Mates, Mysteries and Pretty Weird Weirdness

"Well, tomorrow … Sam's coming up to Crouch End to see me!" Kyra beamed.

"Brilliant!" I smiled, genuinely pleased for her. "Are you excited?"

"Yeah, but a bit … y'know … *nervous*, too," she surprised me by saying. "Which is why I want you to come too, Ally."

"What?" I squeaked at Kyra, not sure I'd heard right.

"I just thought it I wouldn't be so … y'know … *awkward*, if you were there, Ally. Oh, and another thing," she grinned sheepishly from the other side of the garden gate. "Can you bring Billy along? Just so Sam doesn't feel outnumbered by girls? 'Cause I thought if you pretended Billy was your boyfriend then…"

Whoah – maybe I was intrigued enough to meet the mighty Sam, and maybe friends are expected to do each other favours, but pretending Billy was my boyfriend? Wasn't that *way* beyond the call of duty…?

Available in this series:

The Past, the Present and the Loud, Loud Girl
Dates, Double Dates and Big, Big Trouble
Butterflies, Bullies and Bad, Bad Habits
Friends, Freak-Outs and Very Secret Secrets
Boys, Brothers and Jelly-Belly Dancing
Sisters, Super-Creeps and Slushy, Gushy Love Songs
Parties, Predicaments and Undercover Pets
Tattoos, Telltales and Terrible, Terrible Twins
Angels, Arguments and a Furry Merry Christmas

And look out for:

Daisy, Dad and the Huge, Small Surprise
Rainbows, Rowan and True, True Romance(?)

Find out more about Ally's World at
www.karenmccombie.com

ALLY'S WORLD

MATES, MYSTERIES AND PRETTY WEIRD WEIRDNESS

KAREN McCOMBIE

SCHOLASTIC

for freddie, the original
gnome-shifting culprit...

Scholastic Children's Books,
Commonwealth House, 1–19 New Oxford Street,
London WC1A 1NU, UK
A division of Scholastic Ltd
London ~ New York ~ Toronto ~ Sydney ~ Auckland
Mexico City ~ New Delhi ~ Hong Kong

First published in the UK by Scholastic Ltd, 2002

Copyright © Karen McCombie, 2002
Cover illustration copyright © Spike Gerrell, 2002

ISBN 0 439 98169 7

Typeset by TW Typesetting, Midsomer Norton, Somerset
Printed and bound by Nørhaven Paperback, Viborg, Denmark

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

All rights reserved

The right of Karen McCombie to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed upon the subsequent purchaser.

Contents

	PROLOGUE	*1*
1:	WEIRD BUT KIND OF WONDERFUL	*3*
2:	STANLEY THE GOLDFISH, RIP	*12*
3:	SPOOKY SCRATCH-SCRATCHING	*21*
4:	THE MYSTERY OF THE GNOMES...	*27*
5:	UPSIDE-DOWN BEANS AND POLTERGHOSTS	*35*
6:	THE "HOW TO FAIL" SPELL...	*46*
7:	LET'S MEDITATE ... (PARP)	*55*
8:	SLEEPLESS AND SPOOKED	*64*
9:	THINGS THAT WENT "THUNK" IN THE NIGHT	*71*
10:	PHANTOM FISH...	*80*
11:	SECRETS AND BIG, FAT LIES	*87*
12:	YOU ARE FEELING VERY SLEEPY...	*97*
13:	SPOOKINESS AND SARCASM	*109*
14:	HUMAN JELLY	*119*
15:	NORMALLY NORMAL	*126*

16: THE (NOT SO) GREAT OUTDOOR SLEEPOVER *135*

17: KYRA'S (SCARY) DARE *143*

18: IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TONIGHT... *152*

19: PANTING, FAINTING AND BIG, BIG HUGS *160*

20: WOW TIMES TEN *169*

PROLOGUE

Dear Mum,

I don't mean to worry you, but Rowan's brain seems to have melted in the heat. (Will anyone notice the difference?)

It's just that it's so baking hot today that she came up with an interesting way of keeping cool – making ice-cubes. But not normal H_20 ice-cubes of course – that would be *way* too simple for Rowan. She's currently sitting on a deckchair in the garden sucking furiously on *custard* ice-cubes, while huffing at me and Tor for refusing to try one and not appreciating her efforts. I'm sorry, but I'd rather splash my face with water out of the dogs' bowl* to keep cool than suck frozen custard.

Speaking of dogs, we all fell in love with that cute golden retriever in the background of the photo that came with your latest letter (all the way from Dallas, Texas!) this morning. Did you notice it? It looked like a wet mop, coming soaking out of the sea. If you didn't notice it then you sure must have *felt* it from

the way it was spin-drying itself about five centimetres behind you. But you know something? There were two kind of weird things about your photo and letter: 1) that dog looked practically identical to one that was destroying a sandcastle in the background of a photo you sent from Hawaii a couple of months ago; and 2) when I went upstairs to put a pin on the map to point out where you were, I realized that there aren't any beaches near Dallas, *or* near Texas (by about a zillion kilometres). Ho hum…

Still, two more bits of weirdness hardly matter at the moment – my world has been one gigantic dollop of pretty weird weirdness lately. I'd better tell you all. So, are you sitting comfortably, Mum, wherever you are? Then I'll begin (over the page)…
Love you lots,
Ally
(your Love Child No. 3)

* I caught Tor doing that a few minutes ago – splashing his face with water out of the dogs' bowl, I mean. After running around the lawn, demented, for the last hour, Tor, Rolf and Winslet are now all collapsed in the shade of the garden shed in a panting, overheated tangle of boy and dogs. Honestly, that kid is one step away from barking and sniffing lamp-posts…

Chapter 1

WEIRD BUT KIND OF WONDERFUL

"Ouch!" I mumbled under my breath, as a vicious cactus prickled my bare leg. I leapt back out of its spiny way and immediately felt a disgusting squishing sensation under my elbow. Slowly I lifted my arm to inspect the damage, and saw a dollop of red *ooze* drip from my elbow and land with a splat on my denim cut-offs.

Understandably, I guessed that a chunk of my skin had somehow been gouged away and leapt forward in shock, only to find myself being smothered – by a huge pair of white pants.

And then I woke up.

No, I didn't – I just suddenly remembered that you can't daydream on Kellie's balcony, you really need to be on your guard at all times. Other tenants in the building might keep the odd pot plant perched out here in the fresh air, or hang out a few pairs of socks to dry in the breeze. Kellie's mother, however, has turned their shoebox-sized balcony into a cross between

the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and a laundrette.

Bored of waiting for Salma to turn up so we could all get out in the sunshine this Friday afternoon, I'd ambled out here, found myself gawping at the badly sunburnt bald spot of the guy on the pavement down below (yeah, well, the *main* view you get from the balcony of Kellie's third-floor flat is of … the three-storey block of flats right across the street) and lost my concentration for a second. That's when I'd leant a little too close to the cactus collection, backed into the tomato plant (squish) and had a close encounter of the knicker kind with Mrs Vincent's pegged-up smalls. (Make that "bigs"…)

"Salma's here!" Jen stuck her head out of the metal-framed door. "You coming in, Ally?"

"Course!" I nodded, hoping she didn't catch the fact that I'd been on the verge of wiping tomato gloop off my elbow with the nearest available piece of material – i.e. Kellie's mum's gigantic undies…

"Here," I heard her say as I stepped into the shade of the living room and waited for my eyes to adjust from the blinding brightness outside.

"Thanks," I muttered, taking a tissue from the box Jen was holding out to me and wiping my soggy arm. (Urgh – she *had* spotted me!)

"Great!" I heard Kellie say (even if I couldn't quite focus on her), as she walked back into the room with Salma. "Now that everyone's here, *wait* till I show you what *I* got today!"

Half a second of rapid blinking and I was able to glance around and confirm that the "everyone" that Kellie was talking to included me, Chloe, Salma and Jen. It didn't include Sandie – who was away for a few days with her parents visiting assorted relatives; or Kyra – who was out shopping with her mum (i.e. right this second in some store in Oxford Street there would be *lots* of arguing and wheedling going on).

"What is it?" I asked Kellie, intrigued. But I was less intrigued by whatever was in the bottom of Kellie's bag than in her general furtiveness. That gagging-to-tell-you look on her face was one thing, but the way she kept checking over her shoulders as she rummaged in her rucksack made me wonder if she had a top-secret government file in there on the abolition of lipgloss or homework or something and was expecting MI5 to burst into her flat any second now and drag her away screaming to a cell.

"Look!" grinned Kellie, holding up a book for us all to examine while she took another surreptitious glance over her shoulder.

"Wow!" gasped Chloe, studying the dog-eared

book cover. "*The Cacti Grower's Guide*! That's *fascinating*, Kellie!"

Kellie frowned at Chloe's sarcasm and flipped the book around, checking the cover for herself.

"Oh. I got that one for my mum," she mumbled, chucking it to one side and diving her hand back inside the bag. "I went to this car-boot sale with my cousin Letitia this morning and picked up some stuff dead cheap, like … *this*!"

With a grand flourish, she held up a book for our inspection.

"*The Little Book of Lovey-Dovey Spells*," I said out loud, in case all my friends had lost the ability to read during the summer holidays.

"Ooh! C*ool!* Let's have a look at that!" gasped Chloe, turning from sarky to shrieky with excitement in the space of two seconds.

"It was only 50p, but it's full of these *excellent* spells for finding true love," Kellie explained, as Chloe yanked the book out of her hands and began flicking through the pages – Salma and Jen crowding in on her on either side of the sofa for a nosey. With no room to join them, I scrambled around the back and leant my (tomato-free) elbows on the cushioned ledge of the sofa back.

"Here!" Chloe surprised me by saying, snapping the book shut and passing it over her head and into

my hands. "*You* pick one out, Ally, and read it in that funny voice you do!"

"Yeah – go on, Al!" Salma turned and grinned up at me.

Oh. I hadn't realized that I *did* a "funny" voice. But I didn't mind having a go. Quickly, I flicked through the pages of weird but kind of wonderful spells and settled on one with a stupid name (well, I would, wouldn't I?).

"OK – here we go," I began, straightening up and getting myself ready to launch into a suitably spooksome delivery. "'The Totally, Utterly Charming Charm'."

"Ooh! I'm getting goosebumps already!"

"Shut up, Kel!" Salma grinned down at Kellie, all curled up on the floor, her arms gripping her knees close to her chest. "Let Ally get on with it!"

"'For best results,'" I got on with it, "'do this spell as the clock strikes midnight!'"

"Not fair!" whined Jen. "I can *never* stay awake till then, even when I try!"

"Yeah, of course," Chloe narrowed her green eyes at Jen, "you have to be tucked up in your jimjams by eight so your mummy can read you a bedtime story!"

I gave a loud cough before war broke out, just to remind the girls what we were supposed to be doing.

"Ignore them, Al! *I* want to hear!" Salma encouraged me.

"Anyway, it says here that you need a seashell, a pinch of nutmeg, a hair from your head—"

"Well, where *else* would it be from?" Chloe interrupted, with a rude snigger.

"Ally! You've stopped doing the voice!" Kellie jumped in and protested. "Read it properly, with the spooky voice!"

I took a deep breath and started again. This spell was only about six sentences long but the way my friends were going it would take me till Christmas to finish reading it out.

"'Place these three vital elements into a piece of soft, clean white cloth—'"

"Huh? But where would you get—"

I shot Jen a shut-up look and carried on, louder.

"'—and fold the cloth gently over them. Hold this sacred package in your left hand and close your eyes. Visualize a cloak of white light settling on your shoulders. Now the spell is done, you will be irresistible to everyone you meet till the clock strikes 12 on the following night.'"

"Brilliant!" Chloe clapped her hands. "Let's all do it tonight! We can phone each other on Sunday and compare notes and see who got the most boys falling for them!"

"Uh-uh." Salma shook her head. "I'm taking my sisters and my niece to a birthday party tomorrow afternoon. If I do the spell tonight, that means that I risk having about 20 three-year-old boys fall in love with me. And frankly, I'm hoping for a boyfriend who's a little bit older than that."

"OK," Chloe shrugged. "Well, let's all do it over the weekend sometime and we'll meet up on Monday and see—"

"That's Mum!" Kellie suddenly yelped, her eyes wide and white with alarm, which was very odd seeing as Kellie and her mum were as big buddies as mums and daughters can get. "Quick, Ally! Hide the book! Mum'll freak if she sees that!"

"How come?" I frowned, stuffing the book down the back of my shorts in a panic and pulling my T-shirt down over the bump.

"You know how religious she is!" Kellie hissed. "She's dead against the idea of spells and stuff, even when it's only for a laugh!"

True. Mrs Vincent is one laid-back lady who lets Kellie watch just about anything on telly, except *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Yeah, now Buffy – *that* can be kind of behind-the-sofa scary sometimes, but Sabrina? She's about as satanic as marshmallow. Still, Kellie's

mum's attitude to all things spooksome explained why Kellie was so jumpy when she was about to show us the book earlier.

"Hello, girls!" Mrs Vincent called out cheerfully, as she negotiated her way from the front door to the kitchen with about a hundred overflowing carrier bags, stuffed with great food. (You'd think she had to feed the entire cast and crew of *EastEnders* instead of one skinny daughter.)

But she didn't get a chance to appreciate our raggedy chorus of hellos back – the phone began to trill in the hall and she was too busy answering that to spot the five honest-we're-not-guilty faces in her living room.

"Where is it?" Kellie hissed in my direction.

"Down my shorts!" I hissed back, which set Jen off giggling. Till she saw Mrs Vincent's distraught expression in the doorway.

"Ally?" Kellie's mum called to me softly. "There's a call for you – it's your sister Linn. She says you're late for the funeral…"

"Omigod! Stanley! I completely forgot!" I gasped, slapping my hands over my mouth.

"There, there, dear…" Mrs Vincent came bustling over, ready to grasp me into her comfortingly large bosom.

Just as I felt myself being enveloped, I made out

Kellie's muffled voice saying, "Mum! Stanley's their *goldfish*!", and I was suddenly released.

"Your goldfish, huh?" she gazed down at me, her dark eyebrows shooting halfway up her forehead in surprise.

"My brother's," I shrugged. "He's pretty cut up about it."

"Well, I'll say a little prayer for Stanley, then," Mrs Vincent smiled indulgently.

"Thanks…"

As I hurried to the phone to talk to Linn, I couldn't help wondering what sort of prayer you could say for a goldfish. "*Our goldfish, who art in pond heaven*…"

"Hello? Linn?"

"Ally, you have exactly *five* minutes to get round here or I'll be burying you right next to Stanley."

Ah, Linn – I think some evil witch must have cast a "Totally, Utterly Grouchy" spell on her at birth…

Chapter 2

STANLEY THE GOLDFISH, RIP

The funeral of Stanley the goldfish had pulled a good crowd. As I burst into our back garden, panting, I spotted Tor (natch), Dad (on a late lunch-break), Linn (giving me one of her where-have-you-been? looks), Rowan (dressed especially spectacularly), Grandma and her boyfriend Stanley (the alive person, not the dead goldfish), Harry (our next-door neighbour) and some kid I'd never seen before in my life.

"Sorry I'm late!" I gasped at Tor in particular.

This funeral was all for Tor's sake. He'd always known that Stanley the goldfish's days were numbered – considering he had an unhealthy-looking lump on his side the size of a whole other goldfish – but finding Stanley floating at the top of his bowl last night had still come as a terrible shock to him. We all knew just by looking at him that Stanley was dead as a very dead fish, but just to put Tor's mind at rest, we asked Michael the vet from next door if he could come through and give