



READ-ALoud STORY • GRADES 3–5

THE ICE CREAM MAN WHO NEVER MELTS

One cone, cold fingers. Two cones, frost. Three cones...

CHAPTER 1: FREE

"If it gets one degree hotter," Gavin says, "I'm going to melt into the sidewalk."

"You can't melt," I tell him. "You're not ice cream."

"I could be. Watch me."

He lies down flat on his driveway. Then he yells and jumps back up, because the driveway is about a thousand degrees.

It's the hottest week ever on Cedar Court. That's what the guy on the news said.

A heat wave. Every day this week is going to be over a hundred.

The sprinkler on Stella's lawn is going *tick-tick-tick*. We already ran through it nine times.

Now we're just lying in the shade of Gavin's garage, dying.

Stella is sitting on her front steps across the street with a book. She's eleven, so she thinks she's too old for sprinklers.

She ran through it twice.

"You know what I want?" I say. "Ice cream."

"You always want ice cream," Gavin says.

It's true. I'm the ice cream king of Cedar Court.

I can name every flavor at the Dairy Barn in under one minute. Mom times me.

But the Dairy Barn is all the way across town. Mom says it's too hot to drive anywhere. And the ice cream in our freezer has ice crystals all over it.

Who wants that?

So I just lie there and think about cookie dough.

The sun goes down behind the houses. The sky goes orange, then purple. It's still hot. Hot like breathing in a dryer.

That's when I hear the song.

Ice cream truck music.

I sit straight up.

Every kid in America knows that song.

Except this one is wrong. It's too slow. Like a music box running down.

And one of the notes is off, every time. Like a wrong key on a piano.

"Do you hear that?" Gavin whispers.

"Ice cream truck!" I'm already on my feet.

It comes around the corner at the end of Cedar Court.

It's not like the trucks I've seen. It's old. White and round, like a refrigerator on wheels.

Down the side there's a row of little round windows, like on a ship. All of them are frosted over.

There's no name painted on it. Just a picture of a cone.

It stops right in front of Gavin's house.

The window on the side slides open, and a cold breeze rolls out over us.

Real cold. Freezer cold. In the middle of a heat wave, it feels like heaven.

The Ice Cream Man leans out.

He's tall. Really tall. White uniform. White paper hat. A big, wide smile.

His face isn't sweaty at all. Not one drop.

"Well, hello there," he says. When he talks, his breath comes out in a little white puff. "Who wants a cone?"

"How much?" I ask.

"For you?" His smile gets wider. "Free."

Gavin and I look at each other.

Free.

"Cookie dough," I say. "Please."

He doesn't even look at the tubs. He just reaches down and comes back up with a cone. Cookie dough. A big, round, perfect scoop.

He hands it down to me, and his fingers touch mine.

They're so cold they burn. They stick to my skin for one second, like a frozen pole in winter.

Then he lets go.

"Ow," I say, and then I take a bite and forget all about it.

It's the best ice cream I've ever had in my whole life.

Gavin gets mint chocolate chip. He moans like a zombie when he tastes it.

"Stella," I yell across the street. "It's FREE!"

Stella has her book closed in her lap. She's staring at the truck. She doesn't come over.

"Nothing's free," she yells back.

The Ice Cream Man looks at her. He keeps smiling.

"Maybe tomorrow," he says.

Then the window slides shut, and the song starts again, slow and wrong, and the truck drives away.

I eat my whole cone standing on the sidewalk. It's a hundred degrees out.

It doesn't drip. Not even once.

"Mom, did you see the ice cream truck?"

Mom is at the kitchen sink. "What truck?"

"The ice cream truck. It was right out front. It played the song."

She looks at me funny. "Sweetie, I've been standing at this window for half an hour. There wasn't any truck."

I look out the window.

You can see Gavin's whole driveway from here.

That night my room is so hot that the fan just pushes hot air around.

Mom says the air conditioner is doing its best.

I lie on top of my sheets.

I'm not hot.

I'm perfect. Cool. Like I just jumped in a pool.

I pull the sheet up. Then the blanket.

My fingers are cold.

In July.

CHAPTER 2: IT DOESN'T DRIP

In the morning, Stella is standing in her driveway, pointing at the ground.

"Come look at this."

Gavin and I cross the street. It's already so hot that the air over the road is wiggly.

On Stella's driveway, right in the middle, there's a scoop of strawberry ice cream. Perfect and round. Like somebody just set it down.

"It's from last night," Stella says. "The truck came back around after you guys went in. I asked him for a cone."

"I thought nothing was free," Gavin says.

"I didn't eat it." She crosses her arms. "I put it on the driveway. It sat there all night. Look at it."

It's nine in the morning. It's ninety-five degrees. The driveway is so hot you can't stand on it in bare feet.

The ice cream isn't melting.

Not even a little. No puddle. No drips. It just sits there, perfectly round, like a pink bowling ball.

"Maybe it's a special kind," I say.

"There isn't a special kind," Stella says. "I looked it up. Ice cream melts. All ice cream."

"How is it not melting?" Gavin says.

He pokes it with a stick. The stick goes *tock*, like he hit a rock.

"Is it even ice cream?"

My stomach drops.

I don't say anything. Because the truth is, I don't care how weird it is.

I want another one.

I want another one so bad my teeth hurt.

All day long, it's all I can think about.

At lunch, Mom makes grilled cheese, and it tastes like nothing. Like chewing a napkin.

In the afternoon, Gavin and I sit in his garage and don't even talk. We just watch the sun.

It goes down so slowly.

"Come on," Gavin whispers to it. "Come on, come on."

The second the sun drops behind the houses, we hear it.

The song. Slow and wrong.

We're already running.

Stella comes too, but she stops at the edge of her lawn with her arms crossed.

The truck pulls up in front of Gavin's house, and the window slides open, and the cold rolls out.

"Back again," says the Ice Cream Man. "I knew you would be."

"Cookie dough," I say.

"Mint chip!"

He hands them down. His cold fingers stick to mine again. This time I don't even say ow.

The ice cream is even better than yesterday.

I'm halfway through when Stella grabs my arm.

"Miles. Look at his hand."

The sun is behind the houses. But at the end of the street there's a gap between two of them, and one last skinny ray of orange light comes through it.

It slides across the truck.

It touches the back of the Ice Cream Man's hand.

His hand drips.

Not sweat. His hand *drips*, like a popsicle.

A thin white drop runs down his wrist. There's a tiny hiss, and a curl of steam.

He snatches his hand back inside the window. Just for a second, his smile goes away.

Then the light's gone, and he's smiling again.

"Anything for you, young lady?" he asks Stella.

"No," she says. "Thank you."

I look at her. She isn't looking at him anymore. She's looking at the side of the truck.

At the little round windows.

I look too.

They're frosted over, white and fuzzy, like the inside of an old freezer.

But in the one closest to me, the frost is thinner.

Behind it, there's a face.

A kid's face. A girl. Frost on her eyebrows. Frost on her lips.

Her eyes are open. And while I'm looking right at her, she blinks.

CHAPTER 3: THREE

"She *blinked*," Stella says. "You saw it. I know you saw it."

It's the next morning. We're in Stella's garage, because it's the only place on the street with a fan that works.

I'm wearing a sweatshirt.

It's a hundred and two degrees out, and I'm wearing a sweatshirt, and I'm still cold.

When I woke up this morning, my eyelashes were stuck together. I thought it was sleep crust.

It wasn't. It was frost. Little white crystals of frost, on my eyelashes, in July.

Gavin has his sweatshirt on too. His lips are kind of blue.

"Maybe it was a doll," Gavin says. His teeth are chattering. "A doll in the window. Like a decoration."

"It *blinked*," Stella pushes her glasses up. "And that's not all. I watched from my window last night. After you guys went in."

"Watched what?" I say.

Stella takes a breath.

"The truck came back around. Really late. There was a boy waiting for it on the corner. I've never seen him before. He had a sweatshirt on, like you. And he was shaking."

She swallows.

"The man said, 'Number three,' and gave him a cone. And the boy ate it. Then the back door of the truck opened, and the boy just... climbed in. By himself. Like he was sleepwalking."

"Why would he do that?" Gavin whispers.

Nobody answers him.

My skin prickles all over.

"And then there was a new face in one of the windows," Stella says. "The last one. His face."

Nobody says anything. The fan goes around and around.

I breathe out, and my breath makes a little white puff in the air.

In a garage. In a heat wave.

"One cone, your fingers get cold," Stella says quietly. "Two cones, your breath does that. Three cones..."

She points at the street.

"You've each had two," she says.

The worst part is, I still want it.

I know what happens. I know about the windows.

And I still want a cone so bad that my whole body hurts. Like being thirsty, but a hundred times worse.

How can I want it this bad?

The sun goes down.

The song starts.

I'm on my feet before I even know it. Gavin is too.

We're walking toward the street. My legs are doing it all by themselves.

"MILES!" Stella tackles me.

She knocks me flat on her lawn and sits on my back. She's heavier than she looks.

"Get OFF!"

"No."

"I just want to look," I say.

"You don't want to look," Stella says. "You want number three."

I twist my head around.

Gavin is still walking.

"Gavin, STOP!" Stella screams.

He doesn't stop. He doesn't even turn around. He walks right out into the street, right up to the truck.

The window slides open. The cold rolls out.

"Number three," says the Ice Cream Man, and smiles, and hands him a cone.

Mint chip.

"Gavin, DON'T!" I yell.

Gavin eats it.

He eats the whole thing in four bites. Then he stands there with his empty hands at his sides.

The back door of the truck swings open by itself. A big white cloud of cold rolls out of it onto the hot street.

Gavin climbs in.

The door shuts.

I can't breathe.

I can't move. Stella's still sitting on me. She's crying now. I'm crying too.

The song starts up again, slow and wrong, and the truck pulls away.

As it goes by, I see the row of little round windows.

Gavin's face is in the last window. Frost is growing over his eyes.

CHAPTER 4: THE HOTTEST DAY

I don't sleep.

I'm too cold to sleep. I'm under three blankets and my winter coat, and my teeth won't stop chattering.

Last night, Stella called Gavin's house and told his mom he was sleeping over at my house. Gavin's mom said okay.

She didn't hear any truck either.

So nobody's looking for him.

Nobody but us.

"He never gets out," Stella says.

It's the next day. The hottest day yet. The radio says a hundred and five.

Stella and I are sitting on her front steps. I'm in my winter coat, sweating on the outside and freezing on the inside.

"What do you mean?" My lips are so cold, my words come out slow.

"The Ice Cream Man. He never gets out of the truck. Not once. He leans way out the window to hand down the cones, even to little kids. He never puts a foot on the street."

She points at the road. "And look at that."

The street on Cedar Court is black and shiny. Blacktop. It's been baking all week.

There's a spot near the curb where the tar is so hot it's gone soft and bubbly.

"The sun made his hand drip," Stella says. "Just one little ray. What if he touched *that*?"

I look at the bubbling tar.

I look at my fingers. They're blue at the tips.

"We have to get him off the truck," I say.

"We have to *pull* him off the truck," Stella says.

The sun goes down.

The song starts.

It pulls at me, harder than ever. My legs want to run to it. I make them walk.

Stella is right behind me. She has both hands wrapped in the back of my coat.

"Don't let go," I tell her.

"I won't."

The truck comes around the corner, slow, and stops in front of Gavin's house. Right over the soft, bubbly spot in the road.

The window slides open. The cold rolls out.

"Well, well," says the Ice Cream Man. He leans way out. His smile is so wide it almost touches his ears. "Number three."

He holds out a cone.

Cookie dough.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Every part of me wants to take it. My hand comes up all by itself.

The Ice Cream Man leans out a little more to give it to me.

And I don't take the cone.

I grab his wrist.

Both hands.

His skin is so cold it burns. My fingers stick to him like they're glued. It hurts so bad I scream.

"Now," I gasp. "PULL!"

Stella pulls.

I lean back with all my weight, and Stella leans back with all of hers, and the Ice Cream Man comes tipping out of the window.

He grabs the window frame with his other hand. His smile is gone.

"LET GO," he says, and his voice isn't friendly anymore. It's cold. Ice-cold. Frost puffs out of his mouth.

"No," I say through my teeth.

We pull. My shoulders feel like they're going to pop. The cone drops and bounces on the street and doesn't even crack.

The Ice Cream Man's fingers slip off the window frame.

He tips out.

One white shoe comes down on the blacktop.

HISSSSS.

Steam explodes up from the street. He screams. It's a terrible sound, a high, cracking, squealing sound, like ice breaking on a lake.

His foot is melting.

Melting into the hot road, white and sticky, like a dropped cone.

Then his other foot comes down, and it melts too. His legs drip. His uniform drips.

He's sinking. Shorter and shorter. His arms flapping.

My hands are still stuck to his wrist. I yank them back. It stings like a hundred bee stings. I don't even care.

His face melts last. The big smile slides sideways and drips off his chin.

Then there's nothing but a big white puddle in the road, steaming and bubbling, smelling like vanilla.

Behind it, the truck is melting too.

It sags in the middle. The roof droops. White drips run down its sides like a popsicle on a sidewalk.

The little round windows go clear.

"The freezer!" Stella yells.

I run to the back of the truck. The door is soft and drippy.

I grab the handle and pull, and the whole door peels off in my hands like a wet sticker.

Cold pours out.

Inside, there are shelves. And on the shelves, there are kids.

Frozen solid. Covered in frost, like popsicles in a box. Their eyes are closed. Their faces are white.

Then the hot air hits them.

The frost starts to drip.

One of the kids coughs.

It's Gavin.

He sits up, shivering, frost sliding off his hair.
"Miles?" he croaks. "Why is it so hot in here?"

I laugh. I laugh so hard I start crying again.

The other kids are waking up too. A girl with
frost on her eyebrows. The boy from the corner.
A bunch of kids I've never seen before, from
other streets, other neighborhoods.

They climb down out of the dripping truck,
coughing and crying. They run off into the dark
in every direction.

Running home.

By the time the last one is out, the truck isn't a
truck anymore.

It's just a big, sticky, white puddle in the middle
of Cedar Court.

And for the first time all week, I'm sweating.

In the morning, the puddle is gone. The street
is just a street.

If you get down really close and sniff, it smells
a little like vanilla.

Stella's strawberry scoop is gone off her
driveway too. Just a pink stain.

Gavin's mom thinks he had a sleepover. Mom
thinks I had a fever, and it finally broke. "Your

hands were like ice all week, sweetie."

The heat wave lasts another whole week.

Mom takes us to the Dairy Barn. Gavin and
Stella and me.

I get a cookie dough cone. It drips down my
hand and onto my sneaker.

It's perfect.

Summer ends. School starts. It's fall, then it's
winter.

On the first snow day in January, Gavin and
Stella and I build a snow fort in Stella's front
yard. It's so cold our noses are red.

Gavin stops packing snow.

"Do you hear that?"

I hear it.

Faint. Far away. Coming from a few streets
over.

A song. Slow. Wrong. Like a music box running
down.

It's snowing. Ice cream trucks don't come in
January.

Down the street, I hear the song.