

KATE  
LE VANN



# RAIN



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There was this girl I knew called Sarah. For a while – when I was younger – we hung out together almost all the time. She was funny and happy and her voice went croaky when she was excited. The things I most remember about her are singing stupid songs that she'd made up and threading daisy chains and lying on our backs on a high, grassy hill talking about clouds. The things I *want* to remember. We argued as well, though. I don't want to remember her shouting at me, or the time I told her I hated her and she cried, but I do. The truth is that I loved her more than anything. But she died before I ever really knew her: she was twenty-six. She was my mother.



## Rain's diary

6 July

*Gemini: The solar eclipse in the creative part of your chart marks a turning point. This is a powerful day for starting a new project or making a new friendship. A meeting where your favourite food is served is lucky.*

My dad thinks horoscopes are a load of rubbish. He'd like me to be sensible and scientific like he is. He works at a big drug company called Zoctine, and wears a kind of spacesuit all day to mix new formulas for anti-cancer drugs. When he comes home, his hair is mad and standing up as if he spent all day rubbing it with a balloon, his face is pink and sweaty, and he's too tired to talk. For an hour or so, he's too tired to do anything but watch football matches he recorded earlier. I got into football so we'd have something to talk about, but I'm never going to be sensible and scientific. I only like chemistry because you can sometimes make pretty colours in a Petri dish. I only like biology because the textbook has pictures of cats in it. I just flat out hate physics.

My mum was more like me. She read horoscopes and watched soap operas and believed in God. She never followed recipes properly and sometimes it really worked and other times she burned her cakes. She once gave my pet hamster mouth-to-mouth resuscitation

(with a hankie between their mouths), while I looked on, too amazed to cry any more (although the thing was, she had accidentally sat on him, which was how he came to be quite flat and not breathing), and brought him back to life. I look like her, or anyway that's what people tell me.

My dad is still not beginning to get over her, so I try my best not to remind him of her when he's tired and home from work at the end of the day.

On Mondays he brings home an Indian takeaway and on Fridays a Chinese takeaway. Tuesday and Thursday, I cook one of the three things I can cook, which are risotto, pasta shells with mushrooms, and chicken Caesar salad. On Wednesdays, he cooks the one thing he can cook, which is shepherd's pie. Weekends are fend-for-yourself, which means on Saturday I usually have instant noodles and he usually has a whole six-pack of teacakes with nothing on them, and we make a giant full-fry-up for Sunday breakfast together. I love Sunday mornings. I love them so much that I spend almost all of them feeling really sad, because they'll be over so soon and it'll be a full week until the next one. Lately, I've even started getting that feeling of dread as early as Saturday. The fact is, when one of your parents has died, you don't take it for granted that the other one will be alive for as long as you need them.

But one of the good things about there only being two of you is that your dad treats you like an adult, because he has to talk normally to *someone*, and you're

the only other person there. I'm closer to my dad than my friends are to their dads and, because he knows me, he trusts me. He trusts me to spend the occasional weekend alone, which is cool – 'cause I could be having wild parties where everyone gets drunk and wrecks the place, if I wanted. I'm not, of course. I get my best friend Georgina round whenever I can, because I hate being on my own, although I'd never tell Dad that. I talk a good game, but I get lonely, sometimes even a bit scared. And, by the way, I'm really worried about this summer.

Dad's going on a research trip with the Norwegian branch of Zoctine. He's wanted to do this for a long time, because that's where a lot of the research for the company is done, and my dad is a genius, really brilliant, and he could really make a difference. His boss has asked and asked him every single year . . . but he's always been responsible for me. So he's stayed at home while his colleagues (who aren't even as good as him) have gone instead. This year I convinced him that there was a better use for his experimental scientific mind than washing my favourite cream skirt with his dark blue towels and turning it grey.

It seemed like a great idea when we were planning it, and now I'm worried. I'm worried that Dad will be sad and lonely on his own without me, or will forget to stop working. This worries me for the long term even more, because soon I'll be going to uni and leaving him

for longer, then even longer. I wish he'd find someone to live with, because I worry about him not taking care of himself, and about how often he'll eat six-packs of toasted teacakes and no proper food. Even then, another part of me is scared of him moving on, because it will change us both. I'm also a bit worried about going to London. I know what I'm doing here, I'm tough as a stray cat *here*. London might be tougher than me. There are muggers and terrorists and people selling heroin. There are tall skinny models and fashionistas walking around who laugh at people like me. There are streets to get lost in and buildings that are too tall to see over. Underground Tubes with a map that looks like my hair in the morning. And there's my gran. I haven't spent that much time with her before, certainly not alone, just her and me. What are we going to talk about every night? What if she doesn't like me?

I feel as though I'm always trying to think of the worst thing that could happen so that, the next time something bad happens to me, it'll hurt me less because I've been planning for it. But it just means I spend a lot of time being sad. Weirdly, though, this time around, all my worrying and trying to shock-proof the future isn't only making me sad. Behind the sad, trying to hide because it's a bit ashamed of itself, there's another feeling. I know what that feeling is, I remember it, even though I haven't felt it for a while: I'm *excited*.

# PART ONE



# Chapter 1

Rain was woken by shouting men. She saw the sash window, then the creepy china monkey on the mantelpiece and remembered she was at her gran's house. She shuffled to the window, tripping over her computer lead on the way. Making sure she couldn't be seen by anyone out there, she peered down at the street. She saw a traffic warden and a little fat man wearing shorts. Rain was on the third floor, but they seemed close. The fat man was slapping his hand on the bonnet of his car and kicking the air; the traffic warden stretched languidly against a wall and filled in a ticket, ignoring the fat man. The rest of the street was quite quiet and no one looked at them. In Rain's village, a little way outside Manchester, people looked when people shouted. The traffic warden tried to fit the ticket under the windscreen wiper of the fat man's car. The fat man tried to stop him. They struggled like six-year-old

boys until the wiper broke off, and the fat man started shouting again.

Rain carefully ducked away from the window and sat on the bed. She knew she should go downstairs and talk to her gran but she was feeling a bit shy. The strange surroundings were disorientating her; she had to think hard to remember what day it was – Tuesday. She could feel the small ache of a new spot growing on her chin. But she was also hungry. So Rain pulled on a stripy towelling dressing gown over her baggy T-shirt and boys' shorts, tripped over her computer lead again, and went down the creaking stairs to the kitchen.

'Morning,' she said, pushing open the door.

There was a boy sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea and reading a newspaper.

'Whuah!' Rain shouted, jumping back.

The boy put down his tea cup.

'Are you okay?' he asked. 'I'm Harry.'

'You made me jump,' she said. 'I didn't expect to see you.' He had dark hair with a bit of a wave to it, and looked about nineteen. He was wearing a crumpled shirt, cords and heavy brown boots. He was gorgeous. Rain remembered she was wearing a ratty old dressing gown and boys' underwear. She pulled the dressing gown tighter.

'Who *are* you?'

‘I’m Harry,’ the boy said again.

‘Where’s my grandmother?’ Rain said.

‘Vivienne’s in the garden,’ he said, nodding towards the kitchen door. He picked up his cup again and asked, ‘Did you want a cup of tea, Rain?’

‘No. No thanks,’ Rain said, and for some reason she was annoyed that he knew her name. She opened the door and leaned out, then stepped out.

‘That grass is really wet,’ Harry said. ‘You shouldn’t go out in those socks.’

Because he’d said *those* socks, Rain looked down at her feet. They were pink and yellow, with stripes running counter to the stripes on her dressing gown. She wasn’t looking great. She tiptoed across the lawn to her gran, who was collecting sawn-off tree branches in a refuse sack.

‘Who’s that boy in there?’ Rain asked. Her feet felt very cold and wet.

‘Harry,’ her gran said. ‘Oh, Rain, I think you’re getting a little pimple there.’

Rain put her hand to her chin. ‘It doesn’t matter!’ she said. ‘Who’s Harry anyway?’

‘He’s helping me get the house fit to sell,’ Rain’s gran said. ‘Get him to make you some tea, and then you can come out and help us.’

‘I don’t want tea,’ Rain said softly, not meaning her granny to hear. She slipped back inside, tried to get past

Harry without him seeing her again – he didn't look up anyway – and went back up to her bedroom.

It had been six years since Rain had last seen her granny, and in that time, Vivienne seemed to have grown twenty years younger. Rain remembered her as an old woman at her mum's funeral – Vivienne's daughter's funeral – and then she'd gone away again. She'd been living in Germany with her second husband, and he had recently died at the end of a long, slow illness, and Vivienne had come back to London. The day before, Rain had looked out the train window as it pulled into Euston station, trying to find a little grey lady bundled in sorrow and sensible knitwear. Instead, she heard a strong voice call out her name, first loudly, then at speaking volume, and she realised she had been staring past her grandmother while standing almost next to her. And before she knew what was going on, Vivienne was taking Rain's bags off her and striding ahead to the taxi rank, while Rain hurried after her, silent and open-mouthed, taking in this energetic fifty-two-year-old woman with her sharply cut black trouser suit and black high heels with red soles.

Vivienne stopped at the end of the queue for taxis.

'Sorry to rush you, Rain, but we wanted to beat the suits.' She pointed behind them at the swarm of businessmen from the same train, lengthening the

queue. ‘Now, let me take a proper look at you.’ She took a step back and Rain crumpled in embarrassment. ‘You look like your mother,’ her grandmother said. ‘You’re every bit as beautiful.’ Vivienne closed her eyes a little too long for a blink. Rain felt a sudden stab at the back of her own eyes and blinked too many times.

They spent their first evening together asking a lot of questions but not really listening to the answers the other gave. Vivienne tried not to stare too hard at the young woman with her chin on her elbows on the kitchen table looking just like her mother had, tugging her fringe shyly like her mother used to, kicking her toes together the way her mother always did. Rain talked about her dad’s work and the research project that took him out of the country this summer, but all she kept thinking was, ‘God, my gran is *really posh!*’

Back in her bedroom on the third floor, Rain tried to look for her granny and the dark-haired boy through the window, but they were on the other side of the house. The third floor hadn’t been rented out when her granny was in Germany – it held everything that was left of Vivienne’s old life, all squashed into one tiny area: the house was tall but very thin. The shelves in every room were crammed with books, boxes, ornaments and papers. There were rolled up rugs and

bags of shoes and old radios and clocks. Soon, these things would all be moved again, or thrown away, after her granny had sold this lovely, rickety house and moved somewhere smaller. Harry and her gran, she realised, were down there hacking through the wild forest of a back garden to make everything tame.

She had to get dressed. Rain showered and found her jeans and a stripy T-shirt, slapped on some make-up, felt embarrassed about putting make-up on just for Harry, wiped the lipstick off and went back outside. Her gran was at the far end of the garden, talking loudly to Harry: ‘ . . . the thing is, do I have to get planning permission for a bonfire in my own back garden?’

‘Can I help with anything?’ Rain asked. Harry looked over at Rain and she saw him smirk, then hide his smile before he went on cutting branches. She wanted to ask what he was smirking about. Maybe she wasn’t dressed for gardening, but no one had told her to bring gardening clothes. Harry might have been gorgeous, but he was annoying, calling her by her name before they’d even met and smirking at her, and *making assumptions*.

‘We could do with some more of these thick bin bags,’ Vivienne called. ‘Do you know how to get to the Portobello Road from here, Rain?’

‘Not really,’ Rain said. She didn’t have a clue,

although she knew it was very near. She'd turned down Vivienne's offer the previous evening to show her around the area, and take a sightseeing trip this morning. She'd felt tired: it had been so long since she'd been here, she just wanted to take some time to get to know the house again to make a safe base before she started exploring.

'Harry, take her so she knows for the future,' Vivienne said. 'There's some cash on the kitchen table.'

'You take her,' Harry said. 'I can get more done than you and I've just had a break.'

'Not bloody likely,' Vivienne said. 'I'm not going anywhere looking like this.'

'Well, it's just that way, keep going all the way round the curve, second left after . . . ' Harry began, drawing diagrams in the air for Rain.

'Oh come on, just go with her!' Vivienne shouted. Vivienne had quite a set of lungs on her. 'If she gets lost we'll have to take time off to find her again.'

So Rain found herself walking past the super-expensive ice-cream coloured houses of Notting Hill. Her gran might have been posh, but there was no way she could have afforded to buy a house here now – millionaires lived in them. Rain's granddad had inherited the house more than thirty years ago, when the area was a lot grottier and cheaper. But still, the house was tatty now, knocked about by tenants, the garden overgrown after

years with no one caring about it.

Rain had been here quite a lot when she was very young. She remembered one Christmas: her mum standing on a chair to put a fallen fairy back on the tree and her granddad whispering to Rain that she could eat the chocolate on its branches. She remembered a sunny day with everyone playing badminton in the garden, Rain swinging her own little pink racquet and always missing the shuttlecock. One autumn, racing her mum to stamp on crab apples on the pavement outside the house. Little pieces of memory. She went through them in her mind over and over again, not wanting to let a single one die from neglect.

‘How long are you staying?’ Harry asked as they walked. His cords were covered in dry mud and there were bits of leaf in his hair. Will people think this is my boyfriend, Rain wondered, this scruffy farmboy in the middle of a city? She crossly admitted to herself that she sort of hoped they would.

‘All summer . . . until school starts again,’ Rain said.

‘Ah,’ Harry said, ‘and school gets serious next year, right? You’ll be doing your GCSEs?’

Rain could feel herself redden with anger. ‘A-levels,’ she said.

‘Oh right,’ Harry said, pulling an exaggeratedly surprised face as he nodded. She wondered if he was making fun of her.

‘What about you?’ Rain said. ‘I suppose you didn’t bother with school past your GCSEs?’

Harry laughed out loud. ‘No, I was foolish enough to keep going,’ he said. ‘I’m here at Imperial. That’s how your grandmother found me, in fact: she put an ad up in my faculty building.’

‘She advertised for a gardener at a university?’

He laughed again. ‘You know Vivienne,’ Harry said, and Rain thought, but didn’t dare say, that she didn’t at all. ‘She wrote something witty and mysterious about needing an impoverished student who was prepared to do anything for money. I’m not just going to be doing the garden with her, we’ve got the whole house planned out. A paint job, bit of woodwork, getting rid of everything she doesn’t need – we were talking about eBaying stuff off if we have time.’

‘My gran knows about eBay?’ Rain thought.

‘Okay, here we are, London’s famous Portobello Road, as seen in the film *Notting Hill*.’ Harry held his hand out theatrically. She felt again that he was slightly making fun, or anyway making jokes that she was too unsophisticated to totally get.

The narrow street they came out on to was a crowded fruit and veg market. The pavements were incredibly narrow and passers-by spilled over the sides, waiting for gaps in the steady traffic of mothers pushing

wide prams, old ladies in motorised wheelchairs, people walking their pushbikes. There were dozens of intriguing little clothes shops, trendy girls gazing dreamily out of café windows, people walking down the middle of the street eating hot oniony sausages in buns that smelled at once delicious and disgusting to Rain's hungry nostrils, a man sitting with his legs stretched out in front of him playing bongo drums, a little grey dog tied to a railing. Rain looked along as far as she could see, to stalls with teetering stacks of not-quite-familiar boxes of chocolate and, in the other direction, racks of dresses with batiky embellishment, and wacky shopping bags. She realised she'd lost Harry. She started to panic, not having paid any attention to the way they'd come. Then she felt a strong hand take hold of hers and pull her just a little bit too roughly forward through a group of young American tourists who'd come to a complete standstill, and she was relieved to discover the hand was Harry's, then annoyed again.

'Don't be hypnotised by the pretty trinkets!' he mocked, putting on a joky voice. 'And watch out for strange men. Young women have gone missing here and been found years later as imprisoned scullery maids for rich businessmen.'

Rain snatched her hand back from him. 'So where are these bin bags anyway? Why couldn't we just go to the supermarket?'

‘It’s not my job to question your grandmother,’ Harry said.

They found the stall he wanted just in front of a branch of Tesco; it sold cleaning products, sponges, batteries, loo rolls and the bin bags Vivienne had sent them for, a pound a roll. While Harry bought four rolls, Rain looked enviously at a tiny, plump old man who walked past them eating chocolate brownies from a pink and white paper bag, pushing them quite steadily into his mouth as if chewing were not involved.

Harry, noticing this, asked, ‘Are you craving a brownie?’

‘Yeah!’ Rain said, too hungry to act cool.

‘But we can do better than those ones. Come on, down here.’

He led her to a road off the market street, and into an Italian delicatessen. Harry bought a paper bag of brownies and they set off home on a parallel road, this one less busy, eating the squidgiest, darkest, most delicious brownies Rain had ever tasted. She found herself warming to Harry, just a little bit.