



Rainbows, Rowan and True, True Romance(?)

“Hope you have a great few days!” Mum smiled, self-consciously stepping towards her own mother, as if she didn’t know whether she deserved to join in the general hug-a-thon too.

“Thank you, Melanie, dear,” Grandma beamed, clasping Mum close, but letting her go again quickly. It was funny; I almost got the feeling that Grandma was on the verge of getting emotional, but trying to cover it up with her usual nonsense, no-fuss approach. “Now we’re back on Saturday. You *will* still be here, won’t you, Melanie?”

From the smile on Grandma’s face, that last remark was supposed to be a joke. Or was it? Was it Grandma’s way of asking Mum what her plans were without panicking any of us? (Except that now, little old worrier me was *already* panicking.)

“Me? ...Of *course* I’ll still be here!” Mum laughed in reply.

Pity she hesitated for that split-second before she spoke, though...

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RAINBOWS,
ROWAN *AND*
TRUE, TRUE
ROMANCE(?)

KAREN M^cCOMBIE

FOR Miss BARBARA THOMSON,
MRS CHRISTINE McINTYRE
AND MR NORMAN CONSTABLE.
(HEY, teachers CAN be COOL!)

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PROLOGUE

Dear Mum,

I know you're here at the moment (well, you're in Sainsbury's right now, strictly speaking), and that I can tell you stuff in person (i.e. once you get back from Sainsbury's), but the thing is, while you were away, I kind of got into the habit of writing down everything that happened to our family and my friends, and I think I'd really miss doing that. So if it's OK with you, I'm going to keep scribbling all our sagas – even if you *are* here to see them – and then when I'm done, you can make a cup of tea, pull up a cat and read all about us.

Anyway, apart from realizing that I didn't want to stop writing my journals, I learnt two things today: first, black olives make our dopey dog Rolf barf (mind you, he *did* eat the entire bag you left on the kitchen table this morning – including the *actual* bag).

The second (and more important) thing I learnt was that while I am an expert in the art of worrying,

I'd much rather be that than shy. Wondering what I'm waffling on about? Well, it's like this; as you know, Sandie is one of my best friends. Absolutely. A hundred per cent. Cross my heart and hope to die. But there *are* moments when your best friends can send you loopy, and that's exactly what Sandie – the reigning holder of the World's Shyest Person title – did to me this morning. I know being shy isn't much of a crime, like being a carjacker or a money launderer or a pirate or something, but then if Sandie *was* a carjacker or a money launderer or a pirate, she wouldn't show me (or herself) up so horribly.

Here's what happened: we were in HMV, and Sandie was being served by the most gorgeous, aloof, sulky teenage boy in the universe. After ogling him, we scarpered outside, only to find that Mr Aloof had short-changed Sandie big-time. But would she go back in and tell him he owed her another fiver? Of *course* not – she was way, way, *way* too mortifyingly shy to do that, no matter *how* much I tried to convince her that she couldn't let herself be ripped off, even if it *was* by accident.

Can you guess what happened next? Yep ... after much begging from Sandie, *I* – complete with a tomato-red face and an attractive stammer – ended up trying to explain to Mr Aloof about the mistake

with her change. He stood listening, chewing gum and acting like I was about as interesting as constipation, while Sandie hid behind a display of Enrique Iglesias CDs. (Couldn't she at least have chosen something cooler?)

Then Mr Aloof asked to see her receipt, but even though I was waving at her like a demented windmill, Sandie refused to come out from behind the CD display. So muggins me had to go and get the receipt off her, *then* walk the walk of shame *back* to the counter with it while Mr Aloof and his fellow aloof sales blokes got the sniggers at me and my dumb mate. Who by this time, incidentally, was doing an impersonation of a startled meerkat as she peeped over the top of Enrique's CDs. Very cool. *Not...*

I guess that means we'll never dare shop in that particular branch of HMV ever again, all thanks to Sandie's shyness making us both look like a right pair of turnips.

Ah, well... I won't hold it against Sandie (even though I can *still* hear those boys snickering as we slouched out), 'cause even *I'm* not immune to the occasional dollop of dumb, tongue-tying shyness myself, as you'll soon see, Mum...

Love you lots,

Ally

(your Love Child No. 3)

PS Sorry if talking about barfing, shyness, constipation, meerkats and turnips all at once is a bit confusing, but, er, that's just me! (Better get used to it...)



Chapter

1

MY AMAZING SHRINKING VOICE

“Hmmm ... miniminimmm...”

It was a teeny-tiny sound, and came from quite a small, pink thing. The sound was some kind of happy, tuneless hum, and the small thing was called Ivy, who happened to be my sister (something I *still* hadn't quite got my head around yet). The pinkness was the colour of her clothes, from her shorts to her T-shirt to her size “titchy” plastic sandals.

“Pppptttt-uhhh!”

That was *another* teeny-tiny sound, and came from an even *smaller* thing. A small *furry* thing this time.

“What was that?” I asked, staring down at the sleepy-looking gerbil that Ivy was gently holding and humming to, and wondering if I'd just heard my first ever gerbil fart.

“A sneeze,” my brother Tor informed me as he scrubbed away at the bottom of the cleared-out cage with a bottle of disinfectant and some wildly over-sized yellow rubber gloves. The ends of the

empty fingers were squidding and wobbling around like they were made of lemon jelly. From her curled-up position on the dusty shed floor, our dog Winslet – pretending she was asleep – watched the wibbly-ended gloves with interest with her one opened eye. I guessed that the minute Tor took the gloves off, Winslet would nab them to add to one of her many strange doggy treasure troves hidden in the deep, dark depths of our house.

But back to the second teeny-tiny sound: of *course* the “Pppptttt-uhhh” noise was a *sneeze*. After all, that was the whole reason I was spending a sunny Monday afternoon stuck inside the garden shed with a seven-year-old boy, a very small girl, a sneaky dog and a germ-ridden rodent. I was sure there were more exciting things to do on the last day of the summer holidays (for example, Rowan was currently stretched out on a rug in the garden, trying to turn herself into a tanned goddess for the new term), but I really didn’t mind helping Tor spruce up the shed-cum-sickbay. Apart from anything else, it was a perfect opportunity to get to know Ivy better. She may have been on the planet for three-and-a-half years, but all of us had only known her since Saturday afternoon, when Mum arrived out of the blue with her, so I guess you could say there was a bit of catching up to do.

“Do you think...” I muttered, leaning in close to peer at the gerbil nestling in Ivy’s arms, “...that Pickle would like a diddy little hankie for his diddy little snotty nose?”

I was just goofing around for Ivy’s sake, but instead of smiling, she stopped her humming and crinkled her nose in confusion. So far she’d hardly said a word, and hardly smiled either. Mum told us that was just Ivy ... a chip off Tor’s silent block. Though weirdly, Tor had been a whole lot less silent in the last couple of days since Ivy’d shown up. He’d really taken a shine to her, specially once he realized she was just as much of an animal nut as him. Don’t get me wrong; it wasn’t as if he’d exactly turned into a motormouth or anything, but it seemed that being around a kid even quieter than himself had somehow stimulated Tor’s vocal chords. Or maybe it was just the excitement of having Mum around that had got him in the mood for yakking. Funnily enough, it was having the opposite effect on me...

“*Branston,*” said Tor, taking his lemon jelly fingers out of the cage and grabbing a handful of fresh, straw-type bedding out of the plastic sack next to him.

“Branston? What are you on about?” I asked, now that it was my turn to be confused.

“It’s my gerbil’s name, Ally!” Tor corrected me, looking aghast at the fact that I could have got such an obvious thing wrong. “Not *Pickle*.”

Ivy nodded hard. Ah ... so *that* was what had got her crinkling her nose at me just now, and not just my useless attempt to goof around. Maybe I was coming across as a bit of a failure in her big, brown eyes. Urgh ... the *last* thing I wanted to be was a disappointment of a big sister *already*.

“I knew it was Branston! I was only joking!” I lied with a big grin. “I *know* there’s not a Pickle!”

“Yes there is!” Tor corrected me again. “He’s Branston’s brother!”

“Um ... I knew that too! I was just being silly...” I tried to cover up, knowing that Tor and Ivy didn’t buy my excuse for a *second*.

“Pppptttt-uhhh!” Branston sneezed again, sending millions of minuscule particles of bacteria shooting off around the shed.

I was about to ask out loud if it was possible for humans to catch gerbil germs (I didn’t fancy “Pppptttt-uhhh!”, “Pppptttt-uhhh!”, “Pppptttt-uhhh!”-ing my way through assembly tomorrow morning), when I realized that Tor would take it as a terrible slur against his sickly pet, and I was in enough trouble with my little brother as it was. Nope... I needed to steer the subject away from

gerbils and on to something else. Something that would make Ivy realize that in my own way, I was just as cool as Tor.

“OK, OK!” I burst out. “How about I tell you both a story?”

I settled on story-telling, as the only other things I was good at were worrying, eating crisps and beating the rest of my family to the shower in the morning, and I didn’t suppose any of that would particularly impress a three-and-a-half year old. (Although Ivy *might* have been quite amazed at how many tortilla chips I could cram in my mouth at once...)

“What story?” Tor asked, delicately lifting Branston out of Ivy’s arms and depositing him and his gerbil germs inside the newly renovated cage.

I hadn’t a clue. I’d been so desperate to change the subject that I’d said the first thing that came into my mind. But under Ivy’s intense gaze, I knew I’d have to come up with something smartish, or risk disappointing my brand new kid sister for a second time.

“Right...” I nodded, hoping that the nodding might shake an idea out of my brain cells somehow.

Two eager faces stared expectantly at me. Make that three; Winslet had opened *both* her eyes now, although I had a sneaking suspicion that while Tor

and Ivy were waiting for a story to trip off my tongue, Winslet would have preferred to hear the magic words, “Teatime!” Well, tough cookies, hairy dog – teatime was a long way off.

“Um ... once ... once upon a time...” I wiffled, hoping for a thunderbolt of an idea.

And then it came; inspiration washed all over me like a warm bath. (OK – it wasn’t quite as poetic as that; it was more of a small *ping!* in my head.)

“Once upon a time,” I began again, with a bit more assurance in my voice, “there lived a boy and a girl, called Martin and Melanie.”

Tor beamed, immediately recognizing the start of this story. Ivy continued to stare intently at me with her huge brown eyes, waiting to hear what was going to happen next. Winslet just disappointedly flopped her head back down on the floor and started snoring loudly, since I hadn’t mentioned anything remotely related to food.

“The girl – was she beautiful?” Tor asked, as familiar with this fairy tale as he was with our family. Which wasn’t surprising, because it wasn’t so much of a fairy tale as the tale of our family, and I’d told it to him a couple of zillions of times before, on those occasions when nightmares had sent him scurrying to the sanctuary of my bed.

“Yes, she was beautiful,” I nodded.

“And was the boy kind and funny?”

I thought of the photos we had of our dad when he was young and smiley and scruffily cute.

“Yes, Tor, he was kind and funny. Anyway, the boy and the girl met—”

“In a bike shop!” Tor interrupted.

“Yes – they met in a bike shop where the boy worked, and they fell madly in love over the spare tyres.”

Tor giggled, but Ivy didn’t. Guess it was going to take her a while to tune into my lame-brain sense of humour.

“And because they were in love, they got married, and became Mr and Mrs Love, ’cause that was their last name. Then they had Love child number one, who was called...”

“Linnhe!” Tor yelled out, making Ivy jump.

“*Then* they had Love child number two, who was called...”

“Rowan!”

“Yep!” I laughed. “*Then* they had Love child number three, who was called...”

“Ally!”

Ivy widened her eyes at the mention of my name, and muttered “Ally!”, which made me go a bit wibbly, actually, ’cause just about all I’d heard her say up till then was “Ben!” (the name of her

dog back home in Cornwall) and “Yum!” (It seemed our Ivy wasn’t a fussy eater and liked her food – although she hadn’t tried Rowan’s cooking yet...)

“*Then* they had Love child number four,” I continued, knowing this was Tor’s favourite bit, “who was called...”

“Tor!” yelped Tor.

“Tor!” repeated Ivy softly, looking like she was starting to enjoy this game.

“And *then* they had Love child number *five*, and *she* was called...”

This was a new addition to the story. Neither Tor or me said anything; we both just leant forward, grinning at Ivy and wondering if she’d get it. Just as she glanced wordlessly between us, another voice altogether gave the right answer...

“Ivy!” Mum called, as she stood in the shed doorway, her hands on her hips and her blondie-brown, wavy hair backlit like a halo by the sun. “Looks like you’re all having fun!”

As she spoke, Ivy went running towards her, and wrapped her arms round Mum’s long denim skirt (and, of course, the legs underneath it).

“Ally was telling us a story!” Tor explained, since I’d magically managed to lose my voice.

“So I heard!” Mum laughed, stepping inside to

join us. (Not easy when you have a small child attached to your legs.)

Eek! I thought in a panic. *How long has Mum been standing there listening in?*

I knew there wasn't any real reason to be embarrassed about the idea of her earwigging on the story I'd been telling, but *you* try explaining that to my stupid cheeks, which were flushing as pink as Ivy's T-shirt right at that second.

"Anyway," she smiled, gently untangling herself from Ivy's grasp and settling herself down on the shed floor, cross-legged. "What have you all been up to while I've been away?"

Wow. *That* was a difficult question to sum up quickly. Me and Linn and Rowan and Tor had all grown up, I guess. Apart from that, we'd made loads of new friends ... accidentally started up an animal sanctuary in the house for wonky, unloved pets ... and Linn had got bossier ... Rowan had got ditzier ... Tor'd turned into a mini-Rolf Harris (minus the beard)...

Oops! As Mum smiled enquiringly at me, I suddenly realized that she meant what had we been up to *this afternoon* while she'd been round at Dad's bike shop keeping him company. She had *not* meant what had we been doing for the last four years while she'd been gone.

Doh...

Mum was still smiling at me, still waiting for an answer, looking just as beautiful as I imagined her in the fun-size fairy tale I'd just told Tor and Ivy. And the strangest thing was happening; I *might* have wanted to answer her, and I *desperately* wanted to ask her how she and Dad were getting along and if they'd sorted everything out between them, but as my grandma would say (and she likes her sensible sayings), you can't always have what you want. It was bizarre; even as I tried to form the words in my throat, I could physically feel my voice *shrinking*, for goodness' sake...

"Aaarkk!"

Mum, frowned a little at the strange squawk that had squeaked out of my dry-as-a-desert mouth. This was terrible: Linn was taller, prettier and smarter than when Mum had seen her last; Rowan was more of a creative, interesting airhead; and me? Mum was probably staring at me and thinking, "I don't remember having a daughter as demented as *this* one!"

Good grief, what was wrong with me? Shouldn't I have been starting to *relax* more in her company, instead of feeling as shy as a five year old on her first day at school?

"All right, Ally? Got a tickle in your throat or

something?” Mum checked with me, looking all concerned.

Got a screw loose in my head, more like, I groaned to myself, as my voice still refused to crank up.

Thank goodness there was someone more idiotic than me on hand to drag Mum’s attention away from my predicament.

“Rowan?” Mum asked quizzically, as a human tornado in flip-flops and a Union Jack bikini appeared panting at the shed door.

With her rows of multi-coloured metal bracelets jangling, Rowan held up a crumpled magazine, and jabbed her finger against it till it rustled.

“I... I... I...” she jabbered, jumping up and down on the spot and making no sense at all. Not that anyone would have been able to hear her – all that frenzied jumping and rustling and jangling had woken Winslet from a deep sleep and set her off barking for Britain.

“*What?*” I shouted at Rowan, finding my voice at last, as I risked life and limb by attempting to clamp Winslet’s jaws together.

“I... I’m... I’m *famous!*” Rowan finally blurted out, before promptly bursting into tears.

Oh, good grief. Now Mum would think she had *two* demented daughters. I wouldn’t have blamed

her if she'd flung all of Ivy's pink clothes in a suitcase and taken the first train back to Cornwall...

]

”

Chapter

2

RONAN LOVE – SUPERMODEL!

“Look! It’s even got my name underneath!” Rowan giggled.

“*Ronan*,” stated Tor.

“Huh?” I muttered, then saw what Tor was getting at. Under the smiling full-length snap of our sister, a sentence read: “*Sussed for summer, Ronan Love (aged 15).*”

“It’s close enough,” shrugged Rowan, unfazed by the magazine’s boo-boo.

“But Ronan’s a *boy’s* name!” Tor answered indignantly. “*You’re* not a boy!”

Well spotted, Tor. Rowan – the most glitter-obsessed girlie girl in the universe – could *never* be mistaken for a boy.

“I don’t mind,” Rowan sighed happily. “Not now they’ve made me famous!”

Yikes. We practically had our own Kate Moss in the family. Yes, Rowan – sorry, *Ronan* – Love was a star. Nearly. Well, it’s not *every* day you look in a trendy style magazine and see your sister staring