

# **Life According to Emma**

**Rachel Bramble**

## Chapter One

“Oh, yes, really, yes, really, thanks”

Oh sorry, it's rude of me. I shouldn't answer the phone just as I'm about to tell you my story, but I'm excited. I've just won a competition, so excuse me for a minute. I must just ring Bob.

“Hi Bob, it's me. No, I'm not moaning about all the dishes you left me from last night, but then you did promise me. Oh you are such a sweetie, did he!! Look Bob I have to get on. I've got at least one reader who wants to hear my story and if I don't get off the phone in a mo they'll close my book.... Bob I've won! I'm going to be a Hack like you. Yes that comp, you know, the one I did during the summer when we were at the caravan- well you told me to have a go- alright see you tonight”

Right now that's done I can tell you my story and remove the quotation marks. I'll just use them when I'm talking to other people and not you.

Well my name's Emma Woodhouse. Now don't laugh. I know. I get the jokes about Pride and Prejudice all the time and about whether I've made a good match recently. People just seem to get Jane's books all muddled up.

It was my Dad who said I should be called Emma. Of course there are lots of Emma's, but not many Woodhouses with the first name of Emma.

My friend Rose from old school days used to say she wondered what it would be like to be called Jesus. I met one once, but his J sounds like an H and if you met him rather than see his name spelt, you wouldn't associate it.

Well, I'm lumbered with the name. Of course if I ever marry Bob [we've been together for three years] then I'd have a different name, but you won't believe it, I'd then just become another Jane Austen character because his name is Wentworth.

That would really confuse people like my Dad who is an Austen nut. You wouldn't believe that a fifty-five year old man would be nuts about Jane Austen and her characters would you? But he is. Mum likes them a bit, but not as much as Dad. He's a member of the Jane Austen society and whenever they are adapted on radio or TV he's there watching or listening.

As children, my brother George and I would laugh when Mum and Dad dressed up to go to an Austen dinner. Mum used to say how handsome Dad looked in his breeches and Dad used to brag about Mum's boobs, which seemed to be falling out of the top of her dress.

I live 50 miles from them now. I left home 7 years ago at the age of 23 and studied social work at university. The course was ok. After I qualified, I worked for 2 years in an area social services office.

The job and team were fine, but there are more things to life than social work. I got fed up roaming around the countryside placing delinquent children. Well, in the end that's what the job seemed to be all about.

I could have gone and worked with older people, that's what some workers do. They think that it's an easy option, but according to my friend Sue [we met at Uni.], It just isn't. She gets as frustrated as I used to. But then, why do we do it? You may ask. I suppose because we can't do anything else, we love it or we are muggings. That's really for you to decide when you've finished hearing my story.

## Chapter Two

Oh hi! You're back again. Bob has just cooked tea, well he calls it dinner and has washed up too. I've done nothing. I came home feeling tired and I think he felt guilty about last night and so decided to spoil me. It was nice and in a minute we're going to sit and watch Eastenders on TV. He loves it.

If you don't mind me whispering then I can carry on telling you my story. Oh here he is now.

"That was lovely sweetheart"

Bob and I have lived together for just over two years. He's younger than my thirty, actually twenty-seven, so I'm not a cradle snatcher. He's a Hack, working for peanuts at the local newspaper. He's a good writer, but hasn't had a big break yet.

In fact, when I met him he had a scoop and could have joined the nationals. He had some offers, but that's not what he wants to do. He wants to be a writer and publish his own books, so it's ironic really that it's me writing the book and not him.

He does have a go. I go into the dining room and find him staring at a blank page. "What are you doing?" I ask, but he replies, that he isn't yet inspired. "Why don't you write about your life," I say. He's done a few interesting things in his time, but no, he wants to

write some fiction. Oh well, I'll just have to leave him to it. Maybe one day he'll become inspired.

And who inspired me, you're asking. I'm not sure really, probably that character called Dilbert. I've forgotten who wrote about him, but I read one of the books once. A friend, who's into computers, well works with them all the time, gave it to me. All I remember was Dilbert thinking that everyone who isn't a bright computer man being a pillock.

I was mortally offended at the time, but thought to myself afterwards, that I'd like to write like that; about me and my work saying exactly what I thought about all sorts of things.

Believe it or not, when I was a kid I used to be a little mouse. I used to be scared of putting my hand up in class in case I got the question wrong and either, got told off for being stupid or laughed at which was worse. I know that Teachers aren't supposed to be like that, but I reckon it still happens sometimes. My friend Sally told me recently that her son Matt was ridiculed at school. Isn't it a sorry state that we still treat people in this way? It's really pretty sick I think.

What is a social worker doing living with a Hack you might say. Well I'll tell you later, but for now I'm going to watch the next programme as Eastenders has come to an end and Bob does the most wonderful foot massage, so bye for now.

### Chapter Three

My friend Clare is having a pig of a day. She worked in my old team and has stayed friends with me. She asked if she could come round for tea and a bit of TLC. Bob is working late so I said it would be nice to have the company. He doesn't like Clare much.

"She's always moaning", he says, "I could never live with her".

"I hope not", I replied "cos I'm not about to give you up to any woman".

Anyhow, I'd been out to visit a nice woman who had thought about being a carer and Clare had texted me. I texted her back to say fine and to Bob to warn him that she was coming. Won't feel guilty about being late then was his reply.

I thought perhaps before you found out why Clare was down in the dumps that you might like to come on a visit with me. I'm going to see a woman who has been a carer for three years. She looks after a little Asian boy. I can't tell you his name as we have to keep things confidential, but I can tell you that he has a mental handicap. In the trade we call it a learning disability but I thought you'd understand it better if I call it a mental handicap. We'll call him Ali.

This woman, who I'll call Jane, but that isn't her real name, is a single woman. You might wonder why a single woman is caring for someone else's child once a week. Well,

I run a scheme that is called Respite Care. In some places it is called other things, but where I work it is Respite Care.

Jane just gets an allowance to work with Ali and we pay her petrol. I know, its embarrassing only being able to give a small amount, but that's the nature of the scheme.

Oh, by the way before we knock on her door, I haven't forgotten about telling you about how me and Bob met, but our story will keep until the journey back home.

Here we are. I always find it difficult following the numbering in Jane's street and parking is a bit of a bummer too. I think I'll just go in there.

Before we go into Jane's house I'll just tell you a few more things. Jane had a younger sister who committed suicide when she was a teenager. It happens to be near the anniversary of that time so she may be a little fragile. You can never tell with these things, but Jane said that she was happy for you to come. No, just be yourself.

Right, lets knock on the door.

"Hi Jane! How are you?"

"Fine, in fact I've only just got back from my Mums"

Oh I forgot to tell you that Jane's Mum lives close by. Her Dad ran off recently with a younger woman. It was the typical office/secretary affair and so Jane's Mum is rather low at the mo and Jane is angry with her Dad.

"How is your Mum, Jane?"

"She keeps saying she wants him back, but I tell her that she's a fool if she does. He's been carrying on with this woman for four years. It puts me off finding someone for myself"

"You might find someone like my Bob"

"There aren't many of them around, how is he getting on with his book?"

"Not very well really. I feel sorry for him, but in lots of ways he is just so stubborn"

"Look Jane, I better not keep gassing otherwise the reader will get bored, I'll tell them about me and Bob on the way home. They've come to see you and learn all about you and Ali, not me and Bob"

"Ok, but you are so easy to talk to. Do you know reader that when I heard about the scheme. I thought I'd quite like to do that, but I was a bit put off because of what everyone says about social workers. I just thought that they either left kids to die or

snatched them and put them into care. I never realised that they did so many other things and that in fact I now know that they rarely take them into care. I've learnt an awful lot from Emma."

"We all learn from each other Jane, so how is Ali? What have you been doing recently?"

"He's fine, although he's put on a bit of weight so isn't so easy to lift into his wheel chair."

Oh reader I forgot to tell you that Ali is in a wheelchair. He is very dependent but he is generally a happy soul who recognises people.

"He loves seeing you Emma", he says, "When's the funny woman coming again?"

"Actually that's one thing I have to tell you. I've won a competition, which means that for the next six months I shall be visiting social work colleagues in different jobs and writing about them, what they do and their views on their work. I am allowed to take the readers with me so that they get a first hand view and so there will be a temporary worker coming in to do my job."

"That's exciting. I shall miss you, but what an opportunity. What about money?"

"They are matching my salary so I don't have to worry there."

“What does Bob think about it?”

“He is pleased for me, a bit jealous as well probably, but he hides it well.”

“Can’t you include him in the story too?”

“Oh, of course I’m going to include him, it just wouldn’t be the same without Bob. The reader likes a bit of romance, don’t you? Well at least I think most do, even if they don’t admit to it.”

“Oh well Jane we better get going. I hope that your Mum gets over it ok and say hello to Ali and his family from me. I’ll be back, bye.”

Yes, reader Jane is a good woman. I just wish that we had a dozen more like her. We do have some good carers, but we just really don’t have enough of them. There are so many men and women who are retired and still fit who, I think, might enjoy doing something like this for a few hours a week, but they are just so hard to find.

Then we also get young men with a mental handicap, who would like to be matched with men instead of women, but caring is still seen to be mainly a woman’s thing to do.

The men we do get love doing this though. We have one guy who is an ex professional rugby player who was over the moon when we won the cup. I had to try to be interested,

but I'm not at all a sporty person, fortunately Bob isn't either. I don't reckon that I could stand living with a football fan. Oh you like it do you, oh well you'd get on well with Daisy. She's my friend who is a residential social worker and is just nuts about it.

Do you fancy some music on...oh I know that ABBA is a bit.... But its just great to sing along to...oh go on, there's nothing better than singing at the traffic lights, everyone thinks that you are just bonkers, but then lots of people think that being a social worker is bonkers, but it isn't. How can it be?

People come to you needing help and you do your best to help them.

Of course, not all social workers are good, but then it's the same in every kind of job.

Some are good and some are bad. You can judge as you come on these journeys with me whether what you think makes a good social worker is what I think does. Anyway, it's time to get back to the office. You'll have to occupy yourself while I do some write-ups and then I'll tell you about me and Bob on the way to dropping you back home.

## Chapter Four

Oh look at Bob. Isn't he a sweetie? I'm not sure really why I'm using this word. He's really not much to look at, but he does have the most lovely, dark, curly hair. It's the sort that lots of older women would die for. His Dad's is the same, but its pretty grey now.

Oh look at the love, sitting staring at that blank page again. Bob works a lot from home these days. He's cut his hours as a reporter and is trying to write his book. The money's gone down a bit, but we manage fine.

We have talked about having kids and thought that I might stay at work full time and he'd be a househusband, but then we thought that it would be best if we were both part time.

Being a Social Worker is quite suited to part time working. As long as you are a good communicator there really isn't a problem. You can't be in people's houses all of the time. You just have to reinforce sensible living. That's really what most of the job is about.

Anyhow I said that I'd tell you about Bob and me. I suppose we are an odd couple really, not because of us, but because of what we do.

The strange thing was that I was reading a soppy romance and was half way through when who came to sit next to me on the train, but Bob.

You see we live in Birmingham and I was going to London to a social work conference. I originally come from Bristol actually, a district called Stapleton, perhaps you know it?

Anyhow, I was reading and Bob asked me if it was a good book and well.... We just went from there. We talked about what we both did and that was that, an attraction that has lasted all of this time.

Oh of course sometimes he drives me mad with some of his Hack attitudes. You see some myths he really believes, but I suppose that he gradually gets better as he gets to know more social workers, but he won't write about us. I keep telling him that we need more media coverage and that we really have some good stories to tell, but he says the editor just wouldn't let him print it. We get coverage for fostering week, but I don't think that that's enough, so when they had a competition in his paper to spend six months writing about your job, I just had to go for it.

I discussed it with my boss at work and, surprisingly, he said that as long as I could get people's permission for photos and scramble stories, it would be ok. I reckon he thought that me winning was a long shot, but I have, and its gonna be great, I reckon.

Hey hold on a minute look at Bob. He's busy typing away. I'll have to creep in so as not to disturb him.

"How long have you been home?" Bob said in a surprised tone.

"Oh, about an hour. I didn't want to disturb you."

"I've got it Em, I know what to write about and its just flowing."

"Great, what are you writing about?"

"You'll laugh if I tell you."

"No I won't, go on tell me."

"I'm writing about what it must have felt like for the women who were at home when their men had gone off to fight in the First World War."

"Oh, and from what perspective, the lack of sex!"

"You see I told you that you'd laugh at me. I respect your views when you go on about social work, so why can't you respect mine."

“I do and seriously, I bet no one has written about that.”

“Because it’s too private that’s why. Surely you’re not going to tell your readers about our sex life are you?”

“Of course not. This isn’t like ‘Big Brother’ watching what we get up to all of the time. It’s about the readers learning about social work, but I can’t not tell them about the man I love, can I?”

I want them to know the human part of social work as well as all the bureaucracy and so they have to know a little about you.

Bob its just great seeing you enthused. Will you read me some?”

“When I’m ready. Shall I make the tea?”

“No you get on, I’ll do it. I need to ring Kate to tell her about tomorrow.”

“Hi Kate it’s Emma, are you all ready for tomorrow? Who is the case conference going to be on? Oh yes. You have asked their permission for the reader to attend? That’s good. I don’t want to really disappoint them. If they couldn’t attend they might have to sit with me through boring paperwork. Mind you I shall do that with them one day so they can see what its like.

Of course it would have been better if they could have just followed me around for a few months, but then they'd only get to see respite care and I really wanted to let them have a feel of what its like in all sorts of social work.

Well I'm not sure about residential work and day care. We might get a bit of time but it's a bit more intrusive and might be more difficult to do. I'll just have to see how it goes.

The outcome you say, well it's a record of their journey of course its my view dominantly and it is about seeing. What am I calling it? Well, I got the name from Bob. Don't laugh.

It's called 'Life according to Emma' Oh you think that's ok, great, thanks. See you tomorrow then. 'Night.'

"Bob, are you coming to bed? Ok, 'night 'night, love you."

## Chapter Five

Sorry we are going to run a bit late. Apparently the mum missed her bus and rang the office on her mobile to say that she would be late.

As you can see, there are some members of the conference who are a bit put out by this. They have other meetings to go to and some of them don't think much of this mother anyway.

This is the problem you get. If you are a good social worker you want to do the best, you don't want children to be separated from their parents. Other professionals such as teachers and health visitors may be much less tolerant than you about the way people live.

Some fuss too much about the state of people's houses and don't think about why people are like this. Often something has happened in their life to be like this or they've just followed the ways of their parents.

Oh look at that health visitor. If looks could kill, well, I think we'd all be dead by now and her huffing and puffing could blow any house down.

Now, this particular head teacher is great. She is level headed and will bend over backwards to do what she can to help.

She always comes to the core groups. They are meetings that you have once a month with everyone concerned in the case, including the parents, to see how things are going. Some work well, others are much more fraught.

I know a little about this case. The mother has a slight learning disability, remember what I said about a mental handicap? No, she is not mad, that's very different. She's what people used to refer to as 'slow'. She understands things, but needs reminding.

She has three children, two at primary school and one who's still at home. I think the little one is just two.

Yes, there are a lot of people here. The police are always invited, but they don't always come. GP's can't seem to find the time. They usually send someone else along. In this case we have both the school nurse and the health visitor.

The social worker in this case is really good. She has worked with the family for over a year. You wouldn't believe what they were like a year ago. How do I know, well she's my friend. I used to be in this team. That's probably why they let me in.

You see social workers aren't very good at telling people what they do. They say that they are too busy, which they are, but it becomes a bit of a vicious circle.

I don't think that you can moan about how things are and then do nothing about it.

Yes, I do want the best people to do social work and that's why you are here. Hopefully reader you will give this to someone else to read and they will do the same and then maybe you or them will think I'd like to do that.

No, I don't want to be rich. I just want to tell the truth.

Oh... that health visitor is getting on my nerves. No, they are not all like her. They vary just like the rest of us. Oh hurray, here's the mum at last so we'll now get on.

Right here we go.

Yes everyone has to introduce themselves. Just say you are the reader that will do.

"Welcome everyone to this child protection review. May I also welcome the reader who may not have been to a conference before and remind everyone that what is said is confidential and should not go out of this room."

So it wasn't what you thought. Did you expect us to tell the mother off? Well it's not about that. It's about finding the best way to work with the family.

I said that I'd give the mum a lift home. Would you like to come too? She said that she wouldn't mind if you came.

You see reader, to help people we need to know quite a lot about them.

Oh hold on a sec. before I start the engine. I've just got a text from Bob. Oh its brilliant he sent a synopsis of his book to a publisher and they are interested.

Right, off we go, lets get Hayley home.

“Bye Hayley. If you just work with everyone you'll do fine. I know, but I'm not working in this team anymore. Yes, I could have worked with you too... you'll be fine...bye”

Right reader. Of course, there are lots of things you want to know, but as you were sworn to confidentiality perhaps I could tell you about some similar kinds of cases.

There are loads of children all over the country on the child protection register. Oh, I should say registers really because all local authorities have them.

Well, we are trying to keep kids safe. Of course we get things wrong. We are only human.

What do I think? Well, I think we sometimes get it wrong. We tend, initially, to let people get on with life. Now, there's nothing wrong with that, but often people come to us for help when things get tough and we send them away until they have a crisis and then their kids end up on the register. Of course, I'd be mad too, but what can we do

when we don't have enough resources or they're in the wrong place. I know a social worker who thinks they should be in primary schools. Who? Social workers of course! They could do a much better job there.

Hold on a minute. I can never remember where this house is. I think we'd better park here and walk. You don't mind do you?

They might be out anyhow as my friend Sally wasn't sure whether they would be here, but they do know that you're coming to find out why we are working with them and have been told to say whatever they think.

No we picked them at random. We didn't pick them because they would tell you lovely social worker stories. It's not about singing our praises, it's about you, the reader, getting to the truth.

Oh another text. Hold on. Oh, its Sally's office. Oh dear, we've got to wait for Sally. We have a problem.

While we're waiting I'll tell you how I got into Social Work. That's if you'd like to know. Well, when I was a kid I used to live near a home where disabled children used to come and stay for a few days to give their mums and dads a break. It's similar to the job I was doing before I started coming out with you.

Well, one day I was standing at the bus stop with a mate. We were going into town to a club. I was about seventeen and there were a couple of the kids from the home waiting for the bus with their carers. They were about the same age as us and they asked us what we were doing.

My friend had difficulty understanding them and didn't really want to know, but I didn't want to be rude and so told them. Although they looked and talked a bit funny they seemed ok to me, so I asked them if they ever went. Their carers thought it was a good idea and so they came with us. We all had quite a laugh and we got invited back to the home. I remember people at the club looking at them in a funny way as if they were mad.

I went home and told my mum. She laughed. "You'll be a social worker next," she said. "Doubt it," I said. "I don't want to leave kids to die or take them into care." When I think of those words now and what so many readers still think, I just wonder how the world can be so ignorant.

I went to visit the kids regularly, made friends of some and, as I got older I began to think...why not? I could change the world. Of course, those were my idealistic days before I was surrounded by piles of paperwork.

Oh here's Sally now, move over and she can sit in the back with you.

"So, what's up?"

“Section 47 I’m afraid.”

“Oh bugger, can we still come?”

“It’s been okayed as it’s just the reader and no cameras.

Look Reader things have changed. We may not get a friendly reception here. So if you want to give it a miss we’ll understand.

You see Sally has to go and investigate some incident of abuse or possible abuse. That’s what the section 47 means. It’s legal stuff that social workers have to follow.

“So what’s happened Sally?”

“The nursery reported a bruise on the child’s face which they weren’t happy with. They should have reported it last night, but there was a mix up and it didn’t get reported until an hour ago. That’s why I texted you straight away. It was a good job that you had your mobile switched on otherwise it could have been a mess”

Reader, if I say go, you do as I say.

One thing social workers have to do is measure the risk to themselves and others. No it doesn't happen too often and 'touch wood' it has never happened to me, but you can never know.

Oh, verbal abuse. We get that all of the time, but fortunately physical violence isn't a regular feature of our job. Yes there have been a few social workers murdered, but then there have been some in all of the caring professions.

Look you can stay in the car if you want and I'll tell you what happens... Are you sure?

Well come on then.

## Chapter six

Phew! I'm glad that's over. Poor Sally she's got a busy day ahead of her sorting out some immediate support for the family.

Well you'd think that was easy, but I'm afraid that the systems that have been created by our Government means that nowadays most social work time is spent investigating abuse rather than supporting families.

That's one of the reasons why I wanted to take you on this tour. I wanted you to get a balanced view of what children's social workers in the UK do and what they would like to do.

I think you would find when social workers start their training at University they usually believe strongly in supporting families, but after a very short time they find that the reality is so different.

A social work friend of mine is currently very upset by a case she has where the children have not only been taken into care, but her boss insists that she recommends to the Judge on the case that the children should be adopted. She can't tell me the details because she could be put in prison if she did, but she felt that she could have supported the family and kept the children together.

The youngest child is only a year old and for most of her first year has been looked after by foster carers. She sees her mum and brothers for two hours once a week. My friend said that at times she has had to fight back the tears when she has taken the baby back to her carers.

Anyhow enough of that, social work is about all sorts of people and if only the world of TV and film would take more interest then it would raise the profile of social workers and people would be less scared of them.

You are not scared of me are you Reader?

I hope you've enjoyed your mini tour and that, perhaps, one day I can take you out again and share more tales of social work in the UK.

It's been good meeting you.

Bye for now. Bob says he'll be a bit more sociable next time.

Note this was written in 2006. I wonder what its like these days – Rachel Bramble

27/5/20