

Chapter Six

I didn't give up trying to talk Mum into getting help.

The next day she was up and tried to give me a shopping list but I wouldn't take it unless she came with me.

'Come on, Ade,' she said when I refused to put out my hand for the fluttering piece of paper. 'The bread's gone green. You don't want to eat green bread, do you? I know I don't.'

'Why don't we go together and we could go to the doctor's afterwards?' I asked.

Mum didn't say anything. She just started taking little gasps of air and tried not to look at me. But she did catch my eye as she took those little, painful breaths, and in that tiny moment I could tell that she was blaming me for making her breathe like that because I'd asked her to go with me. I snatched the list from her hand and

ran out of the flat and went down in the lift and across the road to get the food. It was only when I'd gotten all the way to the shop that I realized I'd forgotten to bring any money with me.

'I'm sorry, Ade,' Mum said as soon as I came back in. She was still standing in exactly the same position as when I'd left, as if she'd been frozen the whole time I was away. 'I know this can't be fun for you.'

I didn't say anything but just reached up to the jam jar where we kept our money and took out a five-pound note that had been folded tightly in half again and again until it was only a little square.

I couldn't look Mum in the eye. I felt like I'd failed her and it was an unbearable feeling, a pressure that had settled over my chest and wouldn't let up.

'Let's go together. It's a good idea,' she said.

I looked up at her sharply. She looked like she might start crying but she was also nodding a little, as if to say, *Yes, yes, I can do this.*

'Are you sure, Mum?' I couldn't believe it. I felt too glad even to smile.

Mum gave me another of her funny nods. She stood up a little unsteadily and, holding my

hand, she walked towards the front door.

Every step was an effort and I was reminded of the way a snail moves, those tiny movements propelling it forward bit by bit. I felt so happy as she took those few shuffling steps past our front door but also daunted by the task that lay ahead. The shops and the doctor's surgery seemed very far away. It was as if we had just begun to climb a mountain and we couldn't see the top because it was surrounded by thick, white clouds.

We'd made it as far as the lifts when she started doing the funny breathing again. Her hand tightened around mine and I tried to give her a reassuring squeeze back but I don't think she felt it, she was holding on so tightly.

'I can't do it, Ade. I'm sorry, I can't.'

As she turned back to our flat, her eyes met mine for the briefest moment, and again they seemed to say, *Don't make me do this, this is hurting me.*

And just like that I was standing on my own in the corridor with the sound of our front door slamming, echoing in the emptiness.

I did the shopping and I almost made it home without crying, apart from when the woman in the shop put a lollipop in my bag

along with the bread and milk and said, 'Looks like you need one, love.'

'Thank you,' I said.

'You're welcome, honey,' she said, and I shocked myself when my eyes filled with tears.

I quickly ran out, leaving the whole five-pound note on the counter without waiting for my change just so I wouldn't have to talk to the kind woman any more.

I walked past the old pub that had fallen down. It was a pile of bricks but I could just about make out the sign that was sticking out of the bricks. It had a picture of a man's face on it. I'd forgotten that had even happened, I had been so worried about Mum.

When I finally got home, Mum was back in bed. I didn't go in to check on her. I wanted to believe that she was sleeping, not lying awake in the dark, waiting for the morning to come.