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Opening extract from **The Rain**

Written by
Virginia Bergin

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If this was a proper story, like the kind you'd read for fun, it would have such a great beginning. Probably they'd want to make it into a film, it'd be that good. It would start in Mission Control – or maybe deep in space, where a massive hunk of rock, an asteroid, is whizzing through the stars on a collision course with planet Earth.

We cut to Earth: all over the world, everyone is terrified; they crowd around their TVs, weeping and praying. Probably there's also a lot of hugging and kissing and hand-holding, that kind of thing. Lots of deep and meaningful conversations – but not too many; we don't want to spoil the action.

The final countdown starts and back in Mission Control some old duffer in a uniform stands aside to let some hot young dude – a misunderstood rebel genius who's masterminded the operation – press the button. His girlfriend is there – or maybe she's at home, watching on TV, whispering, 'I love you, Brad,' as he launches the super-rocket that's the Earth's only hope.

Now all everyone can do is wait and hope and pray.

You'd have to speed up the next bit. Apparently in real life it took hours and hours, days, for the missile to reach the asteroid; in the film of the book it'd take just enough time to let the buff dude and his girl find each other, so they can be kissing when:

KA-BOOM!!!!

The asteroid is blown to smithereens. (It looks really pretty, too: a shimmering starburst in the sky. Everyone on Earth goes ooh and ahh and does some more hugging and kissing.)

The buff dude has saved the planet! The hot guy triumphed! Hurrah!

See?! What a great story!

Except, as I said, this is just the beginning . . . and in any case I was too young to remember the asteroid and all that. Me and my friends, we'd seen the stuff about it on the internet and, honestly, it was boring.

Simon, my stepdad, heard me say that once, and he went mental.

'Are you telling me,' he said. 'Are you telling me –'

Here we go. You knew, you just knew, when he repeated stuff like that he was going to repeat a whole load of other stuff. On and on and on and –

'– that you find the near-destruction of the planet Earth, on which you live, boring?'

I've got to say that when he got on his high horse like that, I couldn't help it: I saddled up my own. Yee-haa!

'Well, yeah,' I said.

I was telling the truth. I hate it when you get into trouble for stuff like that, for just saying what's true. It's like **THEY** – the parental types and about 99.999 per cent of all known teachers – want you to lie about what you think. You get into trouble for lying about everything else – who you were with, what you were doing, whether

you've done your homework or not – but they don't care when you lie about what you think. They actually *want* you to do it. It's called agreeing with them, and that's what they want, all the time, even if they're totally wrong.

'Unbelievable. Did you hear that, Becky? Are you listening to this?'

That was another thing he did; he tried to drag my mum into everything.

'Simon,' she said. 'Let it go. She's just trying to wind you up.'

The truth about *that* was I didn't know myself half the time whether I was trying to wind him up. I couldn't help myself. He annoyed me. My mum said we were two peas in a pod, which made me really angry because he wasn't even my dad. Like I would ever share a pod with Simon; being forced to share a house was bad enough.

'I'm not,' I said. 'It *is* boring. Something really bad *nearly* happened. It's, like, so what? There's a lot of really bad things that are actually really happening.'

'Ruby,' said Simon, borderline total rage-out, 'what you are failing to understand is that –'

I forget what else he said, what it was I was failing to understand. Same old, I expect – with same old results. He'd get madder and madder, I'd get madder and madder, and my mum would get drowned out. Or else we'd both end up having a go at her. It probably ended up with me getting grounded – that happened a lot – or made to go and tidy my room, or do the dishes even though we had

a dishwasher, or clean out the stupid guinea pigs.

The thing is, I would give anything to be back there, in the kitchen, having that row. I would just agree with him, or say sorry or something . . . but there will never be another row in the kitchen. There will never be another row anywhere in this house. Pretty much everyone is dead – except, perhaps, the stupid guinea pigs.

My name is Ruby Morris, and this is my story. If you are reading it, you are very, very lucky to be alive . . . but you already know that, right?

CHAPTER ONE

There's really no point going on about how things used to be. For one, I can't bear to think about it – even though I do, a lot, and it makes me want to throw up with sadness. For two, it kind of doesn't matter, does it? It's over. And, for three, I'm not writing this because of how things used to be – I'm writing this because of what happened . . . so I'll start right there. This is what happened:

I was sitting in a hot tub in my underwear snogging Caspar McCloud.

Ha! That also sounds like a great beginning, perhaps from some kind of kiss-fest romance, or maybe Caspar turns out to be a sexy vampire . . . but the truth is – and this is the one thing I will do, for sure: I will try to tell the truth, even if it hurts me to say it, even if it shocks you to hear it (and I doubt it will, because if you're reading this you've probably had about a gazillion shocks already) – it wouldn't be right to make out that snogging in a hot tub was the kind of thing I usually did on a Saturday night, because it wasn't.

It sooooooooooooooooooooo wasn't. Don't get me wrong: I'd kissed boys before (two); I'd been to parties before (like, since I was five years old or something); I'd

even sat in that hot tub in my underwear before (with Lee; that's Lee as in Leonie, my best friend) . . . but that night, that party . . . it was the best, the most brilliant – scarily brilliant – time I had ever had in my life up until that point. (Not difficult.)

That night, that one, glorious, hot Saturday night, I was becoming a new me, one that was going to have a boyfriend called Caspar and do stuff like snog in hot tubs at wild parties all the time. Yes, from the nagging jaws of the **THEY** I was about to snatch complete amazing greatness and total brilliance. And a boyfriend.

What can I say? It happened. It really happened! Zak, who lived in this massively cool rambling old farmhouse, and whose parents were so laid back you could basically do whatever you liked, pulled the speakers outside the barn where we – that's me and all my lovely friends (exception to be named shortly) – had been hanging out necking LETHAL cider punch, and a bunch of us stripped off – to our underwear – and climbed into their hot tub.

We sort of danced where we sat, doing so-slick-yeah-check-it mini arm moves. It was a total giggle but it was also totally cramped . . . until people started getting out again, moaning that the hot tub was too hot.

It was like some dreadful slow-motion countdown to LURVE; with every person that got out, the water in that tub got stiller and stiller. I kept wishing it was one of those jacuzzi tubs, with bubbles, but it wasn't; unless you kept trailing your hands about on the surface you could

see everything. So I sat there, casually fanning my hands around . . . because across that pool of steaming water sat Caspar-Swoon-McCloud.

And in between us sat Saskia, who wasn't fanning her hands about at all.

I do just want to say that, even before that night, I wasn't really sure how much I actually liked Saskia. Not that I really knew her; she'd just started hanging out with us lately – even more lately than Caspar, who'd been transferred to our school from the arty hippy school, and was cool and wild – and was in a band, and I'd told Simon and my mum I was babysitting with Lee so's I could go see Caspar's band play at The George. And it was there, while Caspar was onstage doing his guitar thing, that he'd looked up and looked at me and I'd looked at him and –

KA-CASPAR- BOOM! (PART ONE)

I realised I was in love with Caspar McCloud.

And this is too much information, isn't it? This is exactly what I said I wouldn't do, which is go on about how things were. I can't stand it. I'll shut up.

Back in the hot tub, Lee came to my rescue – or tried to. She came up and asked Saskia where the gin had gone

(I told you that punch was lethal) and Saskia said she didn't know and Lee said she thought she'd seen her with it and Saskia said she hadn't had it and Lee said maybe she could just come and help her look for it and Saskia, who SO knew all along what Lee was trying to do, sighed this enormous bored sigh and stood up and climbed out of the tub with her *chest* practically in Caspar's face and then turned to me and said –

'Don't do anything I wouldn't do.'

Then there really was nothing but a steaming hot tub of water between me and Caspar McCloud.

I was so shy. I nearly died of shyness. Also I was slightly worried that I was going to cook to death or perish from an exploding bladder because I really, really needed to pee. I tried not to think about that and it wasn't difficult not to think about that because I was in a state of pre-kiss terror. For sure, any second now, there was going to be a kiss. There HAD to be a kiss.

'Hey, Rubybaby,' said Caspar.

That's what he called me: 'Rubybaby'. From the lips of anyone other than a divine being, it would have sounded cringe-making and vomit-worthy. From the lips of Caspar McCloud it was utterly thrilling, as if an electric-lipped angel was kissing your soul. You know: hot and crackly.

'Hey, Caspar,' I said, crackling.

'Why don't you swim on around here and keep me company?' he said.

I fixed him with this sultry model's stare (deadpan, but

pouty) that I'd been practising at home. 'Well, why don't you swim on around here?' I said.

It was the pre-kiss terror that made me say that. Basically I would have swum the Atlantic to get to him. Genius, Ruby; all I'd done was prolong the agony.

Slowly and sexily, we both scooted towards each other. Actually, I'm not sure if you can scoot slowly and sexily, but that's what it felt like. Also it felt like it took an eternity, when really it was probably about ten seconds or something.

I looked into his eyes. Then I had to look away because it was just too, too intense. I could see all my friends, dancing and messing around like loonies; behind them, this gorgeous red sunset blazing in the sky.

If I'd looked the other way, I would have seen something else. I would have seen clouds gobbling up the night. Maybe I would even have seen that reflected in Caspar's eyes, but when I got a grip enough to stare into them again I wasn't there to admire the view.

BOMF! I practically head-butted him as my lips mashed into his. His lips sort of opened a bit and I kind of pushed my tongue into his mouth. I thought that was what you were supposed to do, to show how passionate you felt or something. Like I said, I'd kissed boys before, and that's what we had done. It had been fairly disgusting. Kissing Caspar like that wasn't disgusting; it was scary, and it felt all wrong. Until . . . I dunno: it just changed. One minute it was tongue-on-tongue combat, the next minute . . .

If this *was* my blockbuster movie, we would pause here. It would be worth a whole scene all by itself, that kiss. We would linger on it for as long as possible. That kiss. Those kisses. Where does one kiss end and another begin? We just kind of melted into one another. I do know that's the kind of stupid thing they say in cheesy romances, but we did. That's what happened! One minute I was my own clumsy me being, freaking out, and I could feel this divine Caspar being (was he freaking out too?), this Caspar being's tongue, and the next minute . . . I dunno . . . it was total –

KA-CASPAR-BOOM!

(PART TWO)

We didn't hear the yelling.

Fingers dug into my arm. My lips disconnected from Caspar's. I turned and –

'GET OUT!' Zak's dad shouted into my face, hauling me from the tub.

And that is when it all began.