

KAREN McCOMBIE

CHOLASTIC

Marshmallow
Magic

and the

Wild
Rose
Rouge

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**SCHOLASTIC
PRESS**

*For Stanley, who was there,
and then wasn't*

★ CONTENTS ★

1	Shhh. . .	1
2	A feather a day	3
3	Magic, only marshmallow-flavoured	11
4	In the wilds with Rose	24
5	Sun, rain and mild freakiness	32
6	Greetings from Planet Polka-dot	41
7	N.U.T.T.E.R. spells "Lemmie". . .	50
8	Edible toes and small, furry secrets	58
9	Just my Luck(enbooth)	69
10	ArTy, CrAfTy and shiny, shiny. . .	86
11	The strange sound of scrabbling	98
12	Girl-shaped pancakes	108
13	Gold star for bullying	117
14	Good riddance . . . I wish	124
15	Well, hel-luau, hel-luau	133
16	Whispered shouting	140
17	Armed and loaded with charms	149
18	How to blow a second chance (<i>big-time</i>)	157

19	Love and leis. . .	167
20	Long-lashed shark eyes	181
21	How to (pretend to) be brave	192
22	To tell or not to tell	201
23	One last wild, wonderful weekend. . .	206
24	Walking in a summer winterland	212
25	Truths, half-truths and where-are-you? texts	220
26	Minus the marshmallow magic	228



Shhh. . .

Hello.

My name's Lemmie.

Do you want to know a secret?

The secret is, I've got *lots* of secrets.

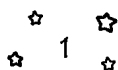
Some of my secrets are so old I've kind of half-forgotten them.

Some are around me all the time, every day.

Some are so weird I can't tell anyone about them, 'cause they'd laugh at me or think I was a freak. (Well, drawing circles around the freckles on your arms when you're sleepwalking is pretty freaky, I guess.)

Some of my secrets are so spangly and special that I hold them inside of me, like a sparkler in the dark.

My secrets come in all shapes and sizes: some are



weeny and floaty-light; some are heart-shaped, and some are, er . . . mouse-shaped.

One secret in particular's so *humungously* big, I can't even bring myself to think about it, never mind write it down. . .

But then some of my secrets can be amazingly, dazzlingly *ordinary* too. Like with Dad, I could *never* tell him that his hip Liam Gallagher haircut looks less hip and more like a deranged farmer's attacked him with a pair of sheep shears. That chunklet of truth would be *way* too cruel.

And with Mum, I can't exactly let her know that the "cute" knock-knock thing we do when she comes to my bedroom door is just something I invented to give me time to hide any stray marshmallow magic under the bed.

Speaking of Mum and Dad, they know a couple of my secrets, but not all of them.

My best friends Morven and Jade, they know some of the marshmallow magic, but that's about it.

There's only one person who knows everything about *everything*, and that's Rose Rouge (of course).

Oh, and before I forget, here's another secret: Lemmie's not my real name.

Confused yet?

Hey, welcome to the club – I manage to confuse myself *all* the time. . .

2



A feather a day

“Knock-knock!” Mum shouts from the other side of the door, at the same time as she knock-knocks for real.

“Who’s there?” I ask, hurriedly slapping the lid of the shoebox back on and shoving it under my bed.

(Urgh . . . now the feathers are sticking to my hand. I shouldn’t have started looking through them after I’d scooped peanut butter straight from the jar with my finger.)

“Harry!” Mum calls out.

“Harry who?” I call back, jumping up and trying to wipe my fluffy, peanut-butter-covered fingers on my jeans. (What a klutz.)

“Harry up and open the door!” says Mum.

Yeah, yeah, it’s a really corny joke – just like every

other knock-knock joke we know – but it’s a nice way to get a bit of privacy, and not have my parents barge in on me without being asked.

Anyway, I go to turn the door knob with my left hand as usual, and then realize I’m going to end up covering *it* with feathery fluff and peanut butter too, so I shove my hand behind my back instead, out of sight. Out of *Mum’s* sight, I mean. Who needs awkward questions, like “What’s with the feathers?” and “Why does a daughter of mine have to be so weird?”

“Hey, Laurel!” Mum smiles, standing on the tiny landing at the top of the tiny set of stairs to my tiny room.

(Hands up if you’ve just spotted my real name, by the way.)

Ah, there goes Mum; doing her customary blink for a second or two. Coming up from downstairs, my room’s always a bit of a shock to her senses, I reckon. Downstairs is all low-lights and off-whites and soft-suede and clutter-free calm, like an interior designer’s show-home (which it *is*, since my parents are both interior designers). Upstairs is . . . the opposite.

It’s so small up here in the attic that there’s more low, sloping ceiling than there is wall-space, but that just makes it easier to decorate. The trouble is, I just don’t think Mum and Dad totally *get* the flurry of

butterflies (cut out from sheets of wrapping paper and Blu-tacked all over the walls), *or* the chilli-pepper fairy lights, *or* the fact that I painted each chunk of wall and ceiling a different colour. I guess they think I just sort of *whammed* it all together, but I didn't. I always give *everything* a lot of thought, even if it doesn't seem that way to anyone who happens to be watching. It's like with the paint; I didn't just pick the colours for their colour (if you see what I mean) – I picked them for their names too: "Rainbird Green", "Lemon Haze", "Peacock Blue", "Gingersnap", "Sugared Lilac" and . . . and what was the name for the bright red again? I can't remember. Wasn't it something like—

"Been busy swotting, then?" says Mum, interrupting my thoughts.

She's teasing. I can tell because she's leaning casually on the doorframe – her shoulder right next to Isla (my door angel) – trying to hide a puzzled smile as she stares at my head.

Oops . . . I forgot about my hair. Before I started sifting through my shoebox of feathers, I'd been playing around with it, trying to fix it into a bun with two plastic chopsticks we got when we last went to the Chinese restaurant (run by my friend Jade's grandparents) in the town square.

I shoot my (left) hand up and pat the lopsided

bird's-nest that's landsliding its way down towards my shoulder.

"Um, I was just trying something out," I say, suddenly dropping my hand back down and turning my head to one side a little, in case Mum can spot any telltale smears of peanut-buttery fluff on my mousey-brown bird's-nest.

Befuddled: that's what Mum looks like, looking at me. I think I befuddle her quite a lot.

Freeze-frame us both right now and you might start to see why. . .

MUM: Shiny, plum-coloured hair; perfect, neat bob, cut above the chin.

ME: A mousy, fuzzy bird's-nest, decorated with chopsticks, feathers and peanut-butter grease.

MUM: Navy T-shirt, pressed jeans, navy loafers.

ME: Tie-dye vest top, daisy-covered pyjama bottoms, one blue flip-flop, one pink flip-flop.

MUM: A dainty pair of sapphire blue stud earrings, her white-gold wedding ring.

ME: A Luckenbooth necklace (present from Rose Rouge), a dragonfly tattoo on my shoulder and a Hello Kitty tattoo on my hip (free along with a load of other temporary tattoos with the last copy of *Bliss* magazine).

Spot the difference.

Y'know, sometimes when she opens the door of

my room Mum stares at me and I think she's wondering who this stranger is in the family. (Still, at least I'm just *weird*, and not wild, like Rose Rouge, and not as much of a stranger either, when it comes down to it. . .)

"Listen, Laurel," says Mum, reaching over and swiping a straggle of hair away from my face, "*Mrs Doubtfire*'s just started on TV – do you want to come down and watch it with me and Dad?"

"Nah, I better revise for this French test tomorrow."

I'd *definitely* better – I've done nothing but muck around and daydream since I came up here to my room after tea.

Mum looks a bit disappointed, but then I know her and Dad would much rather watch some dreary documentary on BBC4 about the history of concrete in modern design or whatever.

"Well, let me at least take that stuff down to the kitchen, out of your way," says Mum, spotting the tray on my ratty old patterned Persian carpet. I catch her frowning slightly at the sight of the opened jar of peanut butter, the two glasses (one of half-drunk orange juice, one of half-drunk lemonade), the plate from last night's cheese toastie and the sticky Maltesers bag.

Mess of any kind gives Mum the heebie-jeebies.

Which means she stays out of my room a lot, which is perfect. (I love my parents, and I love my room – they just don't mix.)

With a wave, and a clunk of the door, Mum's gone, leaving me in my muddled oasis again.

And speaking of muddles, maybe I need to explain stuff; stuff like Isla (my door angel), and the marshmallow magic, and Rose Rouge. But maybe I'll just start with where I live . . . oh, and the feathers, since I can do that at the same time. (Don't worry, it'll get less muddled. I think. *I hope.*)

So where do I start?

Three-hundred-and-eleven days ago, that's where, 'cause that's how long we've lived here in Balgownie. (Me, Mum, Dad, but *not* Rose Rouge.)

I know for a fact that it's three-hundred-and-eleven days, because I've picked up a feather and kept it for every single day we've been here.

So here's the thing about the feather thing: we used to live in Edinburgh, which is the capital city of Scotland and is very cool, with great old buildings and a castle towering over the shops in the High Street. As far as big cities go, it's not *London* huge, but it's still *pretty* huge, with streets and roads and pavements criss-crossing and overlapping for ever and ever amen.

And then we moved to Balgownie, which is a

small town, kind of not quite in the Highlands, and the pavements lead to the country, and the streets and the roads amble to the river on one side and a great big wooded hill on the other. Driving into the town on that first day three-hundred-and-eleven days ago, I saw silvery fish jumping in the river and a spindly-legged deer stopped *just* long enough in the middle of the road to give us all heart attacks before it bounded over a fence and into the forest.

That first day, while Mum and Dad tried to get the lock on the front door of our new house to work, a feather fluttered and floated down out of the cloud-speckled sky and landed *splat* at my feet. I kicked at it with the toe of my trainer at first, like I was scared it was full of toxic country germs, or that it would flutter back up and tickle my knees or something.

"It's a lucky sign, you doughball!" I heard Rose Rouge say, even though she was far, far away, back in Edinburgh.

A lucky sign; I knew I could do with one of those, since the past three years had been pretty much lucky with a capital "U" and "N" slapped right before it.

So without mentioning anything to my parents (who were too busy squabbling over keys to worry about lucky signs fluttering from the sky), I picked the feather up, shoved it in my pocket, and decided to keep it in my room.