.

Bursting the balloon at this stage would be terrible.

Next stop would be home for some clean clothes and then off to the hospital to deliver her prize to Matt.

Unfortunately for Rachel, her mum had other ideas.

Chapter Five

When Rachel walked into the house carrying the balloon, and looking like a drowned rat, she was ordered straight into a hot bath and then off to bed. She was home for the night.

Rachel protested, but mum and dad were too tired and grumpy to listen.

She tried to tell them about Matt in the hospital losing his good luck charm. He needed the balloon she'd rescued to get him through his operation.

It didn't help. Her parents hadn't seen the TV story.

Later, Rachel lay on her bed, angry at her parents and angry at her little brother for keeping everyone awake at night and making them grumpy. And she was especially angry at herself for failing Matt when he needed her.

She rang the hospital and found out the time of Matt's operation the next day. Good. It wasn't until the afternoon.

'I can still do it,' Rachel told herself. 'I can drop the balloon off before school.'

Her mind made up, Rachel tucked down and was soon asleep.

Jake's scream woke her.

His first baby teeth were almost through his gums. People said this last stage of teething was the most painful.

Jake's face was screwed up tight as Rachel ran into his room, holding the rescued balloon behind her.

A brightly coloured thing like this was sure to distract him.

Holding the balloon by the string, Rachel bounced it like a yo-yo off Jake's nose as he lay in his cot.

It worked. The baby stopped crying and waved his hands at the strange new object.

'How about that?' said Rachel. 'This *is* a special balloon!'

Jake chuckled as she bounced the balloon off his nose again and again.

Rachel looked away for a few seconds as her mum came into the room.

'Come and see,' said Rachel, turning back to the cot.

That's when she saw that Jake now had the balloon in both hands, pressing it to his face.

Right up against the tooth that was just breaking through his gums.

BANG! The balloon became a strip of shrivelled rubber.

Jake yelled in fright. So did mum.

But Rachel screamed the loudest.

Matt's lucky balloon was history.

And it was all her fault.

Chapter Six

Early the next morning, Rachel raced out of the house without stopping to say goodbye. Mum and dad were still angry.

After the balloon burst, Jake had taken ages to stop screaming and settle back to sleep. It had been the worst night's sleep so far for all of them.

But Matt's operation was that afternoon and Rachel knew what had to be done.

She had to find another red, yellow and blue balloon to replace the one that got chewed up, then persuade Matt that it was just as lucky as the first one. She wasn't sure how she'd do it, but she'd think of something.

Rachel broke into a sprint.

The mall opened early and she headed for the toy shop.

'Do you sell red, yellow, and blue balloons?' she asked.

'Yes,' said the owner. 'We have red, yellow *and* blue. Which colour do you want?'

'Do you have any balloons with *all* those colours?'

'Yes,' said the owner. 'Most of the time. But I've just sold the last one.'

Rachel raced out of the shop. Luckily other shops in the mall sold balloons.

And that's what they offered her. Big party packs of colourful balloons. But not red, yellow and blue balloons which had suddenly become very popular.

Rachel sprinted out of the mall and spotted the service station down the road. They sold all sorts of things. Why not balloons?

She crossed her fingers and headed for the big petrol sign.

Chapter Seven

'We don't actually *sell* balloons,' said Mr Rooney, who worked there. 'But this week we have a promotion on. We're *giving* them away'.

'Red, yellow and blue ones?' asked Rachel.

Mr Rooney shook his head. 'Sorry, they're all gone. Very popular all of a sudden. But we've got lots of green balloons, or orange, or...'

Rachel didn't wait to hear any more. There had to be one red, yellow and blue balloon left in town. There had to be.

She flashed in and out of three more shops in the next couple of blocks. No luck. Not a red, yellow and blue balloon anywhere. What was going on?

Rachel only realised she'd gone around in a circle when she saw the service station again.

And Mr Rooney outside, yelling and waving to her.

Rachel waved back, but didn't want to stop. Not until she'd found what she was looking for.

But then she realised Mr Rooney was holding something that might be lucky.

Chapter Eight

Rachel could see the hospital up ahead as she ran. She was sure she had the last red, yellow and blue balloon in the whole world tucked safely in her pocket.

Mr Rooney had found it stuck behind a freezer and kept it in case she came back.

Rachel decided not to blow it up until she got to the hospital. Inflated balloons and strong winds had already caused enough problems.

'Hey,' said a grumpy-looking security guard as she burst into the hospital foyer. 'No running.'

Rachel slowed down until she was out of sight, then ducked into a side room to blow up the balloon and add a piece of string.

Now all she had to do was find Matt.

Rachel hid the inflated balloon behind her back as she walked the corridors. She might run into the security guard again and he didn't look like a balloon fan.

She spotted a sign that said *Children's Ward*. She was headed in the right direction.

A nurse walked past and into a room and Rachel caught a glimpse of the patient through a crack in the door. Matt! She recognised him from the TV story.

He looked sad, but Rachel would soon fix that.

A minute later, the nurse came out of the room.

'Can I go in and visit?' Rachel asked, still keeping the balloon hidden behind her back.

The nurse looked at her. 'Are you family? Or a friend?'

'Kind of a new friend,' said Rachel.

'Okay,' said the nurse. 'But make it quick. He's had a lot of visitors already this morning.'

'Not like me,' said Rachel under her breath.

On her own count of three, Rachel flung open the door and stepped into the room.

Chapter Nine

'Surprise!' Rachel yelled as she dragged her hand from behind her back and held up the balloon.

Matt stared at it. So did Rachel, suddenly feeling stupid.

The balloon had shrivelled to the size of a tennis ball. It must have got damaged when it got stuck behind Mr Rooney's freezer.

But that wasn't the only thing that made Rachel feel silly.

Matt's hospital room was *full* of red, yellow and blue balloons.

No wonder all the shops in town had sold out - other people who'd seen the story on TV had been buying and bringing them in.

So why did Matt still look so miserable?

'These balloons all *look* like the one I lost,' he told Rachel, 'but only that first balloon was lucky.'

The balloon Jake's new tooth had wrecked and that could never be fixed.

She looked around, desperate to find some way to cheer Matt up, to give him back the confidence to face his operation.

'That first balloon,' said Rachel, suddenly, remembering the TV interview. 'It was lucky because it was given to you by a friend. Right?'

Matt nodded.

Rachel started to grin.

'That means,' she said, 'that *all* these balloons are lucky.'

Matt looked puzzled. 'How come?'

'Because all *these* balloons were given to you by friends as well,' she said. 'New friends. Like me.'

'But...' said Matt, frowning.

'I reckon,' said Rachel, not giving him time to argue, 'that if one balloon was lucky, you must now be the luckiest boy in the world.'

Matt's frown turned to a grin. Then he started to laugh.

Rachel laughed, too. She felt sure now that Matt would be okay and that he believed it as well. And, after the operation, she'd round up some of his new friends to come visit and speed up his recovery.

They'd all help Matt get well and as fast as he could.

'Matt?' she asked as she got ready to leave. 'Now that we're friends, can I ask you a favour? Seeing as you've got so many of these things...'

Chapter Ten

That night when her mum and dad were asleep, Rachel crept into Jake's room carrying the three balloons she'd borrowed from Matt.

'Hi, Jake,' she said as he opened his eyes. 'Sorry I gave you such a fright last night.'

She tied one of Matt's red, yellow and blue balloons to the cot. Well out of reach of Jake's new teeth.

'This is a lucky balloon,' she told him. 'It's something you give to your special friends to cheer them up.'

Then Rachel walked down the hall to her parent's bedroom and tied the other two balloons to the door handle.

The End