



Hassles, Heart-Pings! and Sad, Happy Endings...

I noticed something: without even realizing what he was doing, Billy's hand had stopped whirling his baseball cap around in that demented way and was now conveying a Jaffa Cake to his mouth.

"Mmm! These are just ace, aren't they?" he mumbled after a mouthful, looking slightly less deflated all of a sudden.

Hey, it wasn't earth-shattering stuff, but it seemed like a positive sign to me. Billy would be all right – I, Ally Love, his best mate, would make sure of it. And if Jaffa Cakes helped him over his ordeal, then how much better would he be if there was a potential new girlfriend on the scene?

And then the spookiest thing happened – I caught Billy sort of staring at me, as if he could read my thoughts. But nah; that rapturous look was probably (definitely) nothing to do with Billy suddenly developing amazing psychic powers and *everything* to do with the joy of Jaffa Cakes...

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HASSLES,
HEART-PINGS! 
SAD, HAPPY
ENDINGS..

KAREN McCOMBIE

FOR TOM, MY absolute bestest buddy
(who was wondering where his dedication went to)

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PROLOGUE

Dear Mum,

I, Ally Love, am going mad. Honest.

I've just been staring out my window, looking at Alexandra Palace perched on the hill, and you know what I thought? I thought the sky looked *exactly* like the opening credits of *The Simpsons* – you know, when the fat, fluffy white clouds separate and show the titles. I kind of half expected to see the words “The Love Family” floating above Ally Pally.

See? Told you I was going mad. But *happily* mad, you'll be pleased to hear...

Actually, talking about *The Simpsons*, you know the guy who invented them? Matt Groaning or Groening or something? Well, apart from being a genius (for inventing *The Simpsons*, natch), did you know he also drew cartoons? I used to have a photocopy of one cartoon he did*, called “The 24 Warning Signs of Stress”. It was very funny (and perfect for an undercover worrier like me). For

one of the signs of stress, there was this drawing of a guy with a twisty head – all eyes, ears and nose in a tangle – and that kind of sums up how *I* feel when I've got a head full of hassles.

And there were loads of worrisome hassles – as well as weird heart-pings! – going on recently, weren't there? In fact, there were *so* many that it's taken *extra* long for me to write everything down 'cause it's taken *extra* long for my head to untangle.

But I have finally scribbled it all here, and stuff makes more sense now that I've done that – the stuff to do with Linn, of course, but all the stuff with Sandie and Billy in particular. Hey, maybe, *just* this once, I'll show my journal to someone else apart from you ... but then I don't know if reading about everything would make Sandie sad again, when she's sounding so happy (I spoke to her on the phone half an hour ago and she wouldn't shut up about how gorgeous her room is now she's painted it lilac and lime – eek!).

Maybe I should let Billy have a nosey at it? Nope, no, no *way* – that's *never* going to happen. He's such a berk that if I let him read it and then asked him what he thought about it, he'd probably burp the national anthem or start talking like Cartman out of *South Park* or something just to

hide his embarrassment. And then that would make me annoyed (and embarrassed).

So ... it's for your eyes only, Mum. A record of all the hassles, the heart-pings! and the rest. At least I can trust you not to go wibbly on me or act like a hyperactive baboon, like certain people I could mention...

Love you lots,

Ally

(your happily mad Love Child No. 3)

* I think Winslet ate it – doh!

Chapter 1

THE WELCOME BACK DOOR PARTY

I had a shadow. It followed me everywhere: to the park, to the shops, to my room.

The other day, it even tried to follow me to the loo, till I told it (nicely) to get lost and slammed the door in its face.

My shadow had a name, and that was Billy.

Oh, yes. Ever since Sandie dumped him the week before – right after our geography field trip – Billy had hung around my house (and me) like a stray puppy with a face like a wet sock. I guess it was understandable; when you're mooching, pining and miserable, the one person you turn to is your best mate, isn't it? I mean, Billy has other friends, but they're boys, and let's face it, boys are not too great at doling out sympathy. Well, maybe they are when you've missed a dead cert goal during a five-a-side game in the park, or you dropped your GameBoy and it won't start up or something. But if you're a lad who's just been humiliatingly dumped by your girlfriend,

the closest you're going to get to sympathy from another lad is a mumbled "Oh..." followed by a rude joke about the size of your ex's nose/bum/knees to cheer you up.

So you can't blame Billy for turning to me instead of Stevie or Hassan in his moment of need. The trouble was, it wasn't just a moment; it had been a whole, full-on six days now. Yep, Billy was shadowing me around, desperate for my advice/pity/company practically every minute I wasn't asleep or in school (or in the loo). I guess it was 'cause, unlike Hassan and Stevie, I seemed to know the exact right things to say...

- "Mmm ... yeah ... definitely... I know..." (Rule no. 1 when you're sympathizing with people: agree with just about everything they say.)

- "OK, so you feel like poo right now, but you won't for ever." (Rule no. 2: remind them that things will get better, even if you're not sure that's true.)

- "No – just 'cause Sandie chucked you, it *doesn't* mean you're a total, no-hope loser dork." (Rule no. 3: try to boost their flattened ego.)

- "Do you want more ice-cream/nachos/another HobNob?" (Rule no. 4: offer comfort food – vats of it. In times of trauma, some people might not be able to face food, but, miraculously, Billy was still

managing to stuff his face very nicely thank you in-between whingeing.)

So, now it was Saturday, and we had a week's worth of half-term break looming in front of us. Which meant, I supposed, that Billy would be doing his limpet act and sticking to me for even *more* hours of the day. I wouldn't have minded, honest I wouldn't (considering the circumstances), but the big problem was ... well ... *Sandie*.

It's your worst nightmare when two friends start going out with each other, isn't it? What I mean is, the knowledge that one day they'll break up and not be able to *stand* being within a ten kilometre radius of each other. And that's what had happened with Billy and Sandie. Billy – with his heart well and truly trampoline'd on and his self-confidence squashed like a mushy pea – wasn't exactly in the mood to hang out with Sandie any time soon (like any time this *century*). And Sandie – never exactly the bravest girl in the world in the first place – felt so hideously hideous about finishing with Billy that the very thought of bumping into him made her feel like she might *hurl*.

It was basically one big drag that we couldn't all just hang out together as usual during the holiday, either just us three or with Kyra or Chloe or the others. So I decided I had to do *something*. I had

to somehow *force* them to meet up, just so they could get over the hurdle of facing each other for the first time, and then *maybe* they would be cool with each other after that. Well, *coolish*. At least so they could maybe face being in the same room together without fainting. (That would be a *start*.)

But how was I going to do it? Two hours ago, I wouldn't have had the feeblest clue. But then a couple of things happened that made an idea ping like an oasis into the barren emptiness of my brain. First up, Dad called from his bike shop and told me that he'd got the right hinges and was finally, *finally* planning on re-hanging my bedroom door this afternoon. Oh, the joy of having a door to close instead of a gaping wide *nothing* between me and my mad family! Now I could dance around the room in my knickers and wellies or juggle cacti nude and no one would know. (Er, not that I *particularly* wanted to dance around in my knickers and wellies or juggle cacti nude; it's just that it would be nice to have the choice.)

Anyway, Dad and the door was Thing 1 that got me thinking. Thing 2 was Mum's batty idea to celebrate the momentous occasion of me having a door once more.

"I know!" she'd beamed, when me and Billy

were helping her clear away the dishes after lunch. “We should have a Welcome Back Door Party! We can make streamers and a banner and everything! What do you think, Ally?”

What I’d thought was, *Fine ... anything to give me a break from talking about The Big Split with Billy for the thirty millionth time.*

“Sure!” I’d nodded, before Tor and Ivy went into party hyperdrive and started babbling about party hats and cake.

Mum was just getting as hyper as they were and talking about whether we should make a cake or just have loads and loads of Maltesers instead, when The Idea clattered into my mind: why didn’t I phone Sandie and invite her round to join in the silliness? (Er, without mentioning the fact that Billy was here, of course.) The way I saw it, how could you hold on to grudges or guilt during something as completely dumb as a Welcome Back Door Party?

So, I sneaked off and called her, and she said yes, please, and she’d be here before five. Ten out of ten for my ace plan so far. The only problem now was that it was a bit past five o’clock, and there was no sign of Sandie. I was too twitchy to concentrate on the newspaper hats that Mum was showing us how to make in the living room; it was

time to make another sneaky phone call and see what she was up to.

“Back in a minute!” I said vaguely in the direction of anyone who might be listening (i.e. Mum, Billy, Tor, Ivy, assorted pets, and Rowan too).

Before I dived out of the door, I plonked my version of a paper hat on to the coffee table. What a disaster it was – not so much origami as just a scrunched-up bit of newspaper. Even Billy, in the depths of gloom, was making a better job of the party hat thing than I was.

“Hello?”

To be honest, I was kind of surprised to hear Sandie’s voice. I guess I’d been expecting her mum or dad, and was supposing they’d say that she’d left ten minutes ago and would be ringing my doorbell any second now.

“Why are you there? Aren’t you supposed to be *here*?” I asked bluntly.

“Er ... ’cause I’m not coming?” Sandie answered nervously.

“Huh? What do you mean, you’re not coming? What about the Welcome Back Door Party? We’re making hats and having Maltesers and everything!”

“I know. And I really want to come.”

“So ... why don’t you come?”

There was an ominous silence from Sandie. And then there wasn't. "Cause Billy's there, right?"

Urgh, she'd sussed me out. I was about as transparent as one of those spooky jellyfish that Tor likes gawping at in the Web Of Life at London Zoo.

"Yeah, but..."

Pathetic. I couldn't think of anything to say after "but".

"I just don't want to see him, Ally! Not yet! I still feel like a total creep for chucking him!"

Then I felt bad for Sandie and seriously mean for trying to trick her into coming. I guess I'd have felt as sick as someone on a North Sea ferry in a blizzard if someone had fixed me up to spend time in a confined space with Keith Brownlow or Feargal O'Leary straight after we'd finished. Not that I even got *started* with either of them; it was hardly all lovey-doveyness and cutesy pet names with me and Keith, never mind me and Feargal. Not like Sandie and her "Baby Bear". (Blee – don't remind me, or I really *will* barf...)

"OK. Sorry. Whatever..." I mumbled, feeling like a total louse. "But how did you know?"

"Cause after I got off the phone earlier, it dawned on me that you'd been kind of whispering. But I wasn't *sure* he was there. Till now."

“How come?” I found myself frowning, though no one could see that except for Colin, who was snoozing directly in my eyeline on a carpeted step halfway up the stairs. (Er, except he’d have needed to open his eyes first to clock me.)

“Because you’re whispering *now*,” said Sandie.
Doh...

My frazzled brain was frantically scrabbling around for something to say that would make things right when Sandie jumped right in and spoke again.

“Anyway, I’ve got some brilliant news!” she enthused, sounding instantly brighter.

Speaking of instantly brighter, the front door suddenly burst open and Dad and Linn came in chattering, along with an accompaniment of frantic, thrilled barking from Winslet, Rolf and Ben.

“Like?” I asked Sandie, not bothering to whisper now that the chattering, barking and yelling (that was Tor and Ivy) was acting as cover for my conversation.

“Like...” she paused, for maximum impact, “...like Jacob is coming to London on Wednesday!”

I knew she wanted me to say stuff like “Wow!” and “Yay!” and “That’s so cool!” But no matter how great it was for Sandie to see her new boyfriend – the lad she’d met on our geography

field trip – I just couldn't do the whole wow, yay, that's-so-cool thing when I'd had one soggy, sad boy to prop up all week.

"That's nice," was about as enthusiastic as I could manage.

While I was still on the phone, I gave Dad a quick grin and a nod as he zoomed by me straight up the stairs, holding his toolbox aloft in one hand and giving me a thumbs-up with the other. And following behind him, giggling and yakking, were my whole family (including dogs and a bemused Billy), stomping after Dad like he was the Pied Piper or something. (Colin had to wake up and bound out of the way pretty smartish – not that easy when you've only got three legs.)

"Yeah, I know!" gushed Sandie. "And I can't wait to see him again!"

Hmm ... *not* all of my family had giggled and yakked their way up the stairs with their home-made party hats and bags of Maltesers; Ivy was by my side, earnestly gazing up at me as she tugged at the bottom of my T-shirt, muttering, "C'mon, Ally – parteeeee!"

"OK, Ivy," I nodded down at her. "You go on up – I'll be there in a second! Sorry, Sandie, but I'd better go. I think they're starting the Door Party without me."

Ivy allowed herself to be shooed upstairs, smiling broadly at me through the bannister and showing off all her cute baby teeth. Somewhere above me up on the top floor – where my attic bedroom shared space with Linn’s – the sound of creaking floorboards and laughter drifted down.

“Oh, right,” said Sandie. “But hold on – I just remembered. Do you want to come to tea tomorrow night? Mum asked me to ask you specially.”

Of course I said yes, even though meals round at Sandie’s are always on the bleurgh side (her mum likes to boil everything till you end up with something that looks like a pile of wallpaper paste when she finally plonks it on your plate). And it would be nice to catch up with Sandie, even though I wasn’t sure how I was going to get out of my permanent babysitting duties with Billy.

So we set a time, and said our byes, but it wasn’t till I was bounding up the stairs two at a time to join the celebrations that something weird struck me (not literally – I don’t mean a leaping salmon *pounced* out of the shadows and slapped me in the face or anything). It was just the fact that Sandie’s mum had asked me to tea, *specially*?! She *never* did that! Sure I stayed for meals sometimes, but that was usually ’cause I was already there doing homework or whatever and Sandie asked me to.

The thing is, with both Sandie's super-straight parents I always got the feeling that they kind of just *put up* with me being Sandie's friend. I mean, Mr and Mrs Walker are really, *really* uptight and protective of Sandie, and I'm sure they think I'm this wild, rebellious girl, all because my family is a bit disorganized. (Well, I guess we *did* manage to lose our mum for four years...)

But whatever. I'd just have to figure out a way to shake off my shadow (called Billy) for one evening without hurting his black and blue feelings. And I'd worry about that later – I had some serious silliness to be getting on with right now...

"Hurry up, Ally!" Rowan called down to me, leaning over the attic bannister and looking like a pretty version of the Medusa with her bundle of different-sized short plaits dangling around her face. "Dad's just about to put in the final screw!"

I bounded up in time to see everyone wearing their wonky paper hats – including Billy (his was plonked on *top* of his baseball cap), Rolf and Ben (Winslet was ferociously ripping hers to bits).

"There you go!" Mum smiled, sticking the biggest newspaper work-of-art on my head, while Tor held out a bowl of Maltesers to me.

"Nearly there! How does it look, Ally Pally?"

Dad asked me, managing to talk almost normally, despite the screw he was holding between his teeth.

“It looks great!” I nodded in reply, though I wasn’t just talking about my long-lost door, but about the brilliant “*Welcome back, Ally’s door!*” sign that Rowan had painted in something luminous, and the arch of balloons that Mum had pinned up (they said “*Congratulations – it’s a boy!*” on them, but Mum said that’s all they had left in the corner shop).

“Here – everyone take one of these. I found them at the back of a drawer in the kitchen!” said Mum, chucking everyone a party popper. “Once that last screw is in, it’s blast-off time!”

I shot a quick look at Billy, who had a confused smile stuck on his face, like a toddler that’s gone to sleep in their buggy in the park and woken up in a queue in Tesco’s and isn’t sure how that might have happened.

“OK ... here we ... go!” Dad called out, followed by mass whooping and popping from all of us.

Course the whole thing set the dogs off, and seemed to get Ivy into a happy party muddle; apart from stomping her tiny feet up and down she started singing “Happy birdie to yooooo...” directly to Tor.

“No, babes!” Linn laughed, leaning down and

scooping Ivy up in her arms. “Tor’s not eight till *next* Saturday!”

“Nother party! More ’tesers!” she clapped ecstatically, before shoving a melted ball of chocolate in her mouth.

So, my Welcome Home Door Party had been a success. Everyone was smiling, even Billy (even if his head was on another planet).

But lurking in some dusty dark corner of my brain, a small voice whispered, “Something’s weird...” Although that small voice very unhelpfully didn’t explain what *exactly* was weird. Was it the fact that poor Billy was still so out of sorts? (He was trying so hard to have fun but pretty much failing.) Was it ’cause I couldn’t shake this niggle of annoyance with Sandie ducking out of meeting up with him today? Then again, was it maybe because my perfecto, neat-freak sister Linn was having a great time, and didn’t seem to mind the fact that her home-made hat was leaving a newsprint headline on her forehead and that Ivy had just wiped her chocolatey fingers on our big sis’s spotless white top? (Linn acting so unconcerned by mess – now that *was* weird.) Or was it just because Ben the golden retriever really, *really* suited his newspaper trilby?

Who knew? But why worry about weirdness

when you've got a mountain of Maltesers to eat? I could figure it out later, in the privacy of my room, with the door firmly closed (i.e. when I was doing my nudey cacti juggling)...

Chapter 2

LOVE AND DROOL...

What a swizz.

For the first time in ages, I had peace, quiet, no Billy and a door. And the swizz was, I felt kind of lonely and bored. Where was my shadow when I needed him? And I didn't have a single snorey cat or dog to keep me company in my bedroom on this dull, restless, sleepless night.

It was nearly twelve o'clock, and Saturday night was about to slink darkly into Sunday morning. I'd gone to bed early, hoping to slip into this pretty cool recurring dream I'd been having lately, where I'm teetering *right* on the verge of (eek!) snogging someone. It was the weirdest thing; every time I dreamt the dream, I'd get this electrifying tummy tingle, knowing I was about to be kissed, but then I'd always wake up before the kiss happened (boo!), and I never got to see who I was not-quite-but-almost kissing either. (Could it be Alfie? Oh, please, oh, please, oh, please ... after all, it would be the only