

Dates, Double Dates and Big, Big Trouble

“Well, it’s obvious, then,” said Sandie, matter-of-factly.

“What is?” I frowned.

“Your dad,” she continued, “is seeing someone new.”

Sandie isn’t what you’d normally call intuitive. When it comes to the two of us, she always shuts up and lets me do all the talking or deciding (which drives me crazy sometimes). And she was *well* off-course here; my dad seeing someone new? How ridiculous! It must be those cold germs short-circuiting her brain...

There was no *way* my dad was seeing someone new.

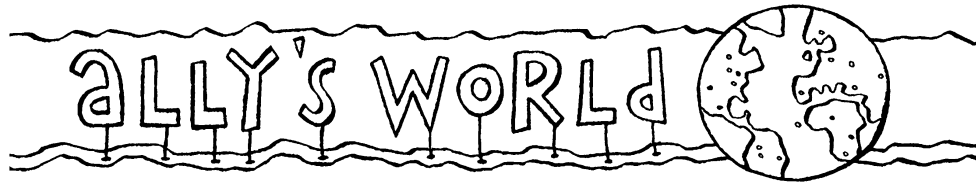
No *way*.

Or...

Or was there?

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DATES,
DOUBLE DATES
AND BIG, BIG
TROUBLE

KAREN M'COMBIE

SCHOLASTIC

for ALICE MILLER (aged 83½)
-the PRINCESS of ALEXANDRA PALACE

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PROLOGUE

Dear Mum,
I came across that photo of you and Dad the other day – you know, the one from your first date. The one where you look a bit weird, 'cause you've just thrown up...

Anyhow, it just reminded me how much I loved it when you used to tell me about how you two got together; all the stuff about how he'd come into the jeans shop in Camden High Street where you worked and try on loads of different pairs every week, just to have an excuse to talk to you. (He never bought any, did he?)

And better than that was how *you* used to spend your lunch-hours in the bike shop he worked in across the street, buying a bell one day, a bicycle pump the next, even a puncture-repair kit.

Then, when he finally *did* ask you out, it wasn't till that first date that he found out you didn't even *have* a bike.

It was so sweet the way you told Dad that you didn't mind about him getting the cinemas mixed up that first night out together, and taking you to see a horror movie by accident. *Even though* horror movies and the sight of blood usually made you feel ill. And it was *really* sweet of Dad to still fancy you after you threw up on his lap.

True love.

After all that, I guess I wouldn't have been in the mood to hand someone my camera like you did and get them to take a photo of the two of you (I think if it was me, I'd have wanted to forget the whole thing, after puking all over the place). But I'm glad you *did* decide to do it – or we wouldn't have had a record of the time our parents started seeing each other. I don't know if you had a proper kiss that first night (I hope not, under the circumstances), but it's still one of the most romantic stories I've ever heard – even if there weren't exactly string orchestras playing in the background and rose petals raining from the sky.

Hope it happens to me like that one day (but maybe minus the part about being sick).

Not so long ago, I thought it might ... and that was also right around the time when me and Linn and Rowan started to realize that Dad had found someone to replace you.

I suppose you'd better hear this from the beginning...

Love you lots,

Ally

(your Love Child No. 3)

Chapter 1

THAT FIRST KISS (I WISH...)

OK, so when it comes to the whole romance thing, I admit, I daydream about it a lot. And I mean a *lot*.

I daydream about it when I'm walking the dogs up by Alexandra Palace, looking out over the sprawl of London off in the distance. I daydream about it in bed at night, when I lie in the dark and stare out at the stars through the tiny skylight in the roof of my attic bedroom...

So that sounds very poetic and everything. But then, I *also* daydream about all things romantic at distinctly *unromantic* moments. Like during especially boring classes, or when I'm brushing my teeth, or when it's my turn to do the laundry and I'm sorting through my family's dirty socks, or even when I'm helping my little brother Tor clean rabbit poo out of the hutches in the back garden.

I don't think Juliet thought about Romeo when she was cleaning out rabbit poo. Well, when I think about the film, I certainly don't remember seeing

Claire Danes in a pair of yellow Marigolds daydreaming about Leo DiCaprio shinning up to her balcony while she was trying to shoo away an irate bunny who's in the mood to bite.

Maybe the fact that I can daydream about romance at really inappropriate times means I'm very imaginative. Or maybe it means I'm a weirdo – I'm not too sure. But anyway, one of my favourite daydreams is That First Kiss. It goes like this...

1) I go to a party and, magically, I look like Joey out of *Dawson's Creek*. (Look, it's *my* daydream, so stuff like that can happen, OK?)

2) The party is amazing, the music's brilliant, and most brilliant of all – I spot *him* across the crowded room. (The *him* part is interchangeable, depending on who I've got a crush on that week. I fall in and out of fancying different boys pretty regularly – but having said that, there's only one boy that I've stayed constantly and truly mad about, and that's my sister Linn's mate, Alfie. Sigh...)

3) During the evening, there's lots of tantalizing staring and looking away going on between us, just to get a bit of a *frisson* going. (Good word, *frisson*, isn't it? Except I said it to my best friend Sandie once, and she thought it was some kind of fish. But I tell you, having a bit of a fish between you *definitely* isn't romantic...)

4) The lights are low and sparkly, my favourite track comes on (that changes week to week, daydream to daydream), and from nowhere *he* sidles up beside me and asks me to dance.

5) Right, this is where it gets good... I've got my arms around his neck, and I can feel myself shiver with goosebumps as he pulls me closer to him, his hands on my back. We say nothing, just look into each other's eyes – reading each other's thoughts and knowing instinctively what's going to happen next. In slow motion, we move towards each other, tilting our heads gently as the moment gets closer. I can feel the warmth of his lips even before they touch mine. And then...

I was sitting on the usual bench on Ally Pally, letting my First Kiss daydream drift through my mind, and was just about to melt mouths with Alfie, when the mood was suddenly ruined.

Well, it's inevitable really, when you find yourself in a headlock.

"Billy! Get off me, you total moron!" I yelled, trying to tug his arm away from around my neck.

Out of the corner of my eyes I could see a middle-aged couple walking along the path looking kind of concerned. They probably thought I was being attacked by some lunatic, and who could blame them? They weren't to know that it was just

my mate, acting like a complete prat...

They weren't the only ones looking concerned; my two dogs – Rolf and Winslet – didn't know who to bark at first: Billy, or his yappy little mutt Precious, who was already up to his usual tricks, trying to inspect both their bottoms at close quarters.

"Do you give up?" I heard Billy asking, though I couldn't see him since he was standing behind me and the bench.

He must have been watching that stupid wrestling programme again, I sighed to myself.

"And are you going to give up acting like a six year old?" I managed to growl. "God, no wonder you can never get a girlfriend..."

It was a low blow (Billy's mighty sensitive about his lack of success with the girlies), but still he didn't let go.

It was time to get tough.

I reached back and, after a couple of searching slaps, found his nose and pulled it hard.

"Arghhhhhh!" he whined, letting go of my neck and scrambling over the back of the wooden seat, with me still hanging on to his nose.

The couple walked past at that point, staring disapprovingly at us – a pair of delinquent thirteen year olds spoiling the serenity of their Saturday-

morning stroll. They obviously didn't approve of the barking dogs either, eyeing up Precious, Rolf and Winslet like they were the spawn of the devil. (Course, that might be true in Precious's case.)

"Gum on, Ally. Led go," pleaded Billy, nasally. He sounded like he could be in an ad for Night Nurse or something.

But you could tell he was quite enjoying it, since he was now sitting beside me with his hands on his thighs, making no attempt to make me stop.

"You look ridiculous," I told him, as I gave his nose an extra tweak for luck.

"You'll look more ridigulous in a second when I blow snot all over your hand..."

"You wouldn't dare..." I said, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Wouldn'd I?" he grinned.

He took a big breath, ready for blast-off, when I let go and jumped off the seat.

Rolf and Winslet thought this was a cue for play-time, and bounded over to me, tails flapping about enthusiastically.

"Billy – you are the most disgusting boy I know!" I yelled at him.

He grinned again, put his hand over his nose and made the most grotesque snotty noise.

"And you *laaaaaaaave* it!" he roared, getting up

and running straight towards me, holding his hand out like he was going to rub it in my face.

I was pretty sure he'd just blown a raspberry behind his hand, but I wasn't taking any chances, not where snot was concerned. So I did the only sensible thing – I ran.

I wondered what the couple were thinking now, seeing a screeching girl, hurtling down the hill pursued by three mental dogs and a deranged boy in a baseball cap. They were probably thinking that they were glad we weren't *their* kids...

“Gotcha!”

The red gravel path that led to one of the park entrances was just hurtling into view when Billy grabbed me by the waist and rugby-tackled me to the grass.

“Get off!” I yelled for the second time so far, feeling him land heavily on top of me.

“Aha! You will never get away from the evil Hand of Snot!”

Somehow I managed to twist around underneath him, grab the evil Hand of Snot with both my fists and force it *well* away from my face.

“Billy – grow up!” I panted in his face, trying to sound angry – and trying just as hard not to laugh.

“Ooh! Listen to Ally Love! She's *so* sensible!”

teased Billy, putting on a dopey voice. “Well, we’ll have to do something about *that*...”

With his free hand, Billy started mercilessly tickling me, running his irritating fingers from my waist to my armpit to my neck and back down again.

“*GERRROFFFF!*” I squealed breathlessly, between giggles, but he didn’t – not that he’d have been able to hear me above the din of three barking dogs anyway, all of whom thought this was an excellent game.

But somehow, I heard another sound above the racket.

They say mothers can tune in to the noise of a crying baby, no matter how faint it is, or even if it’s not their own baby. Well, I managed to tune in to a crunch of gravel on the nearby path, and the rubbery screech of bike brakes (when your dad runs a bicycle shop, I guess it’s in your blood). Of course what caught my attention most was my name.

“Hi, Ally...”

As I turned to look at the source of the voice, I tried to brush Winslet away with one hand, but she carried on happily licking my face, regardless. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I had my other hand right over Billy’s face.

“Whas-going-on?” Billy mumbled, trying to shake his face free of my splayed fingers.

But I didn’t answer him – I was too busy staring at the vision in front of me, perched on his mountain bike.

“Hello, Alfie...” I smiled stupidly, wagging my dog-licked hand at him in a half-hearted attempt at a wave.

Talk about bad timing.

I had why-don’t-you-just-kill-me-now-before-I-die-of-embarrassment timing...

Chapter 2

LINN IS WAY, WAY, WAY OFF THE MARK

It's funny how you know when you're being stared at.

"What?" I demanded, catching Linn gawping at me for the seventeenth time in the last hour or so.

We were in the living room – me (on the sofa), Linn (next to me on the sofa), Rowan (on one of the armchairs painting her nails silver) and Tor (on the floor, driving his toy cars over a mountain range played by snoozing Rolf) – aimlessly watching a rubbish quiz show after stuffing our faces, this Saturday teatime.

I'd seen Linn eyeing me up earlier over the kitchen table, studying my face like I'd grown another nose or something. And ever since we'd come through and flopped in the living room, she'd kept up the surreptitious scrutiny, even though she was supposed to be flicking through the work section of the local paper in search of a Saturday job. And here she was, at it again...

"What? I'm not doing anything!" said Linn,