

Leila Chapter A

I remember this girl.

I must have been fourteen or fifteen at the time. I can still see her face, nearly forty years later. She was good-looking, in a troubled sort of way. Face all scrunched and cross most of the time, like an angry cartoon. Warm smile, if she tried. I tried, but failed. To be honest, she scared me a bit. She used to just get up out of her seat and leave the class. They seemed to let her get away with that. Not us. There would have been trouble. But she was special. Special treatment.

I don't actually remember her name. That's bad. We treated her bad.

We used to chase her. Always wore a red dress. She would just curl up into a ball. And we'd surround her. She'd just quietly whisper all this stuff and wave her hands in front of her face.

'Boom boom boom, I'm going to explode...'

She'd stare up at us through her hair. Never saw her eyes, but she could see us.

Poor girl. She had issues. We didn't really know that. It was like sport to us. We got in trouble of course. And after a while she just wasn't there. What happened to her?

So I'm trying to write a novel.

I thought it would be easy, but it really isn't.

I read a lot, so I thought writing would be kind of the opposite. And I liked writing at school.

I remember Mrs Somersby, at primary school. You know the type. One minute she'd be telling us to focus on the plot.

'Build your story mountain!'

The next minute it would be a setting.

'Think of your happy place!'

And then, people.

'Characterisation is key! Draw your characters first. The rest will follow!'

She was the kind of woman who spoke in exclamation marks! High-pitched. Heart definitely in the right place though. I loved all my teachers back then.

It was Mrs Miklosevic at St. Columba's who really got me into writing though. She made me think I was actually good! I remember her comments in the margins. Elegant, artistic handwriting in bright green pen.

We were fifteen. Struggling through secondary school. Hormones all over the place. I really liked her. Can still see her now. She wore long boots - well, it was the seventies! But she was the sort of teacher

whose lessons you actually looked forward to. There weren't many of those. But she was different. She just encouraged us to pour our ideas onto the paper. She even tried to get us to write poetry.

'From the heart, boys. Forget everything I've taught you about grammar and punctuation, and structure. Just pour it out. Your feelings. Tell your life story!'

Life story? Feelings? We were only fifteen! No life, and definitely no feelings. We knew nothing. But she did get us to do some good stuff. I've still got a couple of the things we did for her. One of those poems - it reads like I was writing it just for her! Probably was.

And forget about grammar and punctuation?

Great!

Kayla!

That's it. Her name. Sorry. Just thinking. She was called Kayla. That girl. I remember us yelling *Kayla* all the time, and running after her.

I feel ashamed now. I wish I could make it up to her. If she walked in now, today, I'd apologise to her. I'm not really that kind of person. We made her life hell. I hope she's OK.

Anyway, they say that characters in fiction are usually based on fact. Usually a mixture of people you know, people you've met, people you've read about. Perhaps family members. So that's where I'm going with this. Let's see what happens. I'm going to begin with what I remember of her. Which isn't that much. Troubled teen. Let's throw her into the mix and see where she takes me.

I need to make a start.

I'd better change the name. Libel or slander or something if you use some living (or perhaps dead) person's name.

Let's call her *Leila*.

Here goes.

And in case you're wondering, I've looked up the word *genre*. It's French.

It's going to be (I hope): *Young Adult. Fiction. Mystery. Feel-good. Coming-of-age*. Based on facts, if I can remember them.

Let's do it.

Enjoy.

Leila.

Leila Chapter 1

The heat was unusually oppressive that September morning.

Climate change, they said on the News. Not everyone believed them, but it was beginning to look like they were right. When was the last time it had snowed in the winter? When was the last time it had been this hot for this long in late summer? Almost never in England, where we had got used to mild summers, and winters which varied between the dull and the bitter.

So maybe climate change was a thing, and whatever the politicians said, something needed to be done about it.

All around the village, people did the right thing. They invested time sorting out glass from plastic, paper from cardboard, making little piles before bin day. You'd get dirty looks, or worse, from the bin men if you got yours wrong. People were actually nervous! There were now four different bins. Paper and card. Food waste. Other recyclables. And glass, split into brown, green or clear. Get it right, or they won't collect it.

It was the same at the school, whose lo-rise buildings brooded beside the main road out of the village. Seemingly endless rows of coloured bins which everyone was supposed to understand. Leila didn't understand, and didn't really care. There were bins for batteries, old pens, crisp packets, plus the usual recycling ones. There was a bin for used cosmetics! Which they were not allowed in school anyway! No kid could wear make-up, and most of the teachers looked as if they didn't bother. Who would bring in used packets of that stuff?

Stupid, thought Leila as she trudged alone and late through the gates, her bag bursting with books she wouldn't ever read, and PE kit she didn't intend to ever wear.

Leila Chapter 2

Deep in the forest, Duke was hard at work. The grassy piles, smouldering gently, could tend themselves for a few days more, given the good weather, so he'd turned his attention to the shack. He'd achieved a considerable amount in one day. In addition to the basic octagonal shape he'd originally planned and built nearly four years previously, he'd made various improvements, adding rooms off the main hallway, levelling some of the surrounding earthworks, and digging out the cellar. This week he'd worked on a deck area outside the front door.

100% recycled!

He talked to himself a lot when he was working, sometimes silently and sometimes out loud. He'd had a radio once, but when the batteries went he'd seen no reason to replace them. He used to listen to pointless news or to the inane witterings of the local DJs and their love of cheesy music, neither of which he missed.

But he needed to talk to someone, and as nobody ever came to this part of the forest, he ended up talking to himself most of the time.

Not beautiful! Not functional! But all mine!

To him the shack felt like a palace. In his head it was always *The Shack*, even though the connotations of that name were mostly negative. For him it was all positive. Away from the world. Somewhere he could be at peace, with himself and with nature. Recycled materials. Birds and squirrels and rabbits befriended him. The odd badger if he was lucky. Occasionally he would hear human voices or a dog barking, but usually at a distance and usually heading away rather than towards him. The smoking grass guarding the clearing usually put them off.

He liked it that way.

At the back he grew most of his food, so much so that his trips to the village shop were down to about once a month. He would sell them his charcoal, and use the cash to stock up on some basics like soap and toothpaste. Maybe knife or saw blades which they would get for him if he ordered them. He sometimes spoke to them in the shop. Often he didn't.

He stood back and admired his latest work.

The deck was built from sawn-up logs from trees he'd taken down when clearing around the front of his property. Property? Who was he kidding? He knew deep down that it was not sustainable and that the pressure from *the authorities*, whoever they were, would only grow. They had visited a couple of times over the summer, but he'd seen them off - once with a hefty stick brandished at the front door, and the other with a bit of charm and a smile and a lot of understanding reassurance that he would do the right thing.

He had no intention of doing the right thing.

Or of moving anywhere.

I could even have guests out here. On my new verandah!

He chuckled to himself and imagined entertaining on the new deck, and picked a couple of stout logs to act as stools. He positioned them just to the right of the porch, and sat down with a glass of murky water harvested from the rain butt. He would chat to them about the weather. About politics. About planners and local bureaucrats.

But he knew no-one would come. He was struck by a momentary pang of sadness when he recalled what he'd left behind, but then he did what he always did. He looked around him at the environment in which he lived, the beauty of the natural world, in the beating heart of the forest, and at the ramshackle collection of boards, blocks and beams that he'd cobbled together.

That he now called home.

The home he knew he was going to have to fight for.

Leila Chapter 3

Duke closed the bin with a crash and flung himself back in his chair, the echo of the wooden structure resonating like a drum around the small room. His eye was drawn to the rough wooden wall of the kitchen, which seemed to have acquired yet another new crack or mark.

It had all started so stupidly. He and his brother had quibbled over a small amount of money and Duke had felt that he was the loser. Although they had drifted apart before that, the money had briefly brought them together - there was even a meeting with lawyers - and then torn them apart for good. They'd not spoken since.

Then when Duke's wife got sick that became all consuming for nearly two years.

Alison was the love of his life.

They had been in the same class at primary school, and she'd insisted that he should be her boyfriend. Ten years later and they were married. *Too young*, everyone said, but they'd been happy, most of the time.

As she deteriorated he'd felt a part of him slipping away with her.

He'd felt compelled to give up his job at the school, so that he could care for her and deal with all the constant visits to the hospital and then the hospice.

And then the graveyard.

They'd had their occasional quarrels, but he had loved her.

Although the family had tried to put on brave faces, none of them could cope with it all really. She was gone.

The brothers didn't speak at the funeral. He'd turned up unexpectedly, so Duke had been taken by surprise. And more importantly, Duke needed to grieve alone.

Nearly twelve years ago.

Duke had moved out without thinking, trying to extinguish his thoughts of the years of married life they could have lived together. The family. The foundations their daughter would have built and grown from.

But Kerry was gone too.

Long gone. Far gone.

Inappropriate boyfriend.

That was his official reason, but she was twenty-two, still living at home. It wasn't right. Kerry and her dad had bickered constantly and although Duke wasn't proud of forcing her out, he genuinely had felt that it was right at the time.

Alison had not agreed of course, and it had been a source of tension between the parents right up until the end of her life. Too late now.

‘You never tried to understand her, did you?’

But she'd always been a difficult daughter to understand. Wrong friendship groups. Wrong company. Trouble at school. Trouble with the police. In the end Australia had seemed a blessing, and the last he knew, she was doing well.

New man.

New life.

She'd not come to her mother's funeral.

Too far.

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Leila Chapter 4

There was one house on Leila's route to school that most of the local kids avoided if they could.

In the summer months with the light mornings it was fine. The house stood there like a malevolent presence for sure, but there never seemed to be anyone around, and the sunlight glinted reassuringly off the broken window panes. But now it was October, and the mornings had started to draw in. This morning, the sky loomed as a background to the twin gable ends of the house, their elevated chimneys outlined and prominent, and the ivy-clad exterior damp and unwelcoming.

Very occasionally Leila would negotiate a longer route to avoid the house. They knew that there was a woman who lived there, but there was virtually never a light on, and there was no evidence of the house or garden being cared for or looked after by anyone. In the two years that she'd been walking this way to school, Leila had only seen signs of life a few times. Sometimes she walked with a friend, but often she didn't have anyone, and walked alone. This morning Leila was in a race with her watch. She absolutely hated being late. Some of the kids preferred the other path, the one by the forest, but it took longer. Not an option today.

She'd just passed the front of the house as she did most days, when there was a scrabbling noise from the front door, which opened with a scrape along the ground. Leila was almost past the frontage, when a figure shuffled out, clutching a plastic carrier bag. Leila sighed. She knew what was going to happen, and when it did it set the day up badly.

'I've lived here since I was a little girl, y'know!'

It was a random opening line, and it did not invite conversation or comment. Leila turned her head to the ground as she walked on past. Her long brown hair curtained low over one eye and she glanced through the gaps to see if anyone was really there. The woman was emerging from her doorway, making her way through the rough undergrowth of her front garden. Leila hastened her already-brisk walk, and looked towards the other side of the well-maintained street, against which the house stood out as an anomaly. Most of its windows were boarded up and several were broken.

'Morning Mrs Parsons,' Leila mumbled, without looking up.

'What did you say? Since I was a little girl, born in nineteen-sixty-two I was!'

Another random if familiar comment, after which she turned and disappeared back into the house, tutting and mumbling.

Leila could not imagine this person as a little girl. She was one of those older people who had always been...old, with her near-translucent skin and limp hair. Some of the girls used to joke that she was already dead and what they were scared of was a hologram or ghost. But Leila's maths was sharp and she quickly worked out that Mrs Parsons was just old, and harmless. Over sixty years old. Leila just quickened her step and arrived at school early, without further incident.

She managed a brief chat with a couple of her friends who'd had a similar experience when passing Mrs Parsons that morning. They both told her not to worry about it. When Leila persisted and tried to make a big drama out of it, they told her to go away. When she didn't, they did.

The morning went as mornings did. Lessons, and breaks, and more lessons. Quite often Leila would

turn lessons into breaks by just getting up and leaving. She had her ways of doing things. She'd just turned the middle of one of her lessons into a personal breaktime and was milling about outside, not bothering if someone noticed her. She looked across the vast wood beyond her personal prison gates and reflected on how still the scene was, now that the late October sunshine had penetrated the greyness. There wasn't a breath of air, and certainly no wind or breeze to disturb the scene. She felt a certain peace as she looked out and tried to calculate how long it was until she could escape, and how long it would take her using the longer route.

Forty-five minutes to go.

Leila's mind cleared as whatever had happened in the lesson faded. She stared out and down over the expanse of forest and felt at peace for the first time that day. Between two distant vapour trails fading into nothingness, she was amused to see a small vertical line of thin grey smoke rising above the trees. Almost dead straight, it seemed to lend order to her normal sense of chaos. Deciding to avoid Mrs P that afternoon, she would take the longer route home, and perhaps seek out the smoke some day, as if tracking the end of a rainbow. Maybe she'd find a pot of gold. She sighed.

That wouldn't happen to me. Nothing ever happens to me.

She shook herself out of her daydream, but resolved to check it out sometime. She didn't forget anything. But now, someone was coming. She'd be in trouble.

Again.

Leila Chapter 5

Going to sea was the right thing to do at the time.

Duke had needed to put the shame out of his mind. The shame of bickering and falling out with them all. He knew that they should have pulled together. Supported each other. That's what families do in times of crisis. But they'd all said too much, without thinking, and it quickly spiralled downwards.

He would probably spend the rest of his life regretting it.

So he joined a shipping company operating out of Southampton. He'd always thought that he would go back to the Sussex countryside when he returned, but he'd sold the house anyway. There was no-one to live in it, so why keep it? He'd ended up splitting the money. He had sent half to Australia. It had felt right at the time.

The work was hard, of course, but the manual labour was actually welcome, and at forty he was still stick thin and strong. He'd signed a six-year contract, which paid enough for him to look after family commitments and store a little away.

It was mindless work, but it stopped him losing his mind. He saw the world, especially the sea corridor between Southampton and North East Brazil. He remembered to this day the warm smell of the cargoes. Usually tropical products from the plantations near Recife. The sweetness of the sugar cane, the richness of the coffee beans. Some friends and some one-night stands, mostly in distant ports, and the odd enemy, mostly on board. Some fights.

He'd seen out those years and then stopped. With a bit of money in the bank and some memories. But he'd finished without regret and had come back to the shadows of where they had lived. There was no question of buying a house, and he knew he could not live in one, so he had set out for his recollections of a distant forest, dense and protective, where families of charcoal burners used to camp out each summer to tend their smouldering stacks.

Over four whole summers he'd cobbled together the shack, and worked on his own wood-burning business. It had made him strong. He was healthier now than he had ever been, eating a mostly vegetarian diet, augmented only by the chickens he kept and an occasional hunt for a rabbit or a pheasant in the forest. He'd become happy and confident in a lonely sort of way, living his life how he wanted, unburdened by the modern world, and far away from the conflicts and difficulties he'd left behind.

In his darker moments, he did think of her all the way out there in Australia and was overcome by a sense of shame and embarrassment, even though he'd heard that she was happy and was forging a new life. He even occasionally thought about his brother, and wondered what he was doing now.

Then again, if there was another log to put on the fire, or another little project to get working on, he forgot all about all of them.

Leila Chapter 6

Leila had been taken back in to lessons by the Deputy Head. She was a reasonable woman and Leila sort of liked her. She knew the woman had a job to do.

But she'd been taken back into a chemistry lesson. Leila didn't get chemistry. It had all been so much easier in primary school when it had just been called science. She quite liked science. But in this particular chemistry lesson she'd lost track of the point of the topic, and then lost the plot completely. She had shouted, *'No more blah blah blah!'* echoing something she'd seen on YouTube. Everyone had laughed but then the same Deputy had turned up and she was back out on her own again.

This happened a lot, and the school tried their best to accommodate her.

Accommodate was a relative term though. She was often held back at playtimes. Occasionally she was given formal detentions either during lunch or after school, and once she'd been suspended for a day. The school prided itself on how it dealt with 'difficult' children, and there were several staff with pastoral responsibilities - mentors, tutors, special needs people. There was also a counsellor. Leila's behaviour had been disruptive enough so that a visit to the counsellor's office was today's solution.

She sat opposite him as he studied his clipboard.

Most of the children who had meetings with him came out crying or laughing, or both. And not in a good way.

'Good morning Leila. How nice it is to see you again.'

Leila didn't reply.

'You can call me Nigel.'

Leila didn't call him Nigel. She didn't call him anything, despite the words coursing through her head. She looked up at him momentarily. The polished top of his head glinted in the light from the single bulb above them. She wondered what was going on inside it.

'You've got to be in it to win it, Leila. You have to realise that. Have a think about it.'

'I am thinking about it, right now, and I have no idea what you're talking about.'

Almost every recent meeting went this way. Often Leila did not feel like talking at all, and simply sat there, her head in her hands or under her hood, saying nothing.

She had once bumped into Nigel Dunsmore out shopping. He was holding hands with what Leila took to be his wife, and was carrying a fold-up shopping bag. Leila remembered him greeting her with a monotone *'Hullo Lyla'* before walking on past. It had been a warm morning.

Why are they both wearing the same colour cardigans? Oh my days! Sandals with socks!

Leila had turned to watch them head for the car park. They had eased themselves into their Honda Jazz and had trouble getting close enough to the payment machine.

Five years earlier, Jane had helped Nigel to enrol at the local technical college which ran an evening course in counselling. It was a good addition to his sociology degree, and he'd studied hard and had done well, but getting a job had been a struggle. The school had offered him a one-year contract, and Jane had been proud. She'd bought him a pocket watch to celebrate, and it had been in the pocket of his slacks ever since. He was now on his fourth one-year contract, so he was doing well. The journey to work only took him seven minutes, and Jane wrapped his sandwiches in clingfilm each morning. Each day brought him the satisfaction he derived from listening to vulnerable young people.

'So Leila, I'm here to help, to reach out to you. Talk to me.'

Leila listened carefully to what he was saying. To her, in her current mood, there was a problem with almost every single word.

Here to help. It sounded like the alliteration was almost designed to madden her. *You may be able to help, but 'here to help'? Please!*

Him reaching out to her was the last thing she needed. Her heart wanted to scream '*Don't touch me you freak!*' Her head just about prevented it.

She still couldn't stop herself saying, 'Please don't reach out to me.'

'It's a metaphor, Leila.'

'I don't do metaphors,' she said, not for the first time.

I could do this job. He has no clue what I am thinking, but I know exactly what he is going to say! In it to win it? Here to help? He's going to talk about my behaviour next. About how I need to respect people and think about the impact of my actions on others. It's like he's read a book on counselling or something, but never got past page three.

'Please just stop talking to me. I can't stand this.'

He carried on with some more *blah blah*.

'Respect your elders,' he said. He'd said it before. She'd ignored it once, and did so again. She found that every time a cliché spluttered forth out of his ridiculous mouth, she could simply ask 'Why?' or for some kind of explanation, and he would backtrack.

'Why should I respect my elders?'

'Well, Leila, it is like this.'

She thought he was going to say, 'reach out' or something again.

'You see, a young person like yourself...'

She hated being called a young person.

Just call me what I am. I am a slightly out-of-control teenager. I'm neither a young person, nor an elder person. I'm stuck in between, because I'm not an adult either. Actually, she thought again to

herself, *it doesn't matter what you call me.*

I'm Leila.

That didn't stop her arguing though.

'Why do you call me a young person?' She knew he would backtrack, probably out of fear that he'd said something inappropriate.

'Well, when I say young person, I mean, er, that you are not yet an adult, Leila. It doesn't really matter, you can ask me to call you whatever you want. I will always respect you Leila.'

He gave her what she considered to be his 'evil eye'. It was a weird combination of smile, grimace and wink. She hated it, and actually recoiled slightly as he said it. So he respected her, did he? His next effort confirmed that he did not. Her eyes did not connect back.

'Well, I've enjoyed our little chat, Leila. I look forward to seeing you next time. Until then, goodbye, and good mental health.'

She wanted to puke! He'd stolen that cliché from somewhere! She couldn't stand him any longer. She stood up.

'Please stop talking to me! You have no idea what you're talking about. It is all just noise. I could talk to myself and get more sense out of it than talking to you!'

'Are you saying that you sometimes talk to yourself Leila? I can help with that. Lend me your ears.'

Lend me your ears? It's getting worse. I'm not lending you anything! Gotta get out of here.

She went to the door, nervously feeling for her ear as she did so.

'I'm never coming here again. Goodbye!'

'I hear you, Leila, and I respect you.' If he said he respected her again, she would go over and punch him.

'And I hope to see you again.'

You really could not win with this bloke. All fluff and nonsense. She vowed then and there never, ever to see him again. Or go to any kind of other therapy. She did not need all that. She was a survivor.

She was *Leila*.

Leila Chapter 7

Each day Duke, when he wasn't drinking home-made tea on the stoop, busied himself around the house, usually focusing on a particular room. With no-one ever coming to visit, these projects took precedence, and keeping the place tidy was never a priority. Occasionally he swept the floor with a makeshift broom and removed some of the worst effects of forest-living - the leaf mulch and mud which caked themselves into every crevice from October to May - but he could not claim to be houseproud.

That morning, however, he was focused on his own bedroom. He'd had a bad night.

It was a small space, the walls of which had once supported a rickety old storage barn which he'd 'reclaimed' from one of the farms down the lane. He'd removed the timber plank by plank and transported it on foot, mostly at night, back to the shack. It was good quality hardwood, the kind that was barely available in these environmentally-conscious days, but which back in the day had been plentiful. It would last forever, so the room felt solid, comfortable and usually warm. On one wall he'd attempted some decoration, by plastering it with old album covers lifted from the house. There were gaps now, where the damp had got to them, and the graphics were faded. He smiled at a couple that were still important to him. *The Kick Inside*, with that half-staring eye, *My Aim is True*, featuring a stick-thin Elvis, and the iconic prism of *Dark Side of the Moon*.

He used to feel the eye's protective gaze as he fell asleep each night. He imagined his beautiful Alison was still with him, next to him. It was her, looking down on him, wasn't it? She was there alright. He would fidget until he got comfortable, settling into the sag of the mattress and remembering how he loved to look into her eyes. Into her soul. To tell her how much he loved her. And now, how much he missed her.

Every night.

But the bed had given up on him. He had brought it from the old house, and although it held some sentimental value, it was never built to last. That night it had finally quit, and in response to a gentle shifting of his weight as he slept, the head end had collapsed, with him asleep on it. He'd woken with a start, fearing an earthquake or even the imminent bulldozers, but had found in fact that the legs of the head end had simply given up, and he was lying with his feet a good eighteen inches above his head, which was now at ground level. He'd spent the rest of the night trying to lie across what was left of the bed, but kept rolling off onto the unfinished wooden floorboards. A rough night, for sure.

The previous summer he'd built himself a sort of workshop, out back behind the house. Above a basic workbench, one wall supported an impressive if ancient array of hammers, screwdrivers, chisels and saws, plus a range of different-sized boxes containing nails and screws. In the end he settled on two old reliables - some gaffer tape and some stout twine, with the intention of lashing the bed head back to its departed body. After an hour or so of re-screwing some of the torn-out fixings, and the application of tape and string to the joints, the bed, although rickety, was back standing. *At least a few more years*, he thought, with a wistful glance at the picture above the bed, momentarily jolted back to the better years that it had seen.

After fixing up the frame, he tried to sort out the mattress, which tended to ride up and ruffle. He was obviously a rough sleeper in more ways than one. With a bit of string at each corner, he managed to secure the corners of the mattress to the corners of the bed frame so that it shouldn't move as he slept his restless, tormented slumber each night.

Leila Chapter 8

There was a knock on the rickety door. It was the planning guy again. Duke stepped out onto the new deck.

‘Oh good morning Kevin, how are you?’

The man was not on the lowest rung of the Council’s planning ladder, but he was pretty close. The familiarity of the greeting made the poor man shudder slightly.

‘Er, fine thank you. I’ve got some...more...paperwork for you.’

‘Well, that can wait! How about a nice cup of tea?’

Duke always did this. The planning officer sat down reluctantly and took the foul-looking brew.

‘Thank you. Er...tea again? Nice. Now we do have a few things to discuss.’

This was the fourth visit. Each one had got slightly more serious. At first it was a few questions, about how the structure had been built, how long it had been there, and why he had built it. He'd always started by offering them refreshments, and he'd sat them on the terrace. When they had wanted to come in to do their inspections, he let them in.

By the third visit, they had brought someone with them called a *structural engineer*. He'd worked his way through the building, including crawling around the roof spaces and exploring the foundations of the basement. Duke could tell he was impressed with what had grown out of nothing, but even so the man claimed to have found *major structural flaws* and *design issues*. With a professional sigh he'd written the word *condemned* in his notebook, and apologised to Duke at the inevitable outcome of his visit.

Kevin Walker had come to discuss just that.

‘Thank you,’ the planning officer spluttered, as the so-called tea hit the back of his throat, ‘so you’ve seen the structural engineer’s report?’

‘Oh no, I haven’t actually,’ replied Duke casually. He always seemed to maintain his cool, despite the seriousness of his current situation.

‘Well it was sent on the Fourteenth...’

‘Of which month?’

‘Er, well of course that would have been September.’ Duke pretended to write something down.

‘And which year was that?’ He knew that his questions would stall the investigation, even if he also knew he'd put the house together with no permission, and virtually no training or experience.

‘Well of course, it was sent a few weeks ago. 2022.’

‘I’m afraid I never received it.’ He looked around him and waved his arms expansively.

‘As you can see, we are not on any regular postal routes, and if you say this dwelling is illegal, then there is no way we can be.’

He was quite proud of using the word *dwelling*. It sounded good. So did his logic. He continued.

‘So actually what you are saying is that you are sending letters to an address that you say is not allowed to exist. How does that work? No wonder I never get any post!’

Duke smiled with satisfaction at the nonsense he'd just concocted.

The man looked as exasperated on this fourth visit as he'd done on the previous three. The absurdity of trying to send something about removing an address, to an address that did not exist, was actually stopping him doing his job. He sighed another deep sigh and sank the dregs of the tea - mostly the silt and leaves and unknown remnants left at the bottom of the cup. He gagged slightly on it.

‘Erm...well, OK, so I will have to get a courier to bring out the documents to you, is that what you are saying?’

‘Yes it is. So what address will you use for the courier?’

Duke smiled as he said this. The man turned away slightly, his lips pursed in frustration.

‘I will return with the required documentation, sir, if necessary with reinforcements.’

‘Oh I do look forward to that. I’ll boil the kettle. Thank you so much for your visit. See you next time!’

With that Duke got up and pointed the route out for the poor man. Kevin Walker raised himself to his full five foot four and turned to go. He hoisted up his shoulder bag, containing the all-important letters and files, but failed to lodge it securely in place, eventually gathering up the straps and cradling it like a baby as he left. Duke was sure he heard the man *tut tut* disapprovingly as he went out of earshot, or perhaps he was mumbling about the documents.

Duke didn’t care! He knew he'd gained another couple of months. These people don’t work quickly.

He picked up the two mugs with a flourish and almost skipped back inside.

Leila Chapter 9

Despite the interventions of the counsellor the previous day, or probably because of them, Leila had had another bad morning.

Terrible actually. This always seemed to happen a few weeks into each term. Everything started OK, then just headed downhill.

She'd got in trouble several times, all for what seemed like really small things, but in the end she'd been taken out of the classroom. The teacher couldn't take any more of her questions, even though she was generally someone Leila liked. Maybe that's why she asked lots of questions in class.

That's what you're supposed to do isn't it?

Leila stood in the corridor, and thought about who she did like. It was a short list.

She didn't like her father, who she lived with. He seemed to be constantly on the phone, and his conversations never made any sense. He went through girlfriends something like once a week. There was always a different woman in the house, and none of them seemed to have time for Leila, even though she did her best to be nice to them. But they were always swooning at her dad. He was a good-looking dude, but he never had enough money to match the promise of his looks, so they soon lost interest in him. He just moved on to the next one. They literally passed in the night. Even if they were nice enough, they never stayed.

There was one once who Leila did like. She was called Melanie, or Melody or Harmony or something. Something that reminded Leila of a song. And the funny thing was, as far as Leila could be bothered to remember, she always seemed to be singing.

Yes, it was Melody, for sure.

Melody was small and smiley, and although she undoubtedly fell first for the good looks, she also committed for a few weeks to both Leila and her dad. It was Melody who had first introduced Leila to music, and who had even given her one of her own guitars to play around with. She'd taught Leila some basic chords, and before long they had started playing together. *Blues jams*, she called them, which had made Leila smile. For a while, Leila had practised a lot, hoping to play more with her. But then, like the others, she was gone.

Leila occasionally liked one or two of the friends she made at school, but each one of them inevitably did something to annoy her. Nothing big. Just annoying, like the way Lil flicked her hair back from the front of her face, or Olivia's irritating little high-pitched giggle, or the way they all changed the rules of her games at breaktime. Well, maybe they weren't exactly her games, but if the rules got changed...well the game just had to end. Right? It happened almost every day. It always seemed to be her that lost out. Everyone else just carried on, after she'd gone.

Why was that?

When she got home, she changed out of her all-blue school uniform. It was neither a nice shade of blue nor a particularly good fit on her. She swapped it for a favourite red dress, past its best but relaxing and familiar. She sat on her bed and contemplated what to do next. She got up and looked out of the window. Five pm in mid-October, it was getting towards dusk, but the day had been unseasonably

warm, and the sun seemed to be lingering just above the horizon. There might be some tea in the kitchen at about six, so she had an hour. She looked at her watch to be sure. It was not good to be late back - her father had a temper.

Just half an hour. I'll take the dog. We can search for a pot of gold at the end of that smoke!

Leila looked at the two huge eyes peering out of a ball of fur curled up in the basket near the front door. A King Charles, Cairo was only two years old and was drawn from sweet and docile stock.

But Cairo was more than just a bit laid back. He was lazy. He just could not be bothered most of the time. Leila looked at him and waggled the lead hanging from the coat pegs in the hallway. Most dogs would jump at the chance of a walk in the woods, but for this one it seemed like a chore. He stared back at her as if she'd said something ridiculous just by suggesting a walk. Then he settled back down on his rug, with a shrug.

No thanks. Not today. I'm happy just lying here.

What self-respecting pooch behaved like that? Leila couldn't be bothered to pester him any more - if he didn't want to go out, then why should she push him? He just wasn't interested. How odd for a dog! Leila stared at him contemptuously, almost growling. He turned his face back to his rug and settled in for a long night of doing nothing.

Even the dog rejected her.

She opened the back door and made her way down the garden, reflecting briefly on the fact that Cairo was a bit like her dad. A lot of sitting around. A lot of eating. Not a lot of action.

Well they do say that dogs are like their owners.

