



Friends, Freak-Outs and Very Secret Secrets

I was panicking. It was an outside chance, but it *was* a possibility. Could Richie/Ricardo have decided he fancied me, now that Kyra had dumped him? Yuck: what if it was true? What would I say to him if he did ask me out? What would I tell Kyra? Oh, it was all too awful to think about. On my own.

“What do you reckon, Sandie?” I asked my friend, only vaguely aware that she had said precisely nothing so far.

“I reckon,” she said in this wobbly little voice, “that you like Billy more than *me!*”

I hadn't expected that. And I didn't expect Sandie to run off right there and then, leaving me standing gobsmacked on the path.

Frantically, I wracked my brain to try to figure out what had just happened, but all my brain came up with was, “Huh...?”

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FRIENDS,
FREAK-OUTS
A VERY SECRET
SECRETS

KAREN McCOMBIE

FOR YULINDA, THE TOOTH FAIRY
(AMONGST OTHER SPLENDID THINGS)

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PROLOGUE

Dear Mum,

I was out for a walk with Grandma today (well, when I say I was out for a walk with Grandma, what I mean is that Tor was there too, only he was pretending to be invisible, so we had to ignore him*).

Anyway, while Tor was trailing way behind us (I didn't bother asking him *why* he couldn't walk beside us, just 'cause he was invisible), me and Grandma had a really nice talk. About you. About you when you were a little girl, actually.

She told me about the time you'd cried when you found a dead mouse in the field behind your house. She told me how you'd decided to give it a proper burial, made it a little headstone cross out of two twigs tied together, and laid wild flowers on its grave every day for a week.

Then you got curious to see what was happening to it and dug it up. (Blee...)

She said you *really* started crying then.

Grandma told me lots of stories like that; stories that I'd never heard before. Maybe you'd eventually have got round to telling me them, if you hadn't left. (Oops – sorry. I'm doing that guilt-trip thing again, aren't I?)

But then Grandma told me something else. Did you know about this? She and Grandad had thought about having another sproglet after you, but they decided that they were so lucky to have such a lovely, pretty, perfect little girl that it would be greedy to expect more. Isn't that lovely? I told Linn that story when I got home, but she just grunted and said it was probably because they couldn't stand the thought of going through the baby-poo and baby-vomit stage again. I tell you, Linn's got a lot of bones in her body but not *one* of them's romantic...

Speaking of family secrets, I finally found out the whole story about my friend Kyra's mum. *And* I found out something pretty surprising to do with my best mate Sandie, too. Poor Sandie; she was doing my head in for a while with her clinginess – I mean, I could hardly turn around without treading on her size 37s – but I guess I understand why now.

OK, I'd better go – Sandie's downstairs waiting for me to finish this. *Pretty Woman* is on the telly

(again) and I left her in the living room watching the end of it with Rowan, so there probably aren't any dry tissues left in the whole *street* now, knowing those two blub queens...

Love you lots,

Ally

(your Love Child No. 3)

* This stopped as soon as we got to the café in Priory Park. It's funny how quickly invisible people become visible again when they want an Appletise and a bag of pickled-onion Monster Munch, please.

Chapter 1

VIP (VERY INEDIBLE PIZZA)

“How do I look?” I asked, walking into our sunshine-yellow living room wearing a matching sunshine smile and my best T-shirt.

Sandie – number one in my Top Ten list of mates (erm, my list is actually a Top Seven, but that’s not so catchy) – was perched on the edge of our big squashy sofa, brushing her hair. With, I noticed, the brush I’d just used to tug matted knots out of Derek the cat’s fur. Still, I didn’t tell her that.

“You look great!” she grinned encouragingly. “Really nice. You’ll really make a good impression.” I hoped so.

In fact, everyone was keen to make a good impression.

There’d been a queue the entire afternoon to use the iron (and that’s a first). The house had never been so hoovered (Rolf and Winslet smelt suspiciously of Shake ‘n’ Vac after refusing to move from the rug in front of the fireplace). Faces had been washed, cats had been groomed, scratches had

been plastered after the cat-grooming (thank you, Fluffy), exotic cooking smells were drifting out of the kitchen (don't get too excited; it was Rowan's turn to make tea), and now all we could do was wait.

And the reason we were so clean and tidy? We had a VIP coming.

And the reason the VIP was coming to the Love household? Well, it was all to do with love...

Aww!

That's quite poetic, isn't it? Not the "aww" bit ... the stuff about love in the Love household.

You know, I sometimes forget how pretty our last name is. Love: nice, isn't it? Although I do remember the first time someone (a boy, of *course*) took the mickey out of it. That happened back in primary school, when this kid in Year Five laughed at me in the playground and told me that my last name was stupid and sippy and that me and my sisters and my brand-new baby brother (back then) all had stupid and sippy first names too.

This was pretty rich coming from a boy called Noah – I mean, it's not exactly Joe or Tom or something straightforward, is it? I said that to him, but he yelled back at me that it was in the bible so that made it OK; it was a *proper* name, not like ours. I argued back that if he was going to be like that, then he should think about the fact that my

siblings were named after a loch (Linnhe), a tree (Rowan) and a hill (Tor), and that if I wasn't *very* much mistaken, God was in charge of making things like lochs, trees and hills, *actually*.

Course, my argument crumbled on two points. God's great at all that nature stuff, but I don't think he had much to do with the building of Alexandra Palace, which is what *I'm* named after. Also, Noah was a pretty thick kid, and despite being older than me he'd never heard of a loch. So he just went on pointing and laughing at me and I guess I lost that fight.

(By the way, I think the original Noah – who did all that brilliant saving-animals-from-floods stuff – would be pretty miffed that some obnoxious little kid's now got his name.)

But enough of Love the name, and back to love the *thing*.

I was still doing my sunshine smile (although it was making my face muscles ache) when I heard the doorbell go.

"I'll get it!" I heard Dad bellow.

"This is going to be weird, isn't it?" giggled Sandie, who isn't technically part of the family but hangs around here so much she might as well be.

"Yep," I nodded, resisting the urge to go and peer out of the big bay window at the stranger on

our doorstep.

“Is Rowan nervous?” asked Sandie, following me over as I walked towards the living-room door.

“Oh, yes – she’s changed three times and sent Tor up to the corner shop for more food,” I whispered. “Something was definitely burning earlier, but she hasn’t let on what it was!”

You know how some people are really dreamy, and things just slip through their minds like butterflies fluttering through a bush? Well, that describes Rowan. And then you know how there are people who are so nervy about stuff, it rubs off and makes you all nervy too? Well, that’s Rowan as well, and making this special tea on this special Saturday night was bringing out the worst of both sides. Tor (the only one who’d been allowed within a seventy-kilometre radius of the kitchen this afternoon) said that Rowan had been doing her eye make-up when she’d let whatever was in the oven incinerate. And that she’d practically been *crying* over the burnt ... *whatever* it was when she shoved some coins in his hand and told him to run to the shop and get a couple of frozen pizzas for her.

I hoped the VIP wouldn’t be too disappointed that his first-ever tea with us would consist mostly of cheese and tomato pizza and not burnt-something-or-other.

“Come on, then!” I grinned at Sandie.

I took a deep breath, stepped over a scurrying cat that wasn’t Colin and walked out into the hall.

There seemed to be a scuffle of people – Dad, Grandma, Linn, Tor and Rowan – and excitable dogs barking and coats being taken off, which gave me just enough time to sneak a look at our visitor.

He was taller than I’d expected, and looked more nervous, too. But then you could hardly be blamed for being shy and nervous when your girlfriend’s entire family has crammed into the hall to stare at you *and* there’s a short growly dog chewing your shoelace.

In the kerfuffle and the noise, Dad suddenly seemed to notice me.

“Oh, and this is Ally, and her friend Sandie!” he announced.

“Um, hello!” smiled the visitor, who was obviously trying (and failing) to memorize all the names and faces while also wondering how he was going to remove the dog from his foot without looking rude.

Luckily, Grandma spotted his predicament.

“Winslet! *Leave!* Shooo!”

Three words from Grandma, and Winslet did as she was told. Like us, she knows that tone of voice means no messing.

“Come on through to the kitchen, Stanley!” said

my dad, in his best welcoming tones.

Our VIP shuffled after him, nodding at all of us in turn.

Behind his back, Linn raised her eyebrows at me and gave me a little “Well!” smile.

I knew what she meant.

“Ally,” whispered Tor, tugging at my sleeve.

I bent down close to hear what he had to say.

“He’s got hairs growing out of his ears!”

I knew what Tor meant too.

But apart from the hairy ears, our first glimpse of Grandma’s boyfriend seemed, well ... not too bad.

“This is...”

Poor Stanley. I could see the beads of sweat forming on his receding grey hairline. It was hard to come up with an adjective to describe Rowan’s cooking, and Stanley really *was* trying.

Gazing across our big kitchen table at him, Rowan’s face bore an expectant smile as she blinked her glitter-smearred eyelids at Grandma’s new bloke.

“This is...” Stanley tried again, nodding down at the soup, “very unusual!”

I hoped his heart was all right. Curried lettuce soup wasn’t to everyone’s taste, but the thought did cross my mind – as every mouthful burnt its

way down my throat – that it might be positively hazardous to those of an infirm disposition (i.e. an old guy with a dodgy heart).

“Thank you!” Rowan blushed, shooting a quick, triumphant “Told you so!” look in Linn’s direction.

There’d been a bit of a fight the night before (or a “debate” as Grandma prefers to call slanging matches between my sisters). It was definitely Rowan’s turn to make tea on Saturday night, but, since Grandma was at last letting us set eyes on her new boyfriend, Linn had decided it was far too important an event to let Rowan do her usual food-poisoning special. But Rowan was desperate to be the perfect hostess and wouldn’t give up her right to cook. And, to be fair, Linn couldn’t exactly do it, since she was working all day at her Saturday job. Same with Dad; he was busy in his bike shop. And if *I* did the cooking, Stanley would be sitting right now in front of two Findus Crispy Pancakes and a mound of Tesco economy beans.

Rowan would at least cook something more imaginative. Even if it was mostly inedible, it would give everyone something to talk about.

“Mmm, it’s lovely, Rowan!” said Sandie, finishing her bowl of soup, while the rest of us still struggled to sip a few spoonfuls. “Got any more?”

Sandie’s a delicate-looking thing – all big blue

eyes in a pale, heart-shaped face and with this straight, fine, fair hair – but boy, she must have insides made of reinforced concrete. She’s the same round at Kellie’s, when Kellie’s mum tries to give us all this wild Caribbean food. The rest of us dip in, a bit wary of the really spicy stuff, but Sandie dives in on the hottest of the hot like she’s never *seen* food before. I think this all comes down to the fact that her manically protective mum and dad only ever have the most bland and boring food. Round their place, everything’s mashed, tasteless gloop. Like they’re all eating *baby* food or something.

“Sorry, Sandie, there isn’t any more soup,” shrugged Rowan, suddenly coming over all confident and Jamie Oliver-ish at the unusually high level of compliments going around. “But there’s plenty more food coming! I’ve made this brilliant tuna and nut pizza!”

Oh, no – Rowan had decided to *customize* the frozen pizzas.

I saw Dad gulp at that, but he’d never dream of criticizing. Usually Linn would (quite happily), but I guess since Stanley was here she’d decided to keep her mouth shut and nibble her way through the tuna and nut pizza like the rest of us.

“What’s for pudding?” asked Tor, coming out with the first thing he’d said since Stanley’s arrival.

Tor doesn't say much at the best of times, but having new people around makes him quieter than ever. Which is *very* quiet indeed.

Then I noticed something telling: Tor had pulled a hunk of French stick apart and made himself a doughy white-bread moustache (he had to swizzle his top lip into an Elvis snarl to keep it in place). It looked almost exactly the same as Stanley's non-dough, real-hair, white moustache. Obviously Tor was warming to Grandma's boyfriend. (Although Grandma would *not* be warming to *me* if she heard me calling Stanley her "boyfriend". That *really* got on her nerves. Dunno why.)

"Pudding is Custard Surprise!" Rowan trilled.

I saw Linn open her mouth and close it again, sensibly opting to avoid starting World War Three in front of Stanley. But I knew she was as alarmed as I was about what exactly that "Surprise" was. Knowing Rowan, mixed in with the custard could be anything from prunes to mince.

Poor Stanley. He didn't know what he was letting himself in for, getting muddled up with a family like ours...

"Well, Martin," Stanley suddenly began, addressing my dad with a hopeful smile, "you've certainly got a splendid family here!"

If I wasn't very much mistaken, Grandma was

cringing at that very obvious compliment. She's a lot like Linn; she says it like it is and doesn't mess about. But poor Stanley was only trying to make polite conversation.

"Yes, they're all right ... aren't you?" Dad grinned round the table as each of us nodded back at him – including Sandie, I noticed.

"You can certainly see that Rowan and young Tor take after their dad's side of the family!" Stanley continued, delicately pushing his unfinished bowl of soup away from him.

I felt mildly excited by that comment of his. I'd always thought I was part of the Dad Equation: the dark brown hair and eyes to match that marked me, Rowan and our little brother as spitting images of our dad. And up till now, I'd always been quite jealous of the fact that Linn was the only one that looked like our mum (and Grandma, for that matter), with her almost-blonde hair and colouring. But now, maybe, this stranger was going to be the one to walk in and see beyond the boring brown hair. Maybe Stanley could make out traces of Mum's side of the family in my cheekbones or something...

"And Linn and Ally look very like their Grandma!" Stanley finished off his observation – pointing first at my big sister and then at ... *Sandie*.

Everyone burst out laughing, including me and Grandma, as Stanley looked around in confusion, knowing he'd boobed somehow.

"Stanley, *this* is Ally," Grandma smiled kindly at him, and pointed to me. "Although Sandie is practically one of the family."

Poor Stanley. (Actually, that's always how I think of him now that he's become part of the furniture – poor Stanley, having to deal with our noisy confusion of a family after the peace and quiet of his bachelor pad.) Sitting right there at the table, he gulped a few times and went red as a beetroot (another ingredient of the tuna and nut pizza, by the way).

But what was funnier than Poor Stanley's embarrassment was how chuffed Sandie looked. I couldn't figure out which she liked better – Stanley mistaking her for me, or Grandma calling her "practically one of the family".

Either way, it didn't matter. Her spare (pink) toothbrush lived beside ours in the bathroom, 'cause she stayed over so much. Yep, I was as close to Sandie as I was to my sisters (closer, in fact) and I'd never get tired of having her around.

Or so I thought...

Chapter 2

SUNDAY WALKIES (AND SILENCES)

“Maybe he isn’t coming,” Sandie suggested.

“He’ll come. He *always* comes,” I replied, keeping my eye on the silvery white plane cruising by overhead.

It was going to ... Santa Fe, I decided, settling on today’s fantasy destination. I could be up there on that plane now, flicking through my *Rough Guide to New Mexico* – my dream boy (Alfie, natch) in the next seat – instead of sitting on a park bench getting splinters in my bum and a crick in my neck.

“Maybe he’s forgotten,” I heard Sandie continue.

“Billy won’t forget. We do this every Sunday morning.”

Yep – every Sunday, whether rain or shine, whether I’m tired or not, I trudge up to the bench Billy and I call home (around 11 a.m. on a Sunday, anyway), high up on the grassy banks of the park, with Ally Pally at my back and the high-rise pointy bits of central London off on the horizon in front of me.