

Chapter Two

It all began with the rain.

'Don't forget your wellies today, Ade,' Michael's mum would say to me each morning. 'And your proper coat.'

Michael and his family lived in the flat next to ours and we would often hear their voices through the walls. I came to be very familiar with the particular wail that Michael's sister made when she didn't get her own way.

Michael's mum had started knocking for me before school. I now walked there with Michael and his little sister, with their mum shepherding us into the lift and across the road.

I liked them but I preferred walking on my own, to be honest. If I was by myself I could walk along the tops of the walls, trying not to fall off once, which I'd never managed, but Michael's mum didn't like me doing that. She tutted very

loudly the first time I tried to step up so I didn't do it again.

It would have been really hard to walk all the way along the wall that week because it had not stopped raining. Everywhere was slick with water. The puddles had grown so big that you had to jump and leap across them and still they grew larger each day. Some of them formed little lakes that were so deep you had to walk all the way around the edge of them. They looked like they might swallow you up if you stepped into them. You couldn't see to their bottom.

I liked the deep, brown-coloured puddles. I liked how you could walk right into them so that your feet would completely disappear.

The first day the rain started falling, we spent most of our playtime doing just that: wading into the murky puddles that had filled any dip or crevice the water could find in the playground.

I remember it was really thundering down all morning, but it had turned into more of a drizzle by lunch time. When we were eating lunch that day, Gaia noticed the teachers all looking out of the windows and having hurried, harassed conversations with each other.

'They're talking about wet play,' she said,

and I looked up from the soggy pile of broccoli I had been wondering if I could get away with not eating. I had piled it up on one side of my plate so that it looked as small as possible.

'Mr Benton is saying that we need to . . . to have a run around,' she continued, and I looked over to the group of teachers who were looking agitatedly around them with their hands on their hips.

'And Miss Faraway is saying only some children have . . . got . . . have got coats. Today. That not everyone's got coats with them today.' Gaia scrunched up her eyes a bit so she could see what they were saying.

She wasn't *listening* to them as such, you see. Gaia was able to understand what most people were saying by looking at how their lips moved. I think it all started because she couldn't hear very well when she was younger and now, even though she has something inside her ear to help her hear, she still does it all the time. The person has to be looking her way, of course, so she can see their lips moving. Sometimes it's not always completely right but she can usually get the gist of what they are saying.

'OK. We are going outside. Mr Benton's

getting really cross and saying that it's more important that we have fresh air . . . than . . . if we are . . . if we are wearing . . . coats. Yep. It's outside play.'

Just a few minutes after that, they blew the whistle and told everyone it was outside play today and to wear a coat if you had one.

Gaia smiled at me. Just a small one. She wasn't showing off or anything but we both liked how her lip-reading meant that we often knew what was going on before everyone else. We'd found out about all sorts of things that way. We discovered that Mr Weaver and Miss Brown were living together after Gaia saw them bickering over what takeaway to order for tea. (Miss Brown wanted Chinese and Mr Weaver, fish and chips.) We even found out what Mr Benton's first name was when Mr Chelmsford, the head teacher, was chatting to him in the corridor. It was something we would never have guessed in a hundred years: Gordon.

The playground was grey and cold but full of shrieks and cries of everyone playing in the puddles. I looked around for Gaia. She had come out before me while I was made to force the last of the broccoli into my mouth. In the

end, it hadn't tasted of anything much at all. Just wetness. Green wetness.

Gaia was by one of the larger puddles and I ran over to join her. She was standing at the very edge of it so I thought that if she wasn't careful, she would fall right in. She wasn't wearing wellies or anything and I saw her dip the black rounded toe of her shoe into the water and then quickly bring it back out again. Then she did the same with the other foot.

Just as she did that, at the very moment she dipped her other foot in, a group of kids barged right past her. She had to take a few steps forward, just to keep her balance. Right into the middle of the puddle.

I'd caught up to her by this point.

'Did you get wet, Gaia?' I asked. We both looked down at her shiny, soaked black shoes. Then we looked at each other.

Her face broke into a smile first and before we knew it, we were both laughing so hard that it didn't matter about anyone else in the whole world. You know how sometimes when you laugh, you feel like that? We were laughing and laughing and people splashed us with puddle water and pushed into us, but we didn't care.

'Miss Farraway's saying this ... is ... this is madness. Why they ... let them ... come outside, I don't know. They're all ... soaked.' Gaia and I had taken shelter underneath the old shed. Everyone was wet now. I don't mean just a little bit wet, I mean sodden, wet right through. Gaia was watching the adults on duty carefully so we could find out if they were going to send us back inside.

'Mrs Brook's saying it's almost now. No ... it's almost over now. Let's get ... everyone ... under the shed until the ... Oh, she's looked away.'

Quickly, we moved to the benches at the back just before Mrs Brook blew the whistle and everyone stampeded under the shed. It was the best place to stand, you see. You got a little bit more space.

After that day, we weren't allowed to go outside to play. Instead, we had to spend each playtime watching films on a screen in the hall. We would all bundle onto the floor in an uneasy, fidgeting mass. The windows would steam up so we couldn't see the rain coming down, but we could still hear it. The teachers would turn up the volume high so the film was blaring, but it

couldn't block out the pitter-patter of the rain on the roof.

I remember the thunder too. It would come in the afternoons mostly. The dark grey clouds would roll in from the distance and everyone would shriek when they heard the deep rumbles. We didn't get a lot of work done on those afternoons.

I can't clearly remember how many days it went on for, but people were saying things like it was the wettest month on record and were comparing it to a monsoon in India and things like that. All I can say is that it didn't ever stop. Even when you thought it wasn't raining any more, if you looked carefully out of the window you could still see the drops in the puddles. They made little circles in the water. It got to the point where you never felt properly dry, even if you were tucked up in bed at night.

The sound of water was all around us. Buildings sprang leaks, so not only did you hear the fall of the rain outside but also the loud, steady drips landing in buckets and bowls and pans.

Gaia liked the rain. She said it made her feel awake. Sometimes she would point her face up towards the sky and let the raindrops land on her

and trickle down her cheeks, like tears. Some of the other children couldn't understand what she was doing and would laugh at her. But I knew it was because she liked the feeling. Just like how I loved balancing on the tops of walls.

I think it was because of this – because we sort of understood things like that – that we were only really friends with each other.

I liked other kids well enough, but sometimes there seemed to be some sort of invisible barrier between us which I didn't know how to make go away. Like with Michael. We walked to school every day for weeks, swinging our bags together as we walked side by side, but we never really spoke. I don't know now if I ever tried to start a conversation, but all I can really remember is the sound of our footsteps in a steady beat, in place of the sound of our voices.

I don't know when I first properly met Gaia, but I can't remember a time when she was not there.

I think our mums were friends first, and although they'd stopped seeing each other, I still saw Gaia every day at school. She didn't live in my block, though. Her tower sat across the road

from mine but we both lived on the seventeenth floor. We liked that.

Our blocks looked almost identical, but not quite. When I was younger I thought that a giant, just like the one in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, could have come along and plucked both of our blocks from the ground and joined them together as neatly as two pieces of Lego. They just looked like they would fit together.

But I don't believe in man-eating giants any more. Or beanstalks that grow up and up into the clouds and lead to strange, dangerous lands. I know now that there are things far more terrible. That are far more real.