

Chapter Five

'It's too hot to eat this,' said Gaia. We were sitting in the hall with plates of roast dinner in front of us. A thin slice of meat, two greasy-looking potatoes and bright orange circles of carrot that were all floating in a pool of brown gravy.

The day the rain stopped was one of the hottest that we'd had in ages. It was funny after all the soggy raincoats and wet socks, to find yourself feeling too hot all of a sudden. Everyone had basked in the sunshine during playtime and lain down on the black tarmac to rest.

Gaia was right. It felt too hot even to eat. The sun was shining in through the hall windows so I had to squint when I looked up at her.

'I'm going to make a run for it,' Gaia said, standing up.

'Gaia,' I said. 'Can I ask you something?'
She sat back down again.

'Does your mum ask you to do the shopping sometimes?' I said.

'What do you mean?'

'My mum's asked me to do that now. Do you do it?'

Gaia's eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

'What do you mean, she's asked you to do it?'

I realized that now I'd brought it up, Gaia wouldn't leave me alone until she knew every little detail, so I told her what had been going on. From the very first time Mum had sat me down to tell me to walk to school by myself to the time she gave me her bank card.

I didn't tell Gaia everything, though.

But I still wasn't prepared for the worried, frowning look that took over her face.

'You shouldn't be doing that.'

'Mum says I'm grown up now. She says I do a really good job.'

'But . . . but . . . if you're doing all of those things, then what's your mum doing?'

It was a good question. Mostly, she was sleeping. At the same time she stopped leaving the flat, she started feeling really tired all the time.

'I just need to sleep, baby,' Mum would say, and I would close the bedroom door behind me

and not come in and sit down on the bed and tell her all about the nothing I had been doing at school that day.

'When did you start doing this?' Gaia asked.

I speared a piece of meat on my fork. It dripped gravy onto the plate, each drop making a little circular splash just like raindrops falling into puddles.

'Ade?' Gaia said softly.

It had been many months since the day I came home to hear Mum crying. Crying is probably the wrong word, although she certainly *was* crying. Tears were running all the way down her face and they fell from the tip of her chin onto a growing patch of wetness on her skirt. But it was also like moaning. And shouting. And screaming. And wailing. All mixed up together.

It was a sound that terrified me.

'Mum,' I said. But my voice was lost in the sound of Mum's cries. In the end, I put my hand onto her shoulder, and only then did she turn to look at me.

She looked right through me as if I wasn't there and then her eyes seemed to focus on me and take in who I was. She reached out for me and clasped me tightly, too tightly, to her.

'It's all right,' she said, over and over again. 'It's all right, it's all right.' But she didn't stop crying.

I felt like I was the one who should have been saying that to her, because as she looked at me then, I could see her face clearly.

She was hurt. One of her eyes was so swollen that it wasn't able to open properly and the other was bruised and half open. There was a violent purple bump on her forehead. A weeping gash cut across her cheek. It looked like a wicked gaping smile.

'What happened? What happened?' I said but Mum didn't answer me. Her face creased as she sobbed harder, and the cut on her face looked like it was crying too.

'Mummy?' I said, although I didn't know what I was asking until the words were on my lips: 'Who did this?'

'Oh, Ade,' Mum was whispering under her breath. 'Oh, Ade, oh, Ade.'

I started crying then too, even though I wished myself not to. I wished I had rang up the police and an ambulance. I wished I'd got something to make Mum's face feel better. I wished I was able to do something other than howl into Mum's shoulder as she rocked us

both back and forth, trying to make us forget she was so badly injured. But for all my wishing, I let myself huddle down into her lap and cry desperate tears for what had happened.

We fell asleep like that, locked together, but when I woke up, Mum was gone from the bedroom and the room was dark.

'Mum?' My voice sounded very small and alone in the dim light.

'I'm . . . ' Mum's voice sounded hoarse and sore. 'I'm in here.'

She was sitting on the sofa in the darkness. I felt glad that there were no lights on so I wouldn't have to look at her poor mangled face, and then I felt ashamed of myself.

'Mum!' I cried out like she had been lost to me, and I climbed into her lap once more and buried my face into the soft fabric of her jacket. It struck me then that she hadn't even taken her coat off all this time.

'It's all right, Ade. It's all right. Go back to sleep,' Mum said. And I did.

I knew that something bad had happened but I couldn't ask Mum what it was. I tried to. I really did. But I couldn't force the words out of my mouth.

I felt scared. Scared wondering why Mum had been so terribly hurt. Scared that it would happen again. Perhaps that was one of the reasons I didn't mind doing the shopping: at least if I did it, I knew nothing bad would happen to Mum. She was safe if she was at home.

I didn't tell anybody about what had happened, not even Gaia. I didn't want it to be real, and if I didn't tell anyone then that stopped it becoming more real, didn't it? I think Mum felt the same, and that's why she didn't tell the police or go to hospital.

Mum did start to get better, in some ways. Her face started healing straight away. It went very purple and then a sort of blue and after that it was very yellowy. You could still see the scar on her cheek but it stopped looking painful. I thought things would go back to how they were before, back when Mum used to tell me funny things that had happened at the shop she worked in. She was always so good at describing customers, it felt like they appeared right in front of me. Or when she would open the fridge and then slam it back shut again and say, 'Ade, let's get out of here,' and we'd go to McDonald's for a treat.

But instead Mum retreated into herself, locking herself away from the outside world.

Gaia somehow seemed to understand all this, without me even having to say it. 'Maybe your mum's got something wrong with her,' she said gently, cutting through my memories.

I screwed up my face when she said this, so I knew she tried to stop herself from saying the next words on her mind, but they came tumbling out anyway: 'Maybe she should see a doctor?'

It was only in a whisper, but I heard it.

A doctor. Someone to make Mum better again. It seemed like a good idea. Her face had mended itself but there was damage on the inside, wounds I couldn't see, that needed healing as well.

When I came home from school that day I went straight into her bedroom and said in a loud voice, 'Mum, I'm home.' She stirred in her sleep and then gave a sort of shrug that buried her body deeper into the bedclothes.

'Wake up, Mum,' I said. 'I'm home. I'm home.'

There was a stale smell in Mum's bedroom. It wasn't unpleasant exactly, but neither was it clean or fresh. An image of Mum, ready for

work, appeared in my mind. Her clothes were neat and they smelled nice, like flowers, and what I think clouds might smell like.

'Ade,' she said in a small voice. 'Be a good boy and go and play in the sitting room, will you? I'm so, so tired. I've got to sleep some more. Then I'll come out, OK?'

'You're always tired all the time,' I said. 'Mum, do you think you should go and see someone?'

'Someone? What do you mean?' Mum's voice sounded sharp, like the screech of a violin.

'Someone . . . like a doctor,' I said.

'I'm just tired, Ade. I have to sleep,' she said. 'That will make me feel better. A doctor can't help me.' Just saying those few words seemed to make her more tired.

'They might, Mum.'

In answer, Mum rolled away from me. I walked round to the side of the bed she was facing. She wasn't even asleep. She was just staring at the wall. Maybe all this time I'd thought she was sleeping when she wasn't. She was just staring at the walls, unmoving.

'Mum,' I said, but her face remained expressionless. 'Mum!' I insisted, but she didn't

even flinch. 'Get up. You have to! You have to go to work!' Again I thought of Mum dressed up all nicely, like she used to be.

At first I thought she hadn't heard me but then I saw round, swollen tears roll down her cheeks.

'I can't, Ade. I can't go out there.'

'But what about your job?'

'I told them I'm not going back. It happened . . . it happened . . .' Mum's breathing was quickening as though she couldn't get enough air. 'It happened just by the shop.'

'What did, Mum?' I said. 'What happened?' I'd not dared to ask her that again since the night I'd come home to find her bleeding and injured.

'They were there,' she said simply, and she rolled over, away from me, and her shoulders shook with her sobs. I put my hand on her and felt the vibrations up my arm, all her pain racking her body. After a long time she was still and I trod softly out of the room and left her to sleep.

Before she started crying, I'd felt cross with her and I hated it. Part of me knew she couldn't help it but another voice had whispered into

my ear: *Is she trying to get better? Why won't she try to get up?*

But now, I only felt achingly sad and alone.

I switched the television on and turned the volume up high so Mum would hear it through the walls. We used to watch television together all the time. She'd watch my programmes and I'd watch some of hers too. She used to really like cookery shows so I flicked through the channels to see if I could find one. If she couldn't see it, she could at least hear what they were cooking.

There was nothing like that on, though, so I put on the news. They were talking about an old abandoned pub that had fallen down. I recognized the pub straight away. It was right by my tower. I walked right past it to go to one of the bigger shops. It was one of those tall, old-fashioned pubs but it had been empty for a while and its windows had been boarded up. Last time I'd walked past I'd noticed that plants had started growing out from in between the bricks. They had grey-green leaves and purple flowers that clumped together to look a bit like an ice-cream cone.

It was reported as just one of those strange, bizarre happenings that no one could explain.

Someone or other was cross because they had just bought it and had big plans for it. And now it was just a pile of rubble.

Then the newsreaders started talking about something different and I realized how loud the voices from the television were and I felt bad that I had turned up the volume so high in the first place. I pressed the *down* button on the remote control and made the voices get quieter and quieter until they disappeared altogether.

Then I sat in silence, just watching the pictures, trying to work out what people were saying by how their lips moved, like Gaia could.

But I couldn't understand them.