

Chapter Nine

I sort of liked school. I liked that you always knew what was coming next. You just had to look at the timetable for the day on the board to find out. I also liked that our teacher, Miss Farraway, was always there, no questions asked. She would come and collect us from the playground at nine o'clock every single day, with the same sort of smile on her face each time, and there was not a day when she wouldn't turn up.

The thing I liked most about school was Gaia.

I liked nothing more than to see her smile or to make her laugh and I never got more upset than when she got hurt by someone.

Like on the day we planted our seeds.

I'll never forget it.

Everyone at school had been talking about a warehouse that had fallen down, just like the

pub. Some children had walked right past it to come to school and they were telling us about the broken glass and the funny bits of metal that were left in place of where the warehouse had once stood.

We were talking so much that Miss Farraway had to clap her hands together to stop our chatter. When we were quiet she announced that we would plant sunflower seeds today. I didn't have to look at Gaia's face to know that she was smiling.

Gaia loved growing things. She told me once about a little garden she had made on her windowsill. She had a little pot of mint and an old house plant her mum was going to throw away when it looked like it was dead, but that Gaia had brought back to life. She would collect bits for it all the time, too. A green leaf from the pavement or a prickly conker case and its shiny brown conker. I'd never seen her little garden but I could picture it perfectly in my head.

We were working on different tables that day. I had picked out my orange flower pot and I was trying to scratch my name onto it. It wasn't working, though. The pencil wouldn't make a mark on the plastic, however hard I pressed down.

Then I looked at the others on my table and I saw that they were all writing their names on white labels. I put my pencil down and tried to cover the dents and lines I had made on my pot with my sleeve. I looked everywhere for the labels but I couldn't see them anywhere. By now everyone else was chatting about something else. I couldn't ask them. I was going to have to put my hand up and ask Miss Farraway and then explain why I had not listened in the first place.

I never meant *not* to listen, but sometimes when someone apart from my mum or Gaia was talking to me, I felt like I was floating away, far up above where they were. Their voice would become very muffled, so I couldn't make out the words they were saying. A lot of teachers used to get quite cross with me when this happened. They would bellow, 'You are not listening!' at me to make me pay attention. Miss Farraway was not like that. She was much kinder and sometimes would repeat things several times, just for me. It still didn't stop it from happening, though.

I was just about to put my hand up when Gaia caught my eye and raised her eyebrows at me as if to ask, *Are you OK?*

I mouthed, 'Labels,' as clearly as I could, so

she would be able to read my lips. She gave me a little nod and stood up from her table and went up to Miss Farraway's desk where there was a pile of white labels in a little green basket.

'Gaia, haven't you already had one of those?' Miss Farraway asked.

'I made a mistake, so I need another one,' Gaia replied, and Miss Farraway nodded and turned away. Gaia dropped the label in front of me as she went back to sit down, and I quickly wrote my name on it and stuck it onto my pot so that it looked just like everyone else's.

'Thank you,' I mouthed to Gaia. 'I owe you.' She just smiled and looked away.

After that, we filled our pots with soil. It was sticky and black and smelled of the outside when it rains. I liked the feeling of it between my fingers. I could see that Gaia did too because she, like me, was playing with it. She was taking a pinchful of soil between her fingers and then rubbing it together so that it fell into the pot like snow.

'Miss Farraway, Gaia's making a mess!' someone from her table called out.

'Gardening's a messy business – you have to get your hands dirty,' said Miss Farraway. 'But it's

better to be outside to get really messy. Can you stop that in here, Gaia? Thank you.' Gaia nodded, but I could see by the way she sucked in her cheeks ever so slightly that she felt a bit embarrassed.

After that we chose a sunflower seed to plant. One each. I spent a long time choosing mine. It had thick stripes down the middle and then thin ones down the sides. I made a little hole in the soil with my finger for the seed and then covered it up so I could not see it at all.

I looked over at Gaia. She hadn't planted hers yet. She was still holding it in her hand and it looked like she was whispering something under her breath.

'Miss Faraway, Gaia's talking to her seed!' a girl from her table shouted out. The whole class laughed loudly. It took Miss Faraway a few minutes to get everyone to be quiet again. By then, Gaia had shoved her seed into the pot and was looking down at her lap so that I couldn't see her face.

We went out to play not long after that, Gaia marching ahead of me. I hurried after her, but overheard two people talking:

'Did you do it?'

'Yeah, I just went in and Miss wasn't there. She's looking at us right now. Freaky Gaia.' Hearing her name made me stop right behind the two girls.

'Where did you put it?'

'In the bin. She's going to be talking to just an empty pot from now on.'

'Ha!'

'She's such a weirdo.'

'Yeah, she's such a weirdo.'

They were looking right at her as they talked. They couldn't have known she could understand what they were saying from all the way across the playground. Only I could see from the look on her face that she had understood exactly what they had said.

I don't know if I'm a very good friend to Gaia. I felt very, very angry but I'm not the kind of friend who, hearing that, would go up to those girls and say, 'Leave Gaia alone!' and then maybe hit them across the face for being so mean. There are people who are like that but I am not. I'm not even the kind of friend who knows the right thing to say to cheer her up. I didn't run straight over to her and say nice, comforting things that would make her feel better.

I thought about it for a minute before I decided what I would do.

I went back inside and into our classroom. Miss Farraway was still not there but I had to be quick. I went to my pot and pushed the soil away until I found my seed. Then I found Gaia's pot, with her neat, curly writing on it, and I buried the seed deep inside the soil.

In the end, mine was not the only pot that didn't have a little seedling in it. A few others didn't grow at all.

But Gaia's did.

It grew taller than all the rest.

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