

## Chapter Eight

There was one person other than me and Gaia who knew about my mum, and that was Michael's mum.

There was a time, a couple of weeks before I told Gaia, when I stopped going into school for a few days because Mum stopped getting out of bed and I didn't want to leave her.

I knew something was wrong because she had stopped eating.

She forgot to flush the toilet when she got up to go, too. The smell was getting really bad, so in the end I had to flush it anyway.

It had been days and days since I had found anything that showed me that she'd left the flat. I always spent the first twenty minutes after coming home searching and searching for any sign that she'd made it outside. I was getting desperate to find a clue that she was getting better.

I knew she wasn't eating because I'd always bring her a bowl of cereal in the morning and some more food in the evening and the plates were all left untouched.

It was a little bit like years ago on Christmas Eve when I'd put some biscuits out for Santa and they were still sitting there in the morning, just as I had left them. I asked Gaia what happened at her house and she said that all she was left with was a few crumbs and the stump of a carrot.

The same sort of thing happened with the tooth fairy. I kept putting my teeth under my pillow but they were always still there in the morning. Gaia said that maybe there was a problem with my block because she got a silver fifty-pence coin for every tooth.

Now I know differently.

On one of the days I was off school, we'd run out of food and money, so I left the flat with Mum's cash card. I knew I shouldn't have. I had a twinge of worry about what would happen if someone I knew saw me, but I put that fear to the back of my mind because I was hungry and hadn't eaten since the day before.

I waited behind a tree until an old man with a walking stick had finished at the cash point.

He took a long time, but once he'd hobbled off I couldn't see anyone else on the street and I tapped in Mum's pin code and waited for the money to appear in the little letter box.

'Ade!' Someone said my name just as the machine started bleeping at me to take the money.

I didn't turn round to see who it was. I just grabbed the money and ran back home as fast as I could. I didn't go to the shops, and all afternoon I tried to ignore the rumblings in my stomach.

A few hours later, there was a knock on the door. I wasn't going to answer it, but then I heard Michael's mum say, 'I know you're in there, Ade. Open up.' When I still didn't open the door, she added, 'I saw you at the cash point today, y'know. I need to speak to your mother.' I opened the door then.

She spent a long time in Mum's bedroom and I tried to listen through the door to what they were talking about but they spoke in such low voices, I couldn't pick out any words.

Then she took me next door to her house for dinner.

We ate chicken and rice and I had to sit next to Michael's little sister, who kept poking me in

the side with her pink plastic fork. Michael wouldn't look me in the eye. I don't think he wanted me to be there and he was just trying to pretend that it wasn't really happening.

There was a sweet, sticky sauce all over the chicken. It was delicious. A lot better than anything I was able to make myself. I ate greedily, licking my fingers clean when I had finished until I noticed Michael's mum looking at me with a worried frown on her face.

The next day, Michael's mum turned up at my front door at quarter to nine. There had been no explanation and Mum hadn't said anything to me about it but I knew I had no choice but to go with her.

'Ade, you ready?' she would call out to me. 'We're going.' I would have to run to catch up with the three figures of Michael's mum, Michael and his sister disappearing round the corner. They never waited for me, they just expected me to catch up with them before they got to the lifts.

'Ade, you ready? We're going.'

The same, every day. Always at the same time, each day. Every day until they closed the school down, right around the time the rain stopped and everything changed.