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.

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 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.

Leila Chapter 10

Leila slipped out of the back door, and headed down the garden path towards the gate. The latch on the outside presented its usual challenge, and she had to jump up on the low wall beside the gate to reach the clasp from over the top of the wooden door. She carefully pulled it towards her and slid out into the cool dusk air.

Their small house had a tiny back garden, but it backed on to an extensive wooded area, which eventually morphed into a deep forest. It was perhaps bigger than it seemed to her, but Leila's dad once joked that it was their *'real back garden'* as if he could boast this vast tract of public land as his own. Probably all the neighbours claimed the same.

Leila usually just left the garden and sat amongst the saplings and fallen trees just into the woods. There was a shallow ditch to navigate, and walking into parts of the wood was a struggle unless you stuck to the few marked paths, the ones the dog walkers take every morning and every evening. By summer, the spaces around the sycamores and the pines in the first glades would be taken up by brambles and ferns. From where she normally sat she could see the back of the house, and although she was carefully just out of sight, she knew where she was and could easily return. She would take a book or a sketch pad.

Hours would pass.

Mr Allen, who kept the village hardware store, would tell you, if you asked, that there was something in the woods. Something deep in the forest; perhaps something that you should avoid. Older adults talked of an extended family of travellers who brought their wagons each summer to spend it making charcoal, and the smouldering grass piles they created to protect the burning coppiced branches until they turned into almost pure carbon. Then one year the town council had decided that the charcoal-burners were trespassing, and the ditches had been dug to put a stop to their work, although Leila did wonder about the smell of smoke she occasionally sensed on the wind.

Now the only villagers who walked the paths were those walking their dogs, early morning and just before sundown. They ambled along, throwing sticks and balls for their Labradors, Alsatians and Spaniels to retrieve. They rarely got more than half a mile into the woods before they'd turn around and start chucking the sticks back the way they came.

Leila avoided them and when she couldn't, she ignored them. It seemed wrong to her, the way they didn't notice anything other than their sticks, balls and dogs. The ones on their smart phones were the worst: they didn't see anything. Their dogs took them out, their dogs took them home.

Off those paths, the woods were quiet. Not that they were empty. A careful walker, a walker who paused making no sound, would occasionally be rewarded with the sight of a muntjac. And those who lifted their eyes could watch the nuthatches, thrushes and crows who made their nests in the bigger trees.

Today though it was strange for Leila to see in the distance, down one of the straight pathways, a stooped figure bending into the undergrowth and emerging with an armful of twigs or brushwood. A man perhaps, in an oversized coat, he glanced up and down the path, his head darting this way and that, before moving quickly with his bundle back into the bushes.

Leila crouched a little flatter to avoid being spotted. She was sure the man had not seen her, and he did not reappear.

But it upset her normal afternoon, so she decided to head back to the gate. It was unusual for anyone out there not to have a dog with them.

She got back to the garden, closed the gate behind her, and bolted it top and bottom.

On entering the house, she removed her outdoor shoes.

Cairo looked up dolefully and seemed to breathe a sigh of relief that any pressure to go out was now definitely over.

Leila Chapter B

So we are making a bit of progress here.

We have some characters. We have a setting, of sorts. We don't have much of a plot yet, but let's hope that may develop. There are hints as to what might come. Leila seems a bit troubled at school, and Duke is kind of happy and lonely at the same time. He's had a mixed past, what with his wife passing away, his daughter moving to Australia, and the falling out with his brother.

Did you catch all that in Chapter 3?

Maybe re-read it if you need to.

Sorry.

That was rude.

Condescending. Of course you got it!

You might need to look up *condescending*.

OMG sorry!

Even more condescending!

So I'm trying to imagine in my head the setting I have described. Do you do that? That's what books are good for. Now, don't get me wrong! I would love this to be made into a best-selling film one day!

Oh yes! I've often wondered who would play Leila. Millie Bobby could do it! With maybe Clooney as Duke. There'd be a red carpet outside the movie theatre and I'd be interviewed about my inspiration for the story, my oversized rented dinner suit hanging off my newly gym-toned body! And the after-party - what style - we'd be all over social media…

Sorry!

Unlike films, books require the reader to build their own mental pictures of what is happening in support of the words on the page. Almost everyone will provide that support in different ways, bringing their own experiences and imagination to bear on what is written.

That's why I don't like picture books or graphic novels.

Too much information.

I remember reading *Stig of the Dump* as a child, with those few pencil illustrations. Just enough to help me frame the action in my own imaginary setting, supported by the line drawings. Great.

The setting I have built in my mind goes like this. I wonder if you have something similar?

Leila's house is small but reasonably comfortable. There is a hallway, perhaps leading out to the back door, where the dog lies around in a basket all day doing nothing. If I go out the back door, there is a

basic garden, although in my head Leila's dad has not done much to it, and there is nothing for her to do in it. Perhaps someone else might have put a trampoline or something for her, or a football goal. But no, there is nothing there. Fencing either side maybe, and tall trees beyond.

The most important feature of the garden, at least to Leila, is the gate.

It's a gateway to a different world. Her dad sees the woods as his own back garden, perhaps making up for the inadequacies of the real thing. Leila sees it as an escape - from home, from school, from Dad. Even just beyond the gate she can immerse herself in relative calm, drawing solace from the natural world. The peace and quiet. Nature in all its glory. Some days it forms part of her route to school.

The forest, which is described as being a mix of ancient and coppiced woodland, seems to have some wide pathways in places, and impenetrable undergrowth in others. Perhaps that is a result of some of it being managed, and some not. For me it feels like it is a mix of coniferous and deciduous trees. Deciduous trees like the mighty oaks have seasons, and drop their leaves and their fruit in the Northern Hemisphere autumn. Coniferous trees are evergreens, like the pine family. Although they may drop pine cones (remember every living thing needs to reproduce itself somehow), they don't generally drop their leaves or spines. Unless you cut them down and put baubles on them at Christmas, when you'll still be fishing needles out of the carpet in June.

I'm seeing trees in a variety of shapes and sizes forming a dense, mixed woodland layer, maybe fifteen or twenty metres high in places, and some sparser areas with pathways and walking routes. I can see elms and pines, but oak trees dominate the other species, their round shape giving them a certain regal superiority over the rest of the forest. As most of the forest has been allowed to develop naturally, the fittest and strongest trees have survived, but there are other weaker ones that have been squeezed out and have fallen, perhaps brought down by storms. I can see trees that have fallen into each others' arms, gradually being covered by lichen and moss, green vines gripping and smothering them, in a suffocating embrace.

OK, I've gone a bit too far! *Regal superiority? A suffocating embrace*? These are good phrases, but a bit over the top! And I've also mentioned *reproduction.*

That's not a good thing.

Time to move on.

Leila Chapter 11

Leila was scared of the deeper reaches of the woods. What young person would not be? Although her occasional route to school just kissed the outer fringes of the copse, she sometimes wandered further in. Of course it was no rainforest, but even during the daytime its deeper regions were darkened by the canopy and the thick understory, where the trees were mature enough to deny nurture to the forest floor, which remained damp and boggy much of the year round. By November you'd need boots. Leila knew that in this part of southern England there were virtually no animals or bugs that weren't more scared of her than she was of them. Twice in her memory someone had reported spotting an adder sunning itself on a pathway, and once a fox had bothered a dog-walker. But no-one had ever been hurt. There were birds of all shapes and sizes, rabbits aplenty, and several families of deer to add to the normal population of harmless bugs and beasties you would find anywhere.

She took her favourite path, the one that curved into the woods, cutting through two huge bramble patches. She liked the look of the trees by this path - their trunks were wide at the base, only slowly tapering as they grew towards the distant sky. She cared less that the path was muddy. It was leading her right to the heart of the forest. Further in than most dog walkers ever went. She felt the taller trees frowning down on her, seeming to bend in the half-light of the evening and then spring back up as she passed. Perhaps there was a little breeze that was gently ruffling some of the uppermost branches. She looked back as the forest seemed to close behind. She knew it wasn't actually closing.

Was it?

Leila had developed a habit.

She liked habits.

This one was to mark her regular path between the trees by touching specific ones in turn. She smiled to herself when she saw that there were little markings from where her fingernails had rubbed the lichen and moss off the bark each time she'd gone through this little ritual. She'd not been to the woods that often, maybe three or four times, but often enough to leave her signature on the way through.

This was just another walk, but after she'd passed the five trees she normally touched (every fifth one in the row), she started to head a bit deeper in. This felt like more of a challenge, as if the trees were daring her to take herself further. She looked around at the shadows casting down from above. She couldn't help a little shudder and a glance back over her shoulder at how alone she was.

She was just about to turn back and search out the five-tree routine again, when her eye was caught by something just sitting on a bank beside the thicker undergrowth of the copse.

Don't panic, but that shouldn't be there. There must be some logical explanation. Stay cool.

Her heart seemed to beat irregularly. She thought it back into rhythm, and breathed.

It was a chair. Not a camping chair or something you might find by a path if someone had forgotten it, but a formal wooden chair. It was broken and moss-covered, and it occurred to Leila that it might once have been from a dining set or was even a rocking chair, whose runners or rockers had long since gone. It was perched on a slight rise in the ground.

She stopped and blinked a few times when she saw it. It was at an angle that made it look like someone

had been recently sitting in it, or was still there, even though it was empty. She thought she saw it rock slightly. Maybe it was the wind.

Then the air brought something else. Something from deep inside the forest, that she had never heard before.

At times like these, Leila’s mind took on an extraordinary clarity. Throughout most days her brain was awash with conflicting thoughts, sounds, sights and smells. They overwhelmed her. But here, at the doorstep to the forest, alone, she was clear, soothed by the breeze and the warmth of the forest aroma.

She breathed in, then held her breath. Closed her eyes, taking in the stillness.

In gentle waves the wind brought her something new, from far away.

A vague but sweet sound, unlike anything she'd ever heard before.

Leila Chapter 12

From deep somewhere in the undergrowth, music was playing.

It was not recorded music, it was live.

She strained to hear it, as it came and went. When it went, she took a few paces towards where it seemed to be. When it came, she stopped and listened, trying to orientate it. A lone violin or something similar was being played somewhere in the distance, perhaps not so far away, but masked by the undergrowth through which it had to struggle to reach her ears.

The sound was unmistakably live music, played liltingly at a slow tempo, with little stops and starts, and mistakes. She was drawn towards it and walked on.

She'd never known the extent of the forest. Somewhere it was recorded as being ninety acres, but that meant nothing to her. It was certainly the sort of place where someone could get lost, although Leila always felt that if she kept walking through she would reach a road or a house or something eventually. She didn't feel scared, even if lots of things often did worry her. She felt pulled towards to the sound somehow. Although there was not really a discernible tune, the pattern sounded like something she knew. Or perhaps it was just similar to something she'd made up herself.

As she walked, she thought back, and looked back, to the chair she had passed. *Was that somehow connected to the music*? She briefly imagined someone sitting in the chair with a cello or a violin, lost in the moment of music-making.

As the playing drew her into the forest, she realised that this was the furthest she'd ever been in. She knew most of the paths closer to home well, but at that moment she was surprising herself with what she was doing. Impressing herself even. That didn't happen often. She looked around for landmarks. There weren't any, just a seemingly endless expanse of woodland. She had to duck down to avoid a large trunk that had fallen across the path.

She made a mental note of that one for the way home.

She was closer now. The sounds came and went, stopped and started, like someone was practising. She walked on down the path. The path narrowed as the undergrowth encroached.

Leila didn't like noise. Noises in her head often arranged themselves into cacophonous walls of sound which became overwhelming, and sometimes the speed at which she could melt down was exacerbated by these sounds.

Music was different though. It played in her head regularly and she had some experience of trying to play instruments herself. But she was disabled by her own ability. It came naturally to her, but her enjoyment was limited by the unerring accuracy with which she could identify sounds and notes and chords. Ever since she'd sat down with Melody to pick out tones on the guitar, she'd been able to name them without looking. She'd been so proud to see how delighted Melody was with that! Even more so when she could correctly call out the note of a chirping bird or a beep from the microwave.

The music continued and she continued to analyse it. A chord sequence repeated and repeated over three or four bars. It was not unattractive, but it was constant, insistent.

She tried not to, but something in her head forced her to map out the pattern.

The overall feel was one of minor chords. Probably E minor. There was a certain melancholy to the piece, and it was played at a moderate tempo. She heard each phrase start with E minor, before moving to a G or a B, and ending on A. The chorus was more major chord based, Cs and Gs giving it a more positive feel, with a decisive B*b* to resolve it.

Unaware that it would come back to haunt her, she followed the sequence towards a natural clearing, deep in the forest.

Leila Chapter 13

Although it was not dark, Leila thought she could make out a light, or lights, through the dingy forest. That scent of burning wood was there too.

Her instinct was to run. Nothing about this situation was good. It was getting darker, she had seen someone in the distance, and she'd heard odd noises.

But she knew the routes through most of the woodlands pretty well, and she'd marked her way, so still she went on, driven perhaps by the peacefulness of the forest and the pulling power of the tune.

As she got closer, and the wood smoke got stronger, she came upon a clearing. Right in the middle of it was a mound, perhaps five feet high, apparently constructed out of grass and dried mud. She stopped just before the clearing and stared at this unusual shape. A mist of thin smoke clung around its top.

She skirted around the clearing by keeping close to the trees that fringed it. Leila had seen bonfires in autumn, when gardeners stash their random rubbish and set light to it, but those piles are usually a couple of feet high, no more. This was more structured, more organised. She looked to her right and thought she saw another one in a clearing through the tall pines. The same pall of smoke just hanging there above it.

And then, she was there.

Deep in the forest were three or four small wooden buildings. The largest one had a rough terraced area, with a small picket fence around it.

As she got closer, the music died away. The pulling power was gone. She stopped as it stopped.

Instinctively she moved away from the main path which approached the door. She couldn't see anyone. Up on the low roof was a chimney fashioned out of what looked like a narrow metal can or bucket, perched on top of a car tyre. A thin column of smoke rose from it - the line she'd seen from the school yard.

She took in the shape of the main building. No bigger than a large shed, it had a door and a porchway made of dark wood, and a rusted metal roof. As far as she could tell there were just two windows, and one of those was propped half-open with a long stick liberated from the forest. She could see part-way through it to a room beyond.

Leila was about to turn back to leave, ready to retrace her route by the trees she'd marked, when she noticed movement.

'Built it all myself, you know!' called a deep voice from within.

Leila's first instinct was to run. She took several steps away down the path, and dropped into the ferns until she was definitely out of sight, but then found herself peering back out from where she was hiding. She noticed a violin and bow lying on a table in front of the door.

'100% recycled materials. That's what you young people like isn't it? Environmental credentials!'

The voice had a smile in it and lingered on the word *credentials*.

How did the voice know she was young? She momentarily looked around to ensure she was adequately hidden and to verify that he was not talking to anyone else. Maybe she'd been seen on the way in. The path to the front door was ramrod straight and lined with trees. Sure, she'd been spotted. She slid her way carefully out of the thicket, straightened her jacket, and crept onto the last few metres of the path.

‘Ah there you are! Welcome!’

Leila still could not see anyone, but the shuffling from inside the house, and the rattling of the door as it slowly battled its rusting hinges indicated that someone was present. Above the door was a hand-written sign with a single word. *Heaven*, or perhaps *Haven.* A few seconds later, a prematurely aged man shuffled out of the half-open door and pulled out after him a battered chair. Leila recognised it as the one she'd seen at the head of the path, or something very similar.

‘Do come over, my dear,’ he said, clumsily re-arranging a sawn-off log at the other side of the chair which would serve as a kind of stool. He swept out his left arm, motioning to her to sit down, as he took his place on the chair. It had been a rocking chair, but the runners were long gone and it perched precariously on what remained of its legs.

Leila didn’t move. Her mind was alert.

Stick or twist? No way am I going closer. Can I run if I have to? No-one else here. I could get away, no problem.

Still, she declined the offer of pulling up a seat.

‘Erm…I’m sorry to interrupt,’ she said, from where she stood, a few yards from the shack, ‘I heard some music. Least I thought I did.’

‘Music? Oh I don’t know about that. I hope it didn’t bother you.’

Leila looked at the ground and pulled a few strands of hair across her eyes. She knew she should not be engaging with this stranger. She looked up at the darkening sky.

‘No. It was fine. I like music. E minor I think. Erm, sorry. Actually I think I should go.’

‘Well that is what I would call a flying visit! I don’t get many visitors. So did you recognise the playing? And you knew it was E minor?’

The gentleness of his rich voice seemed to pull her in. Luckily her rational head took over.

‘Er, I think I should go,’ she repeated, ‘nice to meet you and all that. Thanks. Bye. Nice playing.’

Duke watched as she hurried back down the path, jogging to touch each of the five trees in turn.

He smiled to himself, staring intently at each tree, and called out to her.

‘Bet you can’t name the song!’

His words were whisked away on the breeze.

Leila Chapter 14

What had he said? He said I wouldn't be able to name the tune. That thing he was playing on the violin? Hardly a tune, really! Some nice notes. A melody. Calm. Hmmm…what was it?

Leila was not one to ignore a challenge, however pointless. She had run home with the tune teasing at her musical brain, and his question annoying her.

The next day she had again wanted to avoid Mrs Parsons on the way home, and although she could have gone straight, no-one really cared if she stayed out for a bit, and something pulled her towards the centre of the forest. As before she acted out her little tree ritual, touching every fifth one on the route, but failed to notice a little carved tick mark under each of her fingerprints.

Her return caught Duke unawares. Not only a visitor, but a repeat visitor. He could not remember whether that had ever happened before.

'Oh, hello again! Weren't you here yesterday?'

'Yes, I came when I heard that music. Was that really you? I thought I knew the tune, but I can't place it.' Leila stood well back from the house, keeping to the side of the path and grasping one of the smaller trees for reassurance. She kicked and scraped at the muddy ground with the toe of her trainers.

'That was me! I like to practice a bit as the sun goes down.'

'The sun doesn't go down, it's just the rotation of the earth.'

Leila liked science to be right.

'I used to play the guitar. A bit.'

'Oh that is wonderful,' he replied, 'I love it when young people want to play music!'

'Well, yes, but I'm not very good.'

'Keep going, my dear, you're only fourteen years old after all!'

'I'm fifteen actually.'

'I knew I'd miscalculated! Sorry! I used to teach in the secondary school, so I was a pretty good judge of age. But it's been a long time, perhaps I'm losing my touch! You all look so different these days!'

There was something about his voice that made her want to go closer, but as she edged forward she stopped, trying to regulate her breathing. She thought again about sitting down, but again thought better of it. She moved forward and leaned against the wooden columns supporting the front of the structure. As she moved, he again motioned to the stool. For a moment it looked like he was going to take her hand. She recoiled slightly and he withdrew.

Leila did not like to touch people at any time. Even her father, or perhaps especially her father, would be met with a withdrawn hand if he tried to take it. He didn't try too often. She didn't like being touched, or touching anyone else. She took the normal corridor-jostling at school personally. More than

once she'd lashed out after imagining some personal slight had occurred in the melée.

Duke was clutching a mug. Leila could see a scummy foam on the top of whatever was in it.

‘Something to drink?’

She held up a hand to decline the offer, checking again that she was far enough away to run if she had to. *Stranger danger* they used to call it in school. Yet looking across at the hunched figure, tea in hand, silently looking up at her, she felt a certain calmness and pride in her courage. He was thinking the same.

‘You’re a brave little thing, aren’t you? Does anyone know you’re out here?’

Leila took in the words.

What is he? A mind-reader? He seems to know what I’m thinking.

‘Honestly I was just walking and I got a bit lost. I heard some music. I had a bad day.’

‘Bad day at school? Or don’t you go to school?’

‘Yes it was bad. I barely managed to stay in a lesson today.’

‘Annoying teachers? Other kids bothering you? Terrible school dinner? Afternoon dragged on?’

He seemed to know exactly what her school was like.

‘Well yes, all of those things actually. I hate school.’

‘What’s so bad about it? You don’t really mean that do you?’

Normally she would have resented the question, but his tone was one of sympathy, rather than judgement. He continued.

‘I used to think I hated things, and I’ve made lots of mistakes in my life because of that. Often by the time I realised it wasn’t so bad, it was too late.’

She tried to make sense of what he was saying.

‘Yes I make mistakes too! But at the time I just can’t help what I do. It always goes wrong.’

‘Well, that’s it, isn’t it? Mistakes happen in the heat of the moment. But the moment soon passes. And it’s better when you talk about it.’

She had to admit that talking about it, even with a total stranger, helped.

‘I never really like school that much, though. Just a few people sometimes, and some lessons.’

‘There you go! So there are a few things that you like!’

‘Yeah, but I did have a bad day.’

‘I know you did.’

He spoke with his hands clasped together and tried to catch her distant gaze. Had Leila looked up she would have seen his understanding smile, suggesting he actually did know how she was feeling.

‘So may I know your name? I’m Duke by the way.’

The question was relaxed, casual even. It flowed naturally, sounding almost disinterested, so that if she didn’t want to say who she was, it was like it wouldn’t matter. Because of that, she told him.

‘I’m Leila.’

‘Ah yes, of course. Pleased to meet you Leila. That is an unusual name. And a beautiful one too.’

‘Yeah, er…thanks.’ She thanked him because she felt she ought to.

‘I think perhaps you should be going Leila. It’s quite late and your parents wouldn’t want you out in the woods past dusk, would they?’

She stared hard at the ground. No eye contact.

‘If I was lucky to have what normal people call parents, they’d care. Maybe.’

‘Oh… I’m so sorry,’ he said, hastily retracting.

‘It’s OK. I live with my Dad. I don’t remember my Mum. My Dad is always busy. He really doesn’t care where I am.’

‘Well, adults often appear uncaring Leila, but I’m sure that soon enough he’ll start wondering where you are.’

‘Yeah, maybe. OK, goodbye then.’ There was a part of her that didn’t want to leave.

‘It has been great meeting you Leila. Your best route out is to take that path there, and then turn right when it hits the fence. You’ll end up back on the lane.’

That’s odd. He didn’t ask where I live.

The directions to the lane would work, although she was confident that her tree-trail would also take her back. She stepped away from the porch.

‘Thank you. Nice to meet you.’

‘The thanks are all mine, my dear.’ He stood up, pushing the chair backwards and nodding his head slightly.

‘It has been a pleasure meeting you. I don’t get many visitors. Goodbye.’

At that moment, Leila resolved to come back. There was something familiar and reassuring about him. He seemed wise and honest and genuine. And she didn’t meet many people like that. Most of the people she met seemed to her to be the opposite - stupid, and disreputable and fake. She took part of the path he'd indicated, then turned off when she found what she thought was her own route back to the garden. She studied the tree in the half-light but could not see the vague marks she'd left before. She had a moment of panic when she thought she might be lost, then breathed again when she realised she was one tree out.

She tapped lightly on the right one, her first marked tree, and looked back along the path. She could see through the gap the wispy smoke rising through the trees, from the ever more distant home-made chimney.

She paused and thought she could hear the sound of a violin, playing a gentle but happy tune.

E minor.

Leila Chapter 15

It was not until a few days later that she followed her tree-codes again, double-taking momentarily at the two little nicks in the bark under her fingerprints before continuing.

His voice sounded a note of genuine surprise.

‘Oh hello, you’re back?’ He adjusted his ropey old sweater, as if trying to impress an important visitor. ‘Lyla isn’t it?’ His jaunty, almost casual, tone suggested a deliberate forgetfulness.

‘Leila actually.’

‘Oh yes, Leila, do come over. Please, take a seat.’

She'd resolved, albeit briefly, not to return and to leave him in peace. He probably lived there for a reason, and was happy with his own company. But she hadn’t spoken to anyone that day, and she knew that he would listen. This time she sat down on one of the stools on the deck.

‘What’s that burning over there?’ She pointed to one of the piles she'd seen smouldering on her way in.

‘Oh that’s charcoal. Precious stuff that is!’

‘Charcoal? Barbecues and things, right?’

‘That’s right, Leila, I sell quite a bit for barbecues. It’s also for things like filters and masks. It’s very absorbent you see. You just burn wood as slowly as possible. There’s a fine art to getting it just right.’

‘So you make it?’

‘Well I have to do something! It fascinates me actually. Two hundred years ago, there would have been many families working each summer making charcoal in these forests. Have you noticed how many clearings you come to as you walk on through? Many of those would have been cleared for the kilns. The raw material is all around and at one time much of the forest would have been cut down to produce enough fuel for iron and bronze making. Back in the day, you know.’

She didn’t, really.

‘So do you do anything else?’

‘Apart from making and selling a bit of charcoal? Not really. Fixing this place mostly. Sorry to disappoint you. Maybe you were thinking I was the front for some criminal superpower, and underneath here is a network of bunkers and supercomputers?’

He laughed.

She didn’t.

‘I didn’t think that. It’s just a shack.’

He smiled.

‘No I guess you didn’t. Honestly Leila, I don’t really want to talk about it. I do what I do. It’s an honest and simple life. I don’t bother anyone and I look after the forest. I’m not doing anyone any harm. Everything changed for me after I lost my wife.’

Leila didn’t really pick up on the last comment. She thought for a moment and then said, ‘It’s a good life. Quite cool actually. And useful.’

He genuinely felt happy with that endorsement.

‘Thank you. Would you care for some tea?’

The old-fashioned language made her smile.

‘I would not care for any, at least not today. Thank you though. I should probably depart.’

They both smiled at the formal language.

Wordsmiths.

Both of them.

Leila Chapter 16

‘There’s this guy who lives out in the woods. I’m going there.’

‘What the actual…?’

They hadn’t yet made it to school. It was already nine thirty and Leila was late. Noah was also late, as he often was. Leila occasionally talked to Noah. Although he was a year older than her, they often met in the isolation unit. They would try to snatch a few words through the walls of the booth desks and compare notes on what they had done to be sent there. He was usually there because he always turned up late.

‘No, seriously. I met him there. He’s built a house and stuff.’

‘OK, well take me there then.’

Leila thought for a moment. In just three brief meetings she'd built some kind of rapport with the old guy. She already felt protective of him. She already wanted to go back. Alone.

‘Er, well maybe I can take you there sometime, if you like.’

‘Now. Let’s go.’

Leila looked at the time. She was already thirty-one minutes late. Noah grabbed her arm. She didn’t like being touched, and pulled away from him. Noah was a special kid.

‘Come on! You don’t dare, right? We’re already too late to go in anyway. Show me your mystery hermit!’

It was clear that Noah didn’t believe her and just wanted to bunk off school for an hour. He was already diverting from the main school entrance towards the path that led away to the woods.

‘If you don’t come I’ll just find him myself!’ He was laughing, taunting her.

‘He doesn’t like being visited,’ she muttered. She started to follow, wondering to herself why she was acting defensive. Who was she protecting?

‘He doesn’t exist, that’s why!’ yelled Noah, almost skipping down the path. Leila ran after him.

As they made their way alongside the fence that separated the school from the woods, Leila wondered whether she was more scared of being alone in the woods with the old man, or with Noah. Maddie from Year Nine had told Leila that last summer, walking home alone with Noah, in that stretch of the path where there’s usually few people about, he’d asked if he could kiss her. It was all she could do to keep him off her. Leila momentarily thought about turning back, but there was something pulling her along. She caught sight of the narrow plume of smoke rising from one of the clearings. It felt supportive, protective even.

‘It’s this way,’ she said, stopping Noah’s headlong rush into the forest, ‘can you just calm down a bit. He doesn’t like strangers.’

She came to the first tree in her set of five. She touched it with her fingers as usual, reinforcing the little wearing away of the green lichen. She pressed hard to make her mark, just above three small gouges in the bark. They were neatly cut, and fresh. Counting but missing the next four as they headed into the undergrowth, she stopped just before she touched the second tree in her set.

‘Hey, wait!’ she stopped Noah, whose enthusiasm for the trip seemed to be waning.

‘We probably ought to get back, actually,’ he said, his bravado deserting him.

‘We’re nearly there. He’s probably heard us coming by now.’ She looked at her tree. Underneath the mark where she'd scraped it, perhaps a dozen times, was another new mark. Carved into the bark. Almost a tick mark. Her heart gave a little thump as she looked at it. She waited for Noah to get closer.

‘Look at that. What is it?’

‘What? That mark?’

‘Yeah, I haven’t seen that before.’

‘Oh that’s just a mark they make to indicate the tree needs cutting down.’ He sounded convincing, although she wasn’t sure. They walked on, more slowly now, talking nervously. To the third tree.

More ticks, just under her finger marks.

And the fourth. *All marked for felling?*

It didn’t seem like it.

Leila Chapter 17

Duke was sitting on his new deck, reading a bit, writing a bit. It was comfortably warm despite being early November, and he always had extra layers.

That morning he had looked in his so-called wardrobe, which was more like a single long rail suspended at either end by two loops of thick rope from the ceiling, and which was full of what he'd retrieved over the years from clothes banks and charity shops. He'd managed to pick three layers of cardigan which were not too damaged. The colours didn't match at all, but that didn't bother him. If he'd had a mirror, he might even have admired the green, beige and scarlet combination with some satisfaction.

Sitting out there, rocking gently with a huge mug of tea in his hand, he was surprised to hear voices in the distance. Although unusual, especially for that time in the morning, there was no need for him to get up or to worry. He knew the planning guy wouldn't be back for several weeks, and although he could hear walkers occasionally as they perhaps got slightly off their own beaten track, they rarely stumbled so far in that they came across his compound.

Today was different and even from a distance he knew that the invisible voices were young and were holding a conversation. The lilt and intonation of each voice was responding to that of the other. As they got closer, the two voices sounded excitable and nervous.

Rather than draw attention to himself, he got up and went inside. The few visitors who saw the shack often just had a quick peek and then left, often taken aback and alarmed if they actually caught sight of him.

The voices had seemed to fade, so he was surprised to hear a gentle knocking on the front door.

'Hello, are you there?' It was Leila's voice. 'Hello?'

'You've been kidding me, right? What a joke!' Another voice. One of those teenage voices recently emerged into adulthood. A tuneless song of highs and lows.

'No I told you. He's here somewhere. Sit down.' She pulled up the log and motioned to him to sit on the other one. Duke took a deep breath and shuffled out.

'Leila, what a wonderful surprise!'

The boy shuffled nervously backwards, almost losing control of his stool.

'Oh don't worry about me. I'm Duke,' he paused slightly and looked at Leila, 'pleased to meet you.'

He extended his hand, but the boy didn't budge. Leila leaned forward and thought about giving him a little hug, but then thought better of it.

'Good morning, my dear. Shouldn't you be in school? And please do introduce us.'

She ignored the question.

'Oh yeah sorry, this is Noah.'

Noah tried a smile but he had the kind of face that was really a permanent scowl, and if a smile were to break out it would be nearly invisible.

‘Oh yeah. Hi,’ scowled Noah uncertainly.

‘I wanted to show him where you lived.’

‘Is that true Leila?’

‘Er, not really. I wanted to prove to him that you exist. He thought you were just imaginary!’

Duke chuckled into his tea.

‘Noah is one of us,’ she said finally, ‘we’re both bunking off this morning.’

‘And I thought you just came to introduce me to your boyfriend!’

The moment the words were out, Duke regretted them. Teenagers could be touchy about such things. But he’d said it. Would a smile serve as an apology?

Noah’s scowl became even more deeply furrowed, if that was possible. Leila ignored the apologetic smile. Neither spoke.

‘One of us, you say?’

‘Yeah, Noah likes things to be done just right, see.’

‘Well, he won’t like all this then!’ He spread his hands to indicate the ramshackle mess of buildings behind him.

‘Actually I like building things,’ replied Noah matter-of-factly, ‘but they excluded me for that.’

‘You said you were making stuff out of Lego in a maths lesson. Not the right place. They’d told you not to.’

‘And I’d told them that I was going to. So I did.’

‘I was a teacher once,’ said Duke, ‘It’s not easy. You need to do as you’re told.’

Noah looked at him with contempt. Just like all the rest.

‘I do what I like,’ he said, getting up and stepping down off the deck, ‘C’mon, we’re off.’

‘Good to meet you Noah. I’ll see you again Leila.’

He knew he wouldn’t see Noah again.

Thank goodness.

They walked out together, waiting until they were just out of earshot.

‘I told you. Old man living in the forest. You were rude.’

‘I don’t like him. The way he looked at me. Creepy.’ Noah was definitely not going back.

‘Well, I think he’s alright. He makes me feel relaxed.’

‘You shouldn’t go there alone. Why would an old guy just hang out in the woods like that?’

‘He told me why. His wife died and he couldn’t face the house any more. He didn’t get along with his family, but he wanted to stay close. So he came back here. It’s simple.’

‘Fine then, you go back if you want. But be careful.’

‘OK. I will.’

She touched her five trees on the way out, the little tick marks pointing the way back.

Leila Chapter 18

‘But you seem to be the only one who really understands!’

Leila's voice was cracking as she spoke. She'd gone back that evening after a desperate day. In trouble for being out with Noah and being late for school, she'd got home to find her father on a phone call with the Head. When he'd tried to confront her about it she'd stormed upstairs, locked her door, and sat with her legs dangling out over the open window sill. As her father was getting into the car to go out, he'd threatened to call the police if she didn’t come down.

‘No-one else, not anyone, understands me.’

‘So what is it that you want me to understand exactly? Speak to me Leila.’

Duke’s voice sung like warm milk around the side of a bowl. Soothing and settling.

‘It’s just that I’m y’know, different. I don’t see things like other people.’

‘So how do you see things?’

‘I can’t say. I don’t know what other people see.’

She tried to settle, but the log-seat she was sitting on wobbled underneath her.

‘OK, so let’s play a little game,’ he said after a few seconds pause for calm.

‘I don’t even like games. Everyone likes games! But I don’t. Why not?’

Her confusion was making her physically shrink away from him.

‘Listen to me, my dear. We are going to play a little game. I am going to ask you to help me imagine something. Something I very much need to understand. I want you to tell me something from deep within you.’

‘Deep within? Imagination? What are you, some kind of shrink?’

‘Please don’t be rude Leila. I am trying my best to help you.’

‘Yes. Sorry.’

She didn’t say *sorry* very often.

‘Imagine that I have the power of x-ray. You know what an x-ray is?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘So I have the power of x-ray. I focus my x-rays on your head. I can see right inside your skull. I can see right inside your brain, right through to the centre of your mind. What do I see?’

He leaned back in astonishment and stared at her as she spoke. She started, very calmly, head bowed, as

if she really was reaching inside and helping him see what was going on.

‘Most of the time, nothing is organised. Nothing is ordered. Imagine a bookshop where all the shelves have collapsed. All the books have fallen on top of each other in random piles, and every piece of information inside every one of those books has got mixed up. Millions of bits of information, in thousands of books. And to get my mind to do anything, it has to fight to find the pieces of a puzzle amidst all that chaos. When the puzzle is together, I can function. When it is not, I cannot. And my response to that mess? I fight! I cannot order the information. All is confusion. And the noise! Those books crashing down on top of each other! A continuous low rumble that is always getting louder, always threatening to burst through. And when it does, CRASH! I blow. Like a volcano smashing through the surface of the earth. An unstoppable power. I feel the power, even though I know I have lost all control.’

‘So, when you are in class, for example. How do the crashing books happen there?’

‘It’s just the same, but it is like every book now has a voice. A high-pitched human whine. A million different tones, one attached to each of the falling books. Each emitting its whine as it falls, like fireworks splashing to the ground. The million whines are like an unbearable white noise. Earth-shattering.’

‘Can anyone else hear them?’

‘Of course not, they’re in my head.’

‘Can you hear the teacher?’

‘I can hear the calm ones.’

‘How is that possible? You’ve got that going on all the time, right? How can you hear anything else?’

‘The calm ones. I can hear them. I can hear their bodies.’

He sat up slowly, straight in his chair. He smoothed down the creases on the thighs of his trousers, and gently brought his hands to his knees. Head tilted.

‘You can hear their bodies?’

‘Yes. The calm ones show me respect with their body.’

‘So, like, body language.’

‘Yeah I guess so. Posture. Sympathy. The bad ones? They rage and roar round the room like human thunderstorms. The good ones? They move so easily, all I can think of is sunlight. I can tell they want to help me. You’re doing it now. Your posture is listening to me.’

‘My posture helps?’

‘Yeah. Look. You’re bent forwards just a little. Not too much, like an old person. Not too little, when you’d look hard and uncaring. Not too close. You care about me because you incline to listen. I like that. It cuts down the chaos. The books become more organised. Straightened out on the shelves. And

your hands.'

He looked down at his hands with a smile. Forest hands. Cutters of a thousand trees.

'Your hands are open. Facing me. You talk with them.'

It was true, he had an animated way of talking, his eyes and hands in gentle movement. She addressed that next.

'And your eyes. They are kind eyes. And calm ones.'

She looked at him momentarily, but then averted her own eyes.

'And all that reduces the mess inside?'

'Yes, it goes quieter. It's like my route through the forest carves a path through the mess. And when I get here, you're respectful to me. Good teachers do that. Calm ones. They cut through the noise.'

'I would love to have had you in my class! You're interesting. A class of thirty perfect, clever kids might seem like a dream, but really, how dull! Give me a feisty class any day!'

'I'm not feisty!' she said, somewhat feistily.

'No, but you are special!' he laughed. 'One of the special ones. I hope you'll come and visit again some day soon. I'm always here if you need anything.'

'So I can come here again?'

'Of course, my dear. I enjoy your visits. Come again. Soon. Leave Noah at school!'

His voice both cleared her way back through the forest, and told her that, at last, someone cared.

'Actually, I need the toilet.'

'Well you could go inside. I'll wait here. It's a bit basic, I'm afraid.'

He knew she would not have the courage, and indeed would see the good sense to not go inside the house. She'd not been in, and he didn't want her to. It was his private space, he was more than a little ashamed of it, and it would look and feel wrong.

'On the other hand, you could just have a wild wee on the way home.'

He said it with a calmness and a frankness that surprised her.

'A wha…what? Oh never mind.' She got up to leave. She'd barely ever been anywhere, and other people's toilets disgusted her. But the thought of peeing in the bushes was even more ridiculous and revolting to her. And probably dangerous. *Who knows what might be out there?* She certainly wasn't going to hang around to discuss it with him.

It was the early evening, and darkness fell quite quickly at this time of year, but that did not stop her

little tap on each fifth tree as she exited. She even did little decimal calculations, working out that she was 0.2 of the way between the groups of five trees that she'd determined from the way they lined the path. One fifth of this section.

She even knew how ridiculous it would sound to anyone, but she also realised how important it had become to her. Even the three little ticks on each trunk.

And on the fourth tree out of five, she dipped into the bushes, well out of sight.

A wild wee!

Her first ever.

She actually skipped a little on the way home, like she used to.

Leila Chapter 19

As November turned into December, Duke started making preparations. He had one final ruse left up his sleeve, but he was realistic. He probably could wangle another six months before they eventually won the day. They could actually tear places down couldn't they? With grapple hooks and bulldozers.

They had not visited again, but he knew they would. They would bring their clipboards and their pieces of paper, and no matter how much he objected, they would win eventually. And each winter seemed to get harsher. He was finding it more difficult to maintain the wood stocks he needed to keep the place warm. And he felt more alone each year.

Except when Leila came to visit.

Which she had not done for several weeks now.

He slumped in the scrappy armchair as the final log of the day burned down. He stared at the dying embers and wondered where she was. He hoped she hadn't forgotten about him.

He hoped she was alright.

Leila Chapter 20

Leila had not forgotten about him.

She'd got scared.

It went like this.

Stupid Noah!

He'd blabbed. They had been called in to see the Head. Even his name, Mr Joseph Walsingham, suggested something of how ineffective he could be. The school's approach to what they referred to privately as *challenging children* was a reflection of his own indecision.

'Maybe you've got something to tell us, Noah?'

The school knew Noah well, and were used to his stories, but he'd been telling anyone who would listen about his visit to the shack in the woods. The 'authorities' had got to know.

'So she's got this creepy old dude in the forest that she goes to visit when she bunks off school.'

Almost every word in that sentence was untrue, and Leila found herself standing up for her forest-man.

'Not true. He's not creepy, he's not old, and I don't skip school. He does.' She pointed at Noah.

'So you do go into the woods to meet someone? An adult?' Walsingham's safeguarding instincts were on fire.

'So what if I do. Anyway I don't. It's my time, I can go where I want. It's nothing to do with you. There's no-one there. Anyway, he's going.'

'Who is going? Going where?'

'It's got nothing to do with you. Leave me alone. Leave him alone.'

'You do realise that we'll have to report this, don't you Leila?'

She stood up from the low chair and turned to face him, her arms folded. He smiled uneasily from behind the safety of his desk.

'Right, explain why you're going to report me for something that I do in my spare time. Who do you think you are?'

'We'll make an emergency appointment with the counsellor for you Leila. And you'll be spending tomorrow in isolation. Insolence to an adult.'

Leila turned to leave. She could see Noah smirking behind his hand. She'd give him a good slap some time for that, although there was no way she was going into that school again tomorrow, just to be

isolated. She opened the door and slammed it shut as she left.

She felt like going straight to the woods to warn Duke about what stupidness they might report. But she had a little project on the go that she was determined to finish.

She was making him a Christmas present. It was taking much longer than she'd wanted, but she didn’t like to not finish things.

Sitting in her room at home, she worked furiously through most of the night.

Leila Chapter 21

Knitting.

She'd taken it up on the suggestion of one of the many *professionals* who visited her at school. A legion of these worthies came to visit, and watch, and report. They'd start by sitting in class: a lurking presence. *Observation* they called it. Leila knew they were watching her. Depending on her mood, she'd act normal - not saying much, paying attention to the teacher - after which the professional would leave, never to return.

Or more often, she'd act up: play the part. She would give it ten, perhaps fifteen minutes, then launch. She'd call out answers to the teacher's prompting, or interrupt the flow with her own quirky questions. Each time, the teacher would ask her to raise her hand before speaking. Each time, Leila just butted in. To irritate the teacher still further, most times her answers were right; her questions were pertinent.

No-one ever said she was stupid. The observer would soon scribble something in their notebook: *high-functioning*, that sort of thing.

When she was fed up with interrupting, Leila would start rocking in her chair, or tapping her pencil between the spaces in her fingers. To her it was just something rhythmic, calming. To everyone else it was just Leila, as per usual. To the teacher it was infuriating. To the observer it was *evidence*. More writing in the notebook.

None of the interventions came to much. The school got recommendations, most of which they already knew. Her dad got a report, most of which he ignored. Leila got nothing, apart from this one suggestion. *Take up a hobby to channel your energies*, they had said. Hobbies?

Not really my thing, hobbies. A bit of drawing perhaps? I already do that. Sport? No thanks. Stupid idea.

But they had given her a free knitting set - a pair of needles, several balls of different coloured wool, and some videos to watch. She'd watched them.

Over the next few weeks, Leila had obsessed over her knitting. She enjoyed the repetitiveness, and it had become a metaphor for what went on in her head.

Except she didn't do metaphors!

She sat on the floor of her room, enjoying the rhythmic click of the needles as they did their work.

When it went well, she was proud of the little creations she made. Knitted squares of coloured fabric to start with. Then something a bit more ambitious. She'd made herself a little hat, *kippah* style, which she'd taken to wearing around the house.

If she had got in trouble, or had fallen out with someone, she might knit to calm down, but it would be furious work, and inaccurate. Multiple balls of different coloured wool! Every time she looked down at what she was doing, the mess was more intertwined and more desperate, and every time she pulled at a strand to straighten it out, it seemed to grasp at another and they would knot themselves together, never

to be separated. The colours would all bleed into one another, her attempts uneven and desperate, and the results were unusable. She would almost always end up discarding these creations, often shedding tears of frustration at the hours of work. That was her head sometimes - multicoloured tangles of wool all fighting for space. The more they fought the more jumbled they became. The more she strove to marshal her thoughts, the more confused they were. The clusters of wool, like wires, all grating against each other, adding a frightful noise to the mix.

But on calmer days, when it went well, the knitting was measured in clear rectangles of perfectly joined fabric, where the single strands were barely visible, such was the fineness and elegance of the stitch.

On those days her thoughts, too, were clear. She felt positive and calm. She thought up amazing ideas for her drawings or craftwork. She could look forward. She could plan.

She'd planned to make the jumper in time for Christmas. She'd drawn out detailed diagrams herself on paper, and sketched the central feature - a mighty stag emerging from a snowy forest. It was the most ambitious thing she'd ever done, and the combination of colours - the whites and greens for the forest, and the brown shades of the animal - tested her new-found knitting skills.

But Leila was on a mission, and her missions were usually successful.

It was nearly three in the morning when she finished it.

Leila Chapter 22

She'd barely been out of the house for a month, and was immediately struck by how unforgiving the forest could be in late December. The ground did not yield beneath her feet and she could feel the icy footprints of others through the soles of her boots as she walked.

Each tree was covered in a fine layer of frost, and she regretted the fingerless woollen gloves she'd put on. She scraped away at the finger marks, and counted the ticks, making sure they were still there as she went from tree to tree. The jumper was in a small rucksack on her back. Although it wasn't quite as perfect as she'd wanted it to be, she knew he would understand.

Her feet crunched in the brittle iciness of the leaves and twigs as she stepped on them. It was the shortest day of the year, and the moon in front of her had not yet been replaced by the sun rising behind. She noticed how the straight path towards the shack was orientated almost perfectly with the moon, sitting in a deep orange morning sky, and the sun on the horizon as she turned and looked back. The smoke from the shack rose in a precise bisection of the two orbits. It gave her hope that today would be a good day. She was looking forward to his reaction.

'You know I'm in trouble, don't you Leila?'

He didn't greet her or look up as he busied himself with something on the table outside the front door.

'Hello. I've bought you a Christmas present. What are you doing? You making something?'

'Oh I'm not making anything, just getting a few things together in case I need to move out quickly.'

He hurriedly stuffed something into a small bag. It looked like a knife, although she didn't quite see it.

'Why do you need all that stuff?'

Arranged on the table were an odd collection of items. There were about ten aluminium cans, unlabelled but which she presumed to be food, another knife, some rope, a box of matches and some gaffer tape. There was a stout home-made walking stick.

'Sorry, Leila, now isn't really a good time.' He hadn't properly spoken to her and had ignored the prospect of a gift.

'Are you OK?'

He looked up. Leila thought she could see redness around his eyes.

'OK so now I'm worried about you. What's going on?'

'You. Are worried. About me?'

'Yes. What's wrong?'

He sat down on the terrace and she followed. He slumped down with his elbows on his knees.

‘Well, you know, I’m not really supposed to be here and I’m getting close to my last warning from the planning people and the police. I’ve tried to stave them off for too long and they are losing their patience.’

‘You have to leave? Where will you live?’ She glanced around at the home he'd built for himself.

‘Oh I don’t know. I’ll be OK.’ She instantly worried when he said this. It felt like he was putting on a brave face.

‘They have talked about ‘re-housing’ me. Can you see that happening?’

‘When was the last time you lived in a real house?’

‘Almost exactly ten years ago, just a few months after she died. They’ve said they might be able to offer me a flat or something. I just just can’t see myself living that way.’

Adults often said difficult things in ways which didn’t make them seem so bad. Leila heard differently.

‘So you can see yourself dying?’

He laughed.

‘It’s not funny. You’re going to die, alone in a pokey little apartment?’

‘No Leila, you don’t have to worry about me! I have plenty to live for. But I’m not going to no flat!’ He semi-gestured to what was around him, but it was unconvincing. Leila didn’t point out that the future was a bit uncertain for him.

‘So where will you go?’

‘I’ll probably head west, and rebuild out there.’ He tapped the bag at his feet and rested his hand on a notebook or sketch pad that was lying on the table. ‘I’ve packed enough for two, so that should keep me going for a while. It won’t be easy. Alone. Maybe I’ll try to contact my brother again.’ He looked up into the sky, his gaze suggesting the implausibility of that succeeding.

Leila thought that *heading west* and *out there* sounded like a long way away. From her.

‘So you’re just going to start again?’

‘Yes, why not? Find some land in a forest. Perhaps build something a bit bigger next time. Sell some charcoal each summer.’

‘You would rebuild everything?’

‘Sure, but to a better design. Anyway, it may never happen. I just want to be ready when it does.’

Leila Chapter 23

It was even colder the next day when she went back. She had hoped to find him in a better frame of mind. It was not like him to be down. He was wearing the jumper. It was shapeless on his bony form, but she was proud to see it. He shuffled into a little model-like twirl as she approached. She smiled.

‘You like it?’

‘I love it Leila. Thank you.’ They sat down.

‘I’ve brought you something else.’ She reached into the rucksack and pulled out two mince pies which she'd liberated from the kitchen at home. He accepted one from her, and they ate in silence.

‘Why are you doing this for me, Leila?’

‘Doing what?’

‘Bringing presents. And coming back.’

‘I like coming. It clears my mind.’

‘I’m not sure I’ll be clearing your mind just now Leila. I’m afraid mine is full of stuff at the moment.’

‘Maybe I can clear yours!’

He looked at the young woman sitting in front of him, and thought that yes, probably, in the right place and at the right time, she could. He checked the backpack was still to hand by the doorway.

‘So why did you come out here? Was it just because she died?’

‘Oh I didn’t come straight out here. When she died it felt like I had nothing to live for. A bit of a cliché I know, but I went to sea!’

‘A cliché?’

‘Yes. Something predictable. Something people do in a crisis.’

‘Well, I’m often in a crisis, and I don’t go out to sea!’

He laughed.

‘Er, OK Leila. Have you ever been to the beach and gazed out over the waves?’

She admitted that she had. The predictability of the swell and the swoosh of the breakers lent her a certain calm.

‘Well I just took it a step further. I needed to get away, and the long, boring journeys actually helped. Not the Navy, but what they used to call the Merchant Navy. Crewing on bulk carriers. I only did six

years, but I saw the world! Based out of Newhaven, just down that way.'

He waved his hand in the vague direction of the coast some ten miles to the south.

She looked at him and thought he looked a bit like a sailor. Rough, weathered skin. Big strong hands.

'Where did you go?'

'Well we had a regular route between England and Brazil. Recife was our main destination, picking up sugar and other crops, every couple of months. But I saw the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, lots of South America too. Interesting places. And I used to like the journeys. Endless water, nothing but sea.'

'So why did you stop?'

'I was only in it to get away. In the end it got too much. Too much travelling. No roots. And I missed England. I came back to chill out a bit and to settle. And to maybe see my daughter again.'

'So why did she leave?'

'Oh, it was my fault really. We just had a falling out. I objected too much to one of her boyfriends. Just didn't like him, But really that was her business. I should have left it at that.'

'Well then, it wasn't really your fault, was it? I mean, if your daughter did something wrong, then you were right to speak about it. If her own father was not able to speak about it, then who would? I'm sure you had your reasons.'

He marvelled at the girl's logic and calm.

'I knew he was cheating on her. I could tell. He was that sort. She didn't believe me of course, until it was too late. She got hurt. She always had her issues. Problems at school. You know, found it hard to make friendships, that sort of thing. I often had to go and pick her up early.'

He looked into the far distance, down the track where the winter sun was rising.

'Neither of us really got over her mother dying, I guess. They'd call it 'mental health' nowadays, but in those days they would say you had 'flipped' or 'had a breakdown'. That's what happened. I just couldn't cope, losing the two of them like that.'

'She sounds just like me!' laughed Leila.

'Well she was like you in many ways. You remind me of her.'

'I feel sorry for her! Where did she go?'

'I think she ended up in Australia. As far as I know that's where she still is. I've tried to make contact, but she's never responded. She was always the kind of person who made up her mind about things and stuck to it. Difficult to convince otherwise. The baby didn't help.'

'She had a baby?'

‘Yes, she had a daughter, but she found that hard too. She was not a natural mother. Too busy worrying about herself. You would have thought that having a baby would focus her mind. Concentrate on something small and vulnerable. She did, for a while, but then like everything else, she just sort of lost interest.’

‘She left the baby?’

‘Yes, that’s right. A toddler by then, but she left it all the same, while she flew half way round the world. That deepened it for me. She'd gone too far and I could not forgive her.’

He was talking slower now. More deliberately. He seemed to be choosing his words very carefully as if there was more he wanted to say but he could not. The whole story obviously continued to upset him, but he also showed a hardness that she'd not anticipated. There was clearly more there, but she decided not to press him now. *Another time.*

‘I still don’t get why you left a perfectly good house and came out here.’

‘Memories Leila. Mostly. Of a wife and a daughter. Both gone. I felt as lonely as I had ever felt when I came to the realisation that I would never see either of them again. I would wander around the house, looking at the made-up beds. I would ruffle them gently so that next time when I peeped in that room it would look as if someone had slept there. I made cups of tea for both, or all, of us. A cup for me, and then one or two for the rest of the family. I kept their clothes. I’ve still got some of them. But I would wash the clothes once a week, as if they had been wearing them. Would you like to see them, maybe you would look good in them?’

‘Sorry that sounds weird.’ He missed the point.

‘It was. I slowly became convinced that I was going mad. I knew I had to get out of that place.’

‘Did you see a doctor?’

‘A shrink? No! My family didn’t believe in doctors. We went if we were dying, and then only if it was a real emergency! No, we were brought up just to make the best of it. Get on with life. Look forward. So that’s what I did. I decided that sitting there in that house, surrounded by ghosts and memories, would drive me crazy. So I sold it and left. Ended up here.’

‘I love it here!’ said Leila.

‘So do I, my dear, so do I. And as they say, time heals. Most of that pain has gone. Memories yes, but the pain has gradually been soothed and absorbed into the forest, in the same way that the trees take in carbon dioxide. Living here has sucked the pain away, and allowed me to look forward. To establish my little house, and my little business. And to meet people like you.’

‘Do you meet many people like me then?’

He laughed his big strong chuckle. His spirit was returning.

‘Oh no! I’ve never met anyone quite like you! Maybe one other that I can remember. But I don’t meet many people. I speak if I’m spoken to, but I can go days and even weeks without speaking to a soul. I occasionally see someone in the far distance, but I don’t need to talk to them, and if they see me,

they tend not to linger.’

They sat in silence for a while. Leila tried to digest what he'd said.

‘So you don’t meet anyone? You don’t have any friends?’

‘Not really. There was someone once. A couple of years ago now. She used to bring her dog.’ He smiled as he spoke. ‘We’d sit right here, although I hadn’t built the porch then.’

‘So what happened to her?’

‘Oh, well, she just stopped coming really. I’m not exactly the most interesting company! I did think she might’ve been the one who got onto the Planning Department. She was a bit intense, to be honest.’

‘Intense?’

‘Yeah, she'd worked as a psychic, or psychologist, or astrologist or something! I never did know the difference. She had these staring blue eyes! She made me do this thing called the *four-minute stare*. God knows, something she'd read in a magazine I guess. But it was odd. I never mentioned anything to her, but I thought I saw something, something not quite right.’

‘I don’t really know what you’re talking about!’

‘The stare. We did it. For the life of me, I can’t describe what I saw. It was a moment, a fleeting moment, barely even that. But it wasn’t right. Something of the night, if that is not too corny. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t believe in all that stuff, but I could see something, something that wasn’t for me, probably not for most people.’

‘Ooer, all that from just staring at someone?’

‘Yes, you wanna try it?’ Duke was smiling.

‘Definitely not! No thanks!’ she giggled, ‘When are the planners coming back?’

‘I’m never sure. But I have a little idea in place to deal with them this time.’ He reached down to touch the bag again.

‘I wish I could help you.’

‘Well maybe you can, Leila. Maybe you can. But I think you should get home now. Thank you for coming. And thanks for the pie!’

With that she got up and left, the freezing breeze flapping the sleeves of her coat.

Leila Chapter 24

Duke regretted their last meeting.

Kids like her. It needs to be about them. Not about me. Why did I tell her that stuff? She's not interested, and anyway I'm not proud of what I did. I lost too much. Almost everything. A least I have her. And she needs me. Mustn't lose her. Not yet.

He regretted letting slip details of his past and his family, but it had come naturally. And she had seemed to relish it. She was a good listener, and a good talker.

She's perfect for the next part of the plan.

As he sat now and thought about it, the January chill assaulting him from behind as his face and torso lapped up the heat from the fire, he thought back to some of the troubled families he'd had to deal with in the distant past, and how vulnerable single people like himself could be in these situations, with little or no support, and the perception that they were the easiest to move on and re-house. It was always the families that got looked after first, especially those with several children living in a house that was too small or otherwise unsuitable.

But if his suspicion was right that they would show him little sympathy or mercy as a single, older person, he would doubtless end up being allocated to some hostel or dingy bedsit. He really could not imagine anything worse. The smaller the house, the smaller the room, the smaller the bed. Almost a coffin. Which might be preferable.

He reached outside the door and grabbed another log, glancing down the long lane of trees as he did so. The fire pitched back into its life-affirming glory.

He thought about how he could wangle himself yet another delay. Sometimes these things dragged on for years, and in a few cases actually went away altogether. He remembered the case of a farmer who had secretly built a mansion behind a giant-sized haystack, which shielded the evidence of any construction until it was complete. After years of legal wrangling, it had been allowed to stay.

He'd looked into the possibility that the land was so-called 'common land' and that as a commoner he had some claim to it. He'd even made it to Mrs Dunsmore at the local library and she'd helped him to try to find out its legal status. It was indeed defined as a community resource. But that didn't mean that anyone could just build on it, in fact the rules and regulations seemed to be even more strict. He rather hoped that he would be able to find a distant relative who had once owned the estate which she'd donated to the community, or that he would be able to make up such a story. He'd considered trying it on the planning officer, but had then thought that such a great idea would anyway be wasted on the petty bureaucrat.

No.

What he needed, for a few more months of grace, was a family.

Just then there was a knock at the door.

It was Leila.

Leila Chapter 25

She was crying. He'd never seen her cry before.

‘Oh my goodness! What’s up? Are you alright?’

‘I’m OK. Another bad day. I always struggle at that place. I wish you could be there.’

‘Too old, Leila! That was a long time ago. I couldn’t do it now.’

‘Well, you’re only as old as you feel, I guess.’

‘That’s another cliché, my dear!’ he said, with a smile, ‘Where did you get that from?’

She laughed nervously, and rocked back on her stool, banging her head on the shelf behind her.

‘Ow! My dad always says things like that. I remember it. I can’t remember the longer stuff, like maths or literacy, but I like the little things.’

‘Is your head OK?’

He reached over as if to touch the wound, and then thought better of it. She inclined her head a little towards him. She rubbed the spot vigorously and examined her hand.

‘Do you mind taking a look?’

‘Yeah sure. I can do that.’

He gently parted her hair where the shelf had made contact and peered at her scalp. He gave it a little rub with his first and second fingers and could feel a slight bump. She squeaked a little as he caressed it, but then he rubbed at the sides of the wound, soothing it, and straightened her hair. She felt as if someone cared.

‘Sorry, that’s sore. But you’ll live!’ he said jauntily as he sat back down, ‘nothing much to see!’

She thanked him and did a little self-conscious straightening of her hair herself. She felt her cheeks redden with the pain and perhaps a bit of embarrassment. But she felt better.

‘Sorry but I had another bad day today. Ended up in the PRU.’

‘The PRU?’

‘Yeah, everyone calls it the Prison Unit. It stands for the Pupil Referral Unit. It is where the bad kids like me end up. Rows of little desks with high sides so you can’t see anyone. I’ve been there loads of times. Sitting in silence.'

Leila paused for a moment. Silence. Then her frustration got the better of her.

‘But it’s so unfair! I didn’t do anything!’

His sympathy tone smiled back at her.

‘Well, you didn’t end up there for nothing Leila, did you?’

‘I only called her a cow.’

Now the smile was in Leila’s voice as she turned her head down and away from his gaze. She knew it wasn’t funny and she was kind of embarrassed, although telling it to someone else actually made her smile. And guess what?

He grinned back.

‘Oh Leila. No wonder they referred you. Just one day, or are you back in there tomorrow?’

‘No I’ll be in for something else tomorrow. It’s just not fair. She is one of those ones who think we should all sit perfectly still for an hour, while she drones on about adjectives and adverbs. It’s just not going to happen. I wanted to go out and hang out with Evie and Lil, but when I started to talk to them about what we could do, she had this massive hissy fit and said that I should be more focused. That I should think about words ending in -ly because they are usually adverbs. When she asked me to think of two adverbs I came up with ‘horribly’ and ‘badly’ and when she told me to put those in a sentence, I wrote something like, ‘The teacher smells horribly and teaches us badly.’ Or something like that.’

‘My dear!’

Her heart began to soar again.

‘My dear, that is inspired! And the thing is, you have used two adverbs perfectly - exactly as she asked for! That is hilarious.’

‘Well it wasn’t really. I refused to leave the room when she sent me out so she dispatched someone to fetch the Head and I was hauled out. The others were still smiling as I left, but it was humiliating, and I really hate it when they touch me.’

‘They pulled you out physically?’

‘Yes.’

He paused for thought for a moment. She realised he considered that wrong.

‘If I’m having a bad one, they grab me and take me to this special room near the PRU. Usually two of them. I try to stop them, but they hold me so tight.’

‘Would you go with them if they didn’t take you?’

‘Yes I would. I always know if I have done something wrong, and I usually apologise. But it takes time. If you grab me when I’m super-high it will only make matters worse. Those noises in my head become deafening. I am accountable to no-one for my actions, least of all myself. Give me a bit of time and I’ll follow you to your stupid unit, but if you try to take me, I’m gonna resist. I bit one of them

once.’

‘Woah! Biting is taking it a bit far Leila.’

‘You’re right. I was suspended for that one. Probably fair enough.’

His next question caught her off-guard.

‘Do you think you’re a bad person Leila?’

Her response surprised him in turn.

‘Actually, I think I’m great. It’s like I have these superpowers that sometimes become so strong that I just cannot control them. But I wouldn’t want not to have them! I can see things that other people can’t see. I can focus on things for hours where others get bored. And I can hear things - sounds and pitches. No-one else knows what they are. Like your little *E-minor* thing! It’s part of me and it drives me to do things. Even like coming here. I wouldn’t be here if I was normal.’

‘You are perfectly normal Leila. Just a bit special. And people need to realise that. Even celebrate it.’

‘Ha! They wouldn’t celebrate me! They even cancelled my birthday once.’

‘Cancelled it?’

‘Well it was my fault actually! The teacher was someone I really liked. She'd iced a little cake for me, but I didn’t like the colour. I threw it on the ground. I know it was wrong. But then they wouldn’t sing for me or anything. I hated her after that.’

She smiled at the memory, then frowned at the shame of it.

Leila Chapter 26

‘You know I was a teacher once? Did I tell you that? I taught maths and a few other subjects as well. To kids about your age. I used to love it, but it became tiring, and I felt I was running out of inspiration. To inspire children like you required loads of ideas, lots of experience, piles of energy. I kind of ran out.’

‘I’d have liked you as a teacher,’ she smiled, as she thought back to some of the teachers she'd suffered in the past, ‘you’d have been kind to me, and cool. You understand me.’

She stressed the word *understand* and inclined her head slightly as she said it. If she'd been any closer to him her head would've drooped onto his shoulder. Instead she jerked herself upright, almost as if she had fallen briefly asleep. His gentle voice woke her.

‘Thank you, Leila. That means a lot. For me it went like this.’

She could tell a story was coming. She settled on to her log-stool, and leaned back against the dusty timber sheeting that made a rudimentary wall behind her.

‘When I started training, I was told it was all very straightforward! And I believed them. Everything was simple. Children sat in rows, their eyes fixed on the teacher or the whiteboard. In my day it was a blackboard, with chalk! They all listened to what the teacher was saying, and they all did as they were told.’

Leila smiled. That didn’t sound like her classroom.

‘And in my day, if that didn’t happen, there would be trouble. And it would usually hurt.’

‘Hurt?’

‘Yes. In those days teachers could hit and hurt children. And they did it, quite regularly. And often the most troubled children got hurt the most.’

Leila had read and heard that this used to happen, but it was unsettling hearing it from someone who might have been through it. She shuddered slightly at the thought of any stranger hitting her, even though her Dad sometimes had. When he lost control. Or when something else was bothering him.

‘Because of that, when I started I had expectations of how the young people would behave in class, and how the class would be organised. But after a few weeks in the classroom, I realised it wasn’t like that any more. When I was your age, the running of schools seemed to be based on a series of threats. The threat of being hurt hung over you like a dark and ever-present cloud. You spent your childhood in fear of authority. School was scary.’

His face painted a picture of worry, as if he were looking down on himself as a youngster. The lines around the eyes seemed deeper, the furrows in the brow were more pronounced, and the mouth was downturned.

‘It was difficult to learn like that. Children are children, they get things wrong all the time. That is the

whole process of learning. Taking risks and making mistakes is part of becoming properly educated. It should be celebrated not punished.'

'What? You're saying I should celebrate all my mistakes?'

'Yes!' He almost shouted it. 'Making mistakes is all part of growing up! Look at me! I am still learning. I make mistakes all the time, but I try to learn from them each time too. Life's for learning. If you're not learning, you're not living!'

She couldn't really figure out what he was saying. He continued.

'So when I started I had the kids in rows and I yelled at them if they talked and made them face the front if they turned round.'

'I can't imagine you yelling at anyone,' she said quietly. His response was equally quiet.

'Within a few weeks I realised it didn't work. They looked worried all the time! We turned the room round, so children could still see me, but could see each other too, and not just their classmates' backs. We encouraged them to talk to each other. Not all the time, but we started to let them chat about their weekends, their football matches, their families. And we found, surprise surprise, that when we wanted them to focus and learn, they did. Much better.'

Leila tried to imagine a world where adults would leave her free to talk about her painting and her craft work and her gymnastics with her friends. Again she would have liked to have him as her teacher.

'When I met young people like you Leila, I had to work a bit harder. And I don't mean on maths and literacy, even though I know you know that that is important. Oh wow, listen to me! I've gone on long enough! You get the idea?'

'What do you mean when you say *people like me*?'

He smiled.

'Special people Leila. Every child is special of course, but when I look at you, and everything I know about you, I know that you deserve special attention and special treatment, especially if you are struggling.'

He could say this without sounding condescending or odd. She knew what he meant. She knew herself that she struggled through life. She knew that made her special. She also knew that most adults found treating her as some kind of special case almost impossible. She wished again that he could have been her teacher.

'I struggled today.'

'I know, I'm listening.'

The voice rippled gently, like the ocean.

Leila Chapter 27

‘You know that woman who used to come here? Were you two, y’know…?’

‘Oh no! Nothing like that! Like I said, being stuck out here in the middle of nowhere doesn’t make me the ideal catch. There aren’t many people on the lookout for a washed up old hermit making charcoal! And there was something about her that didn’t quite work for me.’

‘What the challenge thing?’

‘Well that was a part of it, I think we both got a bit freaked out. Still, it was fun while it lasted.’

‘What? The challenge was fun? You said you saw stuff you didn’t want to see.’

He smiled.

‘Of course, I didn’t really see anything. But they say you can tell everything about someone by looking into their eyes. Windows on the soul, they say. Maybe that’s what I saw.’

Leila squirmed slightly on her seat, as if making to leave, but she didn’t get up. *He’s going to suggest we do it, I know he is.* Part of her felt that he was going to try to cross a path that should not be crossed. Most of her did not like eye contact. But part of her was intrigued.

He took pleasure in the silence, safe in the knowledge that she would speak next.

‘You wouldn’t see much in me! If we did it, how would I know when four minutes is up?’

‘You won’t need to!’

‘How come?’

‘You won’t make it past twenty seconds!’

He laughed, but he knew he had laid down a challenge she would not be able to resist. He motioned to the stool again. She shuffled it closer.

‘So what do we do? You got a timer?’

‘Yes, I’ll keep the time.’ He didn’t actually have anything with which to keep the time. He bowed his head in front of hers. ‘Come on then, get ready.’

Leila thought of comfort zones, and where hers usually lay. *I can do this! I’ll show him. I’ll think of something else. It’s only four minutes!* She sat, slightly stooped, on the stool and stared at the ground.

‘After three then? One….two….three!’

‘I can’t do it!’ She continued staring at the ground.

‘Let’s try again. One, two, three!’

This time Leila looked up. His dark eyes were staring straight at her. She tried not to blink as she stared at his face. Even then she was trying to avoid the eyes, even though she was looking straight at them. She managed to count to fifteen.

‘I can’t do that! It’s horrible!’ She rubbed her eyes and looked anywhere but at him.

‘Told you it was hard!’ he laughed, ‘you managed about sixteen seconds. Let’s try again another time.’

‘No way! That was chilling, man!’

She almost ran as she left him laughing quietly to himself. He called after her.

‘I really need to ask you a favour Leila. I wonder if you can help me?’

But she was gone.

His words barely reached her, mangled by the frosty wind and the swaying forest.

Leila Chapter C

Leila is very specific about her teachers isn't she?

She knows what she likes, and she definitely knows what she doesn't like.

She seems to be the sort of person who reacts very well to some and not so well to others. When she describes the troubles she has at school, she seems to suggest that it is partly to do with the people running the classes. Are you like that? Do you work well with everyone?

If you do, well done.

But if you say you do, I'm not so sure I believe you!

I mean, we all respond differently to the various people who pass through our lives, and we're not going to react in the same way to all of them.

Think of the people who teach you. Be careful, because if you are reading this in school, you may be close to some of them. Look around you, and perhaps cover this page with your hand or whistle an innocent tune as you read. No-one will suspect anything!

Be careful of the spying kind!

These teachers are probably looking over your shoulder right now, checking on what you are reading. They are always there, with an evil little glint in their beady eye, making sure you are *doing the right thing*. Making sure you are *on task* as they call it. They are the kind of teacher who will spend longer checking up on you than checking that what they are teaching you is at all interesting. They bore you close to tears droning on at the front of the classroom, and then wonder why you are twanging your ruler or trying to read this book from safely under the table! Well, of course you've got to do *something* just to stay awake. Just don't get up out of your seat - they will come down on you *like a ton of bricks!*

That is such a dated simile! A ton of bricks? There are loads of crazy old sayings like that! The teacher might *bite your ear off* for something! Or give you a *hard time.*

Leila doesn't do similes.

She also has a problem with the over-prepared ones. Over-prepared? How is that possible? Preparation is good! But this is the teacher who has five Powerpoint presentations on the go, and fifteen beautifully trimmed worksheets, all for just one short lesson on prepositions. It's all too much!

Come on teacher, it's your job! Tell me what a preposition is, give me a couple of examples, and then let me get on with it. I'll show you what I know.

Leila can't deal with fifteen worksheets.

I always used to secretly think that the over-prepared teacher was actually preparing the lesson for themselves! Why else would they have all that stuff on their computer? Maybe they didn't actually know what a preposition was themselves? Surely that is not possible?

You'd be surprised.

Then you have the hard nut. The disciplinarian. The one who thinks they've got *behaviour management* sorted out. In the old days they were the ones who stalked the corridors in their black capes and hats, scaring the wits out of young children. The modern version is no less scary, and everyone sits there wondering who is next in line for a public humiliation or a lecture. No-one can learn anything if they're scared. And what kind of person wants to scare young children?

Quite a few actually.

Leila's response to the hard nuts is to fight. That is not good.

Last but not least, the comedian.

I remember Mr Croker at our all-boys school. He thought he was down with the kids, with his braces and his *Simpsons* tie. He tried to teach us English Literature, and would giggle at all the bawdy references in The Canterbury Tales. He would tell us unfunny jokes, and squawk like a frog in imitation of his own surname. And, without fail, if you did something good, he would exclaim, 'Excrement! Well done!' We laughed the first time maybe, but only that once. And every time he left the room he used to say, 'Goodbye! All the breast!' As if that was funny? Not even the first time.

No, no and no.

They might have a great sense of humour. That is good. But a laugh-a-minute one-liner merchant? I don't think so. They belong on the stage.

Not in your school.

Leila doesn't laugh at the comedians.

What we do know is that she has an image of a favourite teacher, and she is starting to think Duke would have been it. She seems to think that she would learn from him.

Learning that would come from cooperation, from compassion.

Let's hope they can continue their strange little partnership.

And learn from each other.

Leila Chapter 28

Leila had spent the last two Saturday afternoons out in the park with a group from school. Because they had little or no money, the shops were out of the question, so the park was the main option, even though most of the time it was bursting with younger kids. By six pm the little ones had gone and they tended to have the place to themselves. Occasionally they got tutted at by one of the departing parents, but generally they were left alone.

On the second Saturday the group had grown to six, with her friends Evie and Lil, and a couple of boys she didn't recognise. She noticed that the girls seemed to have got dressed up - more than you normally would for hanging out in the park. The taller of the two introduced himself to Leila.

'Er, hello. It's nice to see you here. Isn't it?'

It was the lamest of lame chat-up lines.

'What?'

'Well I just meant that, er, you're Leila aren't you?'

'Of course I'm Leila. You know that. You sit behind me in almost every lesson.'

'Yes. That's right. I'm Dan.

'I know that. You sit behind me in almost every lesson.'

Leila wasn't making it easy for Dan, who had just turned fifteen.

'Do you prefer the swings or the ropes? I like the swings. Relaxing, y'know.'

'No, I don't really know. What do you mean?'

'Well, it's just that, y'know, I wondered if you, er, like films and stuff?'

'Yeah I've watched films.'

Dan cleared his throat. Quite a few times. He shuffled from foot to foot.

'Oh right, see, I just was thinking that you might, er, want to go to the cinema some time? You know. Er. With me.'

'No thank you, I wouldn't,' she replied. She was aware of her face reddening slightly, 'and I've seen that film already.' She didn't look up once.

Dan shuffled around a bit on the bench they were sitting on. He hadn't mentioned any specific movie. He was tall, so he had to unfold himself a little and walk away towards the others. Leila was left sitting alone.

What a creep! What did he want? Why did he ask me those questions? Why would I want to go anywhere with him? Who is he anyway? Oh yeah, that boy who sits behind me. So what? Was he the

one I used to think was cute?

Her mind was racing as she arrived home, just before nightfall. Lil and Evie had walked the other way, with Dan and his friend.

Leila lay back on her bed and didn't give Dan a second thought.

She just thought about Duke.

Whenever she did, her mind took on an extraordinary clarity. Straight lines. The road ahead.

She crossed her feet to get comfortable and settled her body into the softness of the mattress, arms across her chest. She watched as a graceful spider tiptoed its way across the ceiling. She closed her eyes and tried to bring him into focus. Why did she keep going back?

She ran through some of the last few weeks in her mind.

But her mind kept coming back to that voice!

It feels wrong, and yet it feels so right. He's the only one who listens to me. The only one who seems to understand what goes on in my head. But I shouldn't be bothering him. He wants to be alone. That's why he lives there. Why would he want me going back there all the time? Yet he seems to like seeing me. Is he weird? Is he dangerous even? He's like a stranger, but one who feels so familiar. Did he say he had a plan or something? Did he say he needed my help?

Leila rolled off the bed and took the two steps she needed to reach the window. It was not a large room. Her eyes roved over the garden to the forest beyond.

The smoke was rising.

It had been a while.

Time for another visit.

Leila Chapter 29

It was deep February before Duke had finalised his plan. Leila had visited just a couple of times since New Year. Seemed, from what she said, that things were going better at school.

He missed seeing her. Did she only visit when things in class were bad? He needed her. Time was running out.

He stared out into the forest, marvelling at the seasons unfolding once again. Snowdrops carpeted the clearings in plucky little miracles of nature. The early-blossoming trees were starting to bud, and it lent the forest a sense of action, of renewal. It would soon be time for him to start coppicing, piling up the logs, stacking them into their piles, and building the new kilns for the summer season.

If he had time.

He was delighted to see a little figure jogging across the path, touching the trees in her very specific order.

‘Didn’t you say you wanted to ask me a favour?’

‘Good morning. I’m amazed you remember that, Leila!’

‘I remember everything.’ She emphasised the word *everything*.

‘Why didn’t you mention it last time?’

‘Well, it is a little delicate, really. And you weren’t in the best of moods. I had to work hard that day!’ He said it happily, although it had been a very one-sided visit. He'd just had to listen. There was no time for his problems that day.

‘Oh yeah, I remember,’ she said as she sat down.

Today she was full of beans. Not literally.

‘Can we try the four-minute challenge again?’ she laughed, ‘I’ve been practising!’

‘Practising! That’s not fair! Who have you been practising with?’

Part of him hoped she'd made a new friend, although he was not surprised, or disappointed, at her response.

‘Oh just me! In the mirror. We’re pretty good at it!’ She laughed happily.

OK, let’s do it. If you can do four minutes, then you can walk away. If you can’t, then you have to help me. Deal?’

‘Help you with what?’

‘You’ll find out. Let’s play!’

Leila took off her jacket and sat down. It was cold but the air was dry. She needed to concentrate.

‘They say it gets easier!’

‘I just want to do better than sixteen seconds!’

‘Yes, that’s all you managed last time!’

‘OK I’m aiming for a minute.’

‘Let’s do it!’ They both pulled their logs a little closer and sat back down.

This time, she tried to focus properly on his eyes. She found herself trying to concentrate on the skin surrounding them. The deeply ingrained lines either side - the crow’s feet and the life lines. The different shades of brown surrounding them - creases enhanced by stress and worry, baked in by the outside world he'd lived in, and the sun he worked under.

She tried to look directly into the pupils. They were jet black, and the irises which enveloped them were of the darkest brown. The irises seemed unnaturally large, and if she looked hard enough she could see the shadows of the woods reflected against the near-black surface. She saw him flinch slightly, but he remained resolute.

She managed about thirty seconds, powered by her determination to succeed in the attempt, but was soon overcome by what she imagined lay behind the eyes. She thought of his wife, his daughter, the baby. Perhaps the eyes really did reveal something about someone. She started to panic when she realised what she thought she could see reflected there. She looked away and stood up.

‘Sorry!’ she squealed, rubbing her own eyes, ‘how long was that?’

‘You did well. That was just over a minute!’

‘How come you didn’t flinch? Why was it me?’

‘I don’t know, I’m just looking. I’m used to just looking. Do it for hours out here. Practice, that’s what I have. Oh, and I guess I won.’

‘As usual, I don’t know what you’re talking about!’ She laughed. He laughed too, a little nervously. She was secretly proud that she'd got beyond a minute. A crow squawked from a nearby tree, then took flight in pursuit of some unseen prey. He took a deep breath.

‘So I’ve got this plan to win us a little more time, you see. I definitely can’t move out before the summer. I need your help.’

‘Sure, I can help.’

‘Well it’s a bit delicate, Leila.’

‘What do you mean *delicate*?’

‘I mean it is something that is difficult to talk about.’

She started to sense a rare unease about him, which quickly transferred to her. She shifted slightly on her stool, wondering whether this was going to turn difficult. She hoped not.

‘Well go ahead. Tell me. What do I need to do?’

‘Leila, this is very difficult for me to discuss with you, and I don’t know if you would understand. But I think I would be able to stay here longer if I have dependent family members.’

‘What does that mean? You said you have no family.’

‘The key word is ‘dependent’. It means people who depend on you.’

Leila quickly saw the way that this was going.

‘You wouldn’t have to do anything Leila. It would be easy. I would just have to pretend, for a while, that you were related to me. I might have to fill in a form or something. You might need to meet the official people, you know, just to prove…’

She was already up off her seat.

‘What I need you to do is pretend you are my…’

She was already half-way gone.

‘No way! I’m not pretending anything!’ she yelled back down the path.

Running.

She didn’t even touch the trees on the way out.

Duke sat slumped on his chair, head in hands, watching her slip away through his fingers.

He’d blown it.

Leila Chapter 30

She stopped running as she reached the fence and the path which led back to the garden gate.

She knew that she'd done the right thing. Run away. She could not believe what he had just suggested. Her heart was racing, her breath came in gulps, her thoughts were all over the place. She put both hands on to a fence post and leaned against it, her hair drooping either side and obscuring her face.

He'd crossed a line. He wasn't as cool as she had judged him to be. He was desperate.

'Are you OK, love?'

She jumped back to see two people getting out of a nondescript car, and opening the gate through the fence a few metres away from her. One was a uniformed police officer. The other was Kevin Walker, bold now with a new clipboard and a large brown envelope. Leila dropped her head, gulping in air.

'I'm fine. Just out of breath.'

The policewoman came a little closer.

'Please, leave me alone!'

The constable stopped and straightened her belt and stab vest before speaking.

'It's OK. What's happened here? Can we help?'

Leila calmed a little.

'It's OK. I'm fine. My house is just over there.'

'May I ask where you've been, love?' Her Lancastrian accent came out strong on the word *love*.

'Not really. I've been down the shack, haven't I? But I ran away.'

The WPC looked at Walker. 'I don't like the sound of this. Let's go.' Turning to Leila, she said, 'Don't worry, you're safe now, we're on the case. Please go home now, miss.'

Leila didn't move. She watched through her hair as they set off into the forest, the policewoman half-jogging despite all the kit clipped on to her, and Walker in pursuit.

She knew who they were.

She hoped they would kick him out for good this time.

Him and his stupid plans.

Leila Chapter 31

Duke smiled warmly as the planning officer strode up the path. Walker looked a foot taller than before, his confidence boosted by the presence of the policewoman to his side. A brown envelope nestled in his hand, silently ominous. Duke invited them inside, but this time the offer of tea was brusquely turned down. The little man raised himself to his full five foot four, and came straight to the point.

‘Mr Marmaduke Porter, this is a court order for you to have this structure, located at 51°41'48.7" North, 1°29'22.9" West, removed from this Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, within 90 days. This procedure must be carried out at your own expense, and should include the restitution of the land to its former natural state. Good day to you.’

Seemingly even taller as he completed his little speech, he handed Duke the envelope and turned smartly to leave. Duke took the unopened document and placed it at the centre of the fire which was roaring in the hearth. It went up just nicely, curling and twisting in the flames before flying up the chimney and out into the wild forest beyond.

‘We will come and check that the procedures are being carried out to our satisfaction, Sir.’

Duke stooped forward slightly to read the woman’s name badge.

WPC C. Martin? I wonder what the C stands for? She looks like a Catherine, or a Cathy. Uniform’s like new. She hasn’t been doing this for long.

‘You can’t do this.’ Walker turned round in the doorway as Duke spoke. Lines he'd rehearsed for several weeks.

‘We can, Sir, and we will.’

Emboldened by the months of paperwork that had led to this moment, Walker turned and looked up at WPC Martin, ‘We will, won’t we?’ The young constable was on one of her first serious jobs. She turned away, fiddling with the buttons on her radio.

‘I know my rights.’ Duke didn’t, but he sounded like he did, ‘It’s my granddaughter you see. She needs constant care. Round the clock. You can’t just take away her home. The only home she has ever known.’

Duke stood leaning with both arms outstretched against the door frame. His little speech had come out just right. Worth all the rehearsals in his mind. It was enough to stop Walker. He studied his clipboard.

‘It doesn’t say anything about a granddaughter here.’

‘Paperwork, eh? It’s never quite what it seems is it?’ There was a jauntiness in his voice now.

‘You say that your granddaughter lives with you here?’

‘That’s right, little Allie.’ He hadn’t prepared a name. It just slipped out naturally.

‘Little Allie? Is that her name?’

‘Yes, that’s right. Allie.’

‘Well can I meet her please? I need to talk to her. This paperwork will need amending.’

Duke could already feel the plan starting to work.

‘Er, I’m sorry, she’s not here right now. She’ll be back later.’

‘I thought you said she depended on you, and needed constant care?’

He had to think on his feet.

‘Well, she can just about manage a few steps into the forest, and she does like to take a walk at this time of the day. Thank you for your visit. I’ll tell her you called. Good day.’

‘May I take a walk around the property to search for her?’

‘You may not. Goodbye.’

He knew his rights well enough to know that searching any property without a warrant, signed by a magistrate, was not legal. Even an illegal shack. The man had no rights to snoop about.

‘You won’t mind if we wait for her to return, then?’

He hadn’t anticipated this one, and was lost for words. The plan might unravel.

‘You do realise, Sir, that it’s an offence to lie to the police? If what you are telling us is untrue, I could have you arrested.’

The WPC sounded serious.

‘I know lying is wrong.’ Duke tried to maintain his confidence, despite the plan feeling a little shaky at that moment.

‘Please, sir, just follow the instructions you have been given.’

Walker and his minder strode out of the house and set off back down the path, looking left and right as they walked.

Leila Chapter 32

Leila had not left the woods like they had told her.

She wasn't good at following instructions.

Who are they to tell me to go home? I can stay here if I want.

She sat down on the driest bank of grass she could find.

Perhaps they are actually going to throw him out this time? Would they? Could they? What did he say? He wanted my help? What can I do? I'm just a…

Just then, Leila saw the pair heading up the path towards her, away from Duke's house. She'd observed the scene in front of the shack from afar, and knew the gist of what had been said, even though she could not hear it. It even *looked* final from where she hid. Lots of nodding of heads. The envelope and the clipboard. Serious-looking body language.

As they made their way out towards the car, she darted onto the path some sixty yards in front of them, pausing just long enough for both of them to see her, then dodged back to hide within the thick rhododendron bushes, which were just starting to grow buds and leaves. She could see them talking to each other, and then move in her direction.

'Er, come out love, we know you're there!'

There was only one person in the world who she would allow to call her *love.* Or *My dear.* And she knew he needed her. She jumped out again, then started running down the pathway back in the direction of the shack. The young policewoman broke into a clanking jog. Leila darted again, down one of the side paths. Routes she knew so well.

This time she let them get within twenty yards or so, as she reached the main path towards the shack. Walker was puffing hard, and WPC Martin didn't seem to know what to do next. Should they just chase this young girl through the forest? That wouldn't look good on the police report. *The two of us chased her down the path…*

As they panted, staring in an awkward stand-off, Leila screamed.

'Daddy! Daddy! Help! Help!'

The two looked at each other helplessly. Down at the shack Duke jumped up out of his chair, pulled on his boots without lacing them, and clomped towards the path.

Genius!

As soon as she saw him, she started running towards him, turning back over her shoulder for dramatic effect.

'They're chasing me! Help me!' She jumped up onto the deck and leapt into his arms. Martin and Walker continued walking towards them, then stopped.

‘Oh Allie! Allie! I was so worried about you! What happened?’

Leila sobbed dramatically into the shoulder of his trenchcoat.

‘They were chasing me! I was so scared! I was just out for my walk!’

Duke looked up to see them busily whispering to each other. Walker tried to call out.

‘Mr Porter, I’m so… I’m sorry. I didn’t know you had your daught…your grand-daughter here.’

‘I can’t believe what you’ve just done! Intimidating this poor girl, here. Spying on her and running after her through the forest! I am going to make an official complaint about this.’

He knew that he would be on thin ice if he complained to anyone, but it sounded good.

‘We’re not intimidating her, Sir,’ said Martin, ‘we are just ensuring that she is safe.’

‘They were stalking me Daddy! Stalking me!’

‘Officer, it is clear that you have been following a young girl through the forest. That could be taken the wrong way. You need to explain yourself. I will be talking to your superiors, Officer, er, Martin.’

Walker spluttered again.

‘Well I was just following her to see where she ends up…’

‘That’s the second time you have admitted to following a vulnerable thirteen year old through the woods. Stay here my dear, you are safe now. Ignore this man.’

Leila spluttered and sobbed for good effect.

‘I’m scared of him. He is following me with his clipboard! Please help me.’

Duke turned to Walker.

‘Now it is time for you to get off my land, and to stop bothering me once and for all!’

The man predictably started to read from the rule book, muttering about how it wasn’t his land and how he would have to speak to the relevant child protection authorities. Duke rammed home one final point.

‘Time to go. You are stalking. Goodbye.’

‘Yes. Er. Goodbye.’ When he was as far away as he could safely get he turned and shouted, ‘I will be back you know. Other agencies need to know about this! What’s your name again, young lady?’

He sounded really creepy now.

‘Bye bye Mr Stalker-Walker!’

They both collapsed in gales of laughter on the front porch, high-fiving triumphantly in celebration.

What a plan it was!

And they had both played their parts.

To perfection.

Three more months?

At least!

Maybe six.

Leila Chapter 33

Duke was surprised to see her approach the shack the very next day. She usually left it two or three days between visits. But something was up. He sat and watched her slow and deliberate walk as she made her way down the open pathway to the front door. She touched the trees in turn as usual, but this morning she stumbled and wavered, hesitant. It had rained overnight, and she slipped a little on the uncertain surface.

As she approached, he could see that she had been crying. The eyelids sagged, and the edges were swollen red.

'How are you, my dear? You were such a superstar yesterday!'

His words cleared her head for her.

'I'm…OK…thanks.'

She didn't look up, and shuffled nervously from one foot to the other, scuffing the ground as she leaned against the door.

She doesn't look right, doesn't sound right. Is she really OK?

He'd been on his own for so long now that the likelihood of him picking up on anything to do with appearance or fashion, especially in a young woman, was remote. But as he looked at her now, he could see that she'd not taken a great deal of time getting ready. Normally she was so neat. Her standard outfit was close-fitting - often jeans and a t-shirt topped with what he took to be her favourite white denim jacket.

Today was different. She had on a pair of joggers which had seen better days. They hung around her like a sack, and she wore them high on the waist, so that her body shape was hidden and undefined. Her shirt, which was awkwardly buttoned up to the neck, with no adornment or decoration, looked tight and uncomfortable. She wore a thick black coat despite the relative mildness of the day.

'It is lovely to see you Leila. Such a nice surprise after yesterday. Are you cold?'

She pulled the coat tighter around her. It wasn't that cold.

'Is there anything I can help you with Leila? Look, I just want to apologise for yest…'

'Don't apologise. You told me true friendship means that you don't have to. Anyway I don't want to talk about it. I did what I had to. How long you got?'

'You did Leila. You certainly did. Thank you. I have maybe four or five months. Would you like some tea?'

'Oh yeah, please. Don't worry, I'm OK. Tough morning again, that's all.'

'OK, tea coming right up.' He was almost relieved to be able to do something, rather than actually talk about what might be eating at her. He disappeared into the house and she sat outside, pulling at her nails. Occasionally biting them.

‘Here we are,’ he said, handing her the mug, ‘the cup that cheers, as they say!’

‘Thanks. I think my granny used to call it that.’

‘Yes she did. I guess we’re about the same vintage!’

‘So how old are you, exactly?’

‘You can’t ask a gentleman that!’ he laughed and added, ‘OK, so how old are you?’

‘You can’t ask a lady that!’ she said with a smile, ‘I’m nearly fifteen,’ she added, without the smile.

‘A teenager? Oh no! I’m scared of teenagers!’ They both laughed. He took his chance.

‘I’m a bit worried Leila,’ he said carefully, ‘you don’t look yourself today. School alright?’

‘Like I said, I’m OK.’

He didn’t seek to break the awkward silence.

‘I had a row with Dad. He kicked me out. After yesterday you know.’

‘Erm, yesterday? You didn’t tell him what happened did you?’

‘No, not exactly, but I yelled that I’d be better off living in the forest, than living with him. He said something like, ‘Fine! Go to the forest!’, so I did. And here I am.’

His relief at this explanation was tinged with worry at the possible implications.

‘Well, I’m sure he didn’t kick you out. If you go back soon I’m sure he will have seen sense. Adults can get very stressed by life, you know. Raising children is hard.’

‘Well he shouldn’t have had me then.’ she whispered.

‘I’m sure your dad loves you very much, Leila. But he has some challenges, like we all do, and at times he finds it difficult to deal with them. It’s not your fault. Be patient. Be mature.’

‘It is my fault. I swore at him, and his stupid girlfriend.’

‘It is easy for me to say this, Leila, and hard for you to understand. Sometimes adults find it hard to be adults. Sometimes children are wiser.’

‘Wiser?’

‘I mean that, the way you talk to me, you are a sensible and mature person, Leila. Wise. Someone with wisdom, despite your age.’

‘You think I could have more wisdom than an adult?’

‘I know it. You have more wisdom in your little finger than some adults I know! And I think your dad

kind of resents that. He can see his little girl growing up. That is difficult. It represents a loss of control.'

'But he should want me to grow up!'

'And he will. But right now he feels he is losing his little daughter. Instead of feeling pride in your progress, he feels his authority is waning.'

'Why do you always use big words?'

'Sorry, I didn't realise. I'll try not to use them so much. Habits, you know. It means he is slowly losing his influence over you. Like the sea going out at low tide. Some parents, especially dads, find that difficult and react. Try to hold on to it. I think his love for you is so strong that he wants to bottle you up for ever!'

'Yuk! What a horrible thought!'

'Find me a better one then.'

She looked out towards the forest and the estate beyond.

'I think he knows he can't live with me, but at the same time, he can't live without me.'

'You've always been so smart haven't you Leils?…sorry, I mean Leila.'

Her cheeks started to redden but she ignored the rhetorical question. She pulled the backpack off her back. She'd been sitting against it for balance on the uneven log-seat. She scrambled around for a few seconds in the backpack, not really knowing what to do. Her brain started to tangle.

She pulled something out of the bag twice, and then thought better of it.

'Are you OK? Can I give you a hand?'

'No!' She snapped at him for no reason. She slumped down on top of the case, and started to redo the clasps.

'Oh OK, no problem.' He went inside to potter about. He knew that he always had to give her time and space.

She fiddled around again, and with him gone for the moment, she removed the picture from its roll, and took another look. She was not often proud of anything, let alone something she'd done, but she knew that this was a good one. She held it up towards the open window, comparing it to the single picture hanging above his fireplace. She nodded quietly to herself, then sat with it on her lap.

To her slight annoyance, when he returned, he didn't draw attention to it, or even mention it. She fixed her eyes to the floor.

'Here, this is for you. I thought it might brighten up the house. I like drawing.'

She shoved the rolled up picture towards him. He extended his hand and took it. Then he sat with it on

his lap. A few minutes passed.

‘Well, aren’t you going to open it?’

‘Do you want me to?’ This man could definitely read her mind.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know what you’ll think. Maybe not. Maybe I’ll have it back.’

He started to hand it back to her, although he already knew that she did not want him to.

‘Let me tell you something Leila, and then you can tell me if you want me to take a look at it. Imagine your family. A family’s love should be unconditional. No matter what happens. Do you know the story of the Prodigal Son?’

She didn’t.

‘Oh well, never mind. What I mean is that the very fact that you are giving me something, that you have thought of me, means that I will like it. Not because of what it is, but because of who gave it to me.’

He unrolled it like it was a priceless parchment.

He stared at it intently for a few seconds, running his fingers precisely over the fine crayon.

Then he started to cry.

Leila Chapter 34

Leila had always loved to draw.

Her signature was drawings of fine detail. On a bad day they were rough: lines crossing, weaving in and out, messy. On better days the strokes lined up: finely drawn strands and fronds. Each strand a thought, each frond an insight. Yes, on good days, her head came together just as her lines did on the pad.

On the good days, she considered herself a genius. She would work for hours without stopping and her portfolio would grow and grow, such that she could see herself doing it for the rest of her life. On the really bad days, the portfolio would shrink again, as she ripped up half of them and screwed up the others. On those days, they were deemed too fancy, too detailed, and at the same time, not fancy enough and too rough. On those bad days, only the strong ones survived.

'I think that is one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen, Leila.'

She loved it when he used her name, which he always did. Some of the people she knew seemed to just call her *You!* Or even *Oi!*. That's what life felt like sometimes. Anonymous. Nameless. Without your name you were no-one. And sometimes it was the teachers who were the worst. You were reduced to a grunt or a number. No-one actually cared who you were.

He held the paper like a curator would hold a Ming vase in a museum. She watched his eyes scanning across the lines and the swirls of pencil and crayon.

'How long did that take you?'

She averted her eyes and swept a line of hair away from her face.

'Oh, that thing? Not too long.'

'But there's so much detail. So many lines.'

'Sure. I always do that.'

'It's unique Leila. I have never seen that before. And I have looked at thousands of drawings! I love it. I really like the combination of pencil and colour. How did you remember so much detail?'

He glanced up towards the fireplace, gesturing towards the original that she must have occasionally glimpsed through the window and stored in her artist's mind.

The framed photo above the mantelpiece was of an elderly lady, sitting side on to the paper with her head inclined to face the viewer. A posed picture, a bit like the Queen.

Leila's version was a pencil portrait, but was adorned with colourful hair bands, bracelets and brooches. The colour was understated, but it drew the eye to those features, amidst the predominant grey pencil. The pencil drawing was all swirls and close-knit parallel lines, like exposed muscle fibres. Together they formed elegant clusters of finely drawn body parts. Neck muscles, cheekbones, eyes and ears. Each one perfectly proportioned. It was the eyes that drew him in. Deep blue irises set amongst the grey pencil outlines. Lots of lines and creases, each one perfectly shadowed.

Next to her, but in less detail, was a clean-shaven gentleman, perhaps her husband. His look was one of calm, of peace. Of pride.

On the lady's lap was a small child, of indeterminate gender, dressed in a thick yellow jumpsuit or romper suit, curled up and sucking its thumb.

'How long did it take you to do that?'

'Oh not long, couple of days maybe.' She said it dismissively, 'it helps me to relax. What they call *regulate*.'

'Long days I'm sure?'

'Oh I didn't sleep. And I barely ate. When I'm drawing, I don't think of anything else!'

'You worked on this for forty-eight hours straight?'

'I know right! Crazy!'

'Well I would never advise you to…'

'Let me stop you!' She held up her hand and smiled broadly. 'I don't want your advice. Can't you see? I just want your support. Your smile. Your voice.'

Duke paused.

This kid actually does need me. But how can I help her? I'll be gone soon. What will she do then? Should I tell her the truth? Take her with me? No. Impossible.

He turned back towards her, looking her up and down.

'I'm with you all the way, Leila,' was all he managed to get out.

That's right. I need that too. Be with me. All the way.

It was almost like she was already on some kind of journey, at least in her own head. And she wanted him there with her.

She got up to leave. He rose too, and bade her goodbye with a little gentlemanly bow.

'Can I call in next weekend?' she asked, turning to look over her shoulder.

'Sure. I'm not going anywhere. Be good this week.'

'Maybe!'

She was gone.

Leila Chapter 35

‘Imagine the worst kind of traffic jam.’

She'd headed back a few days later. Four tick marks on each tree now, each one a deliberate gouge revealing the flesh beneath the bark.

The week had not gone well.

‘In my imagination, I see a traffic island, perhaps with a monument built in the middle of it. What’s that famous one in Paris? Well the roundabout that goes round it has about six lanes of traffic and there are a dozen different entrances and exits. Cars seem to come from all directions. In my head, the cars come in, but never go out. The traffic just builds and builds like the exit roads are blocked. And the noise! Each car is revving its engine, and all the drivers are leaning on their horns. The pollution from all the exhausts is overwhelming. Mostly the traffic is stopped - it cannot go anywhere - so it is just revving and hooting. Drivers are shouting and swearing just trying to get out of that place. That’s me on a bad day.’

‘Wow, that’s quite a scene, Leila.’

He used her name again. Her heart soared. The road started to straighten out. She tried to imagine and describe what it was like.

‘When I left home, after another day at that school, the traffic was mad! All the cars hooting and revving. They were all close to each other. My way out seemed completely blocked. I fought through it, and it started to clear on the walk here. As I made the way up the path, touching my trees, it unblocked itself. Now all I can see is a clear road ahead.’

‘Going anywhere?’

Leila smiled.

‘Nah not really. But it’s clear and straight. With a dotted line down the middle and a good road surface. No traffic. I can walk on now. And anyway I don’t really need to go anywhere now, do I?’

She looked around the shack, without looking at him.

Without looking at him had become a theme. He had noticed. He'd become very familiar with the sheen of the hair on the top of her head, which was more often than not facing him. It was a brown-blonde plaited mix reaching neatly down to the middle of her back.

She fiddled with a hair band holding it all together, re-pulling the hair through and sweeping it away from her face.

But she didn’t look at him.

When she wasn’t looking at the ground, she stared at the upper reaches of the woods or the makeshift wooden shingles on the roof. She looked around at the door or over towards the pathway out of the clearing.

But she didn’t look at him.

‘That’s good. I don’t want you to go. But I don’t want you to be late home either. Do you want another quick go at the challenge?’

She smiled to herself. She felt clear. She would do it this time.

‘Yes, I’m ready now!’

She laughed and he smiled back. He actually thought she might last the full four minutes this time. He wondered if he could too. He pulled up the seats, took a deep breath, and waited for her to get into position.

‘Are we allowed to blink?’

‘Of course. It would be hard not to.’

‘What about smiling?’

‘Well, yes, you can show your emotions. That’s what it’s for.’

‘Oh, that makes it much easier! No problem!’

They got about a minute into the challenge when both of them almost got a fit of the giggles. But both managed to compose themselves and eventually straightened their faces for the final two minute stretch.

Leila saw deep into his eyes this time, and could see the depths of the ocean.

Was that a face she could see, being sucked deeper, deeper down? Was that him? Or was it her?

She momentarily thought of turning away to see if she was actually looking at herself reflected in his eye, but she resisted. She looked around the irises and thought she saw the remnants of his house in the sad little blood vessels that populated the whites of his eyes, and perhaps, just perhaps, the family that he'd lost. As the fourth minute approached, she just occasionally caught a glimpse of a gathering tear at the pain he'd suffered, and perhaps even a flash of light towards a brighter future. But mostly she saw shame and regret and embarrassment at what he'd become. Of brighter futures spurned and rendered dark. A longing for something they both knew he could not have.

He could see in her young eyes the culmination of all those scoldings and retributions. There was a hardness there, but inside he could read the vulnerability that she showed every time she visited him. The eyes flickered slightly, not blinking but staring uncertainly as if their place in the world was somehow in doubt. Was there danger there? An inadvisable risk? Was there even a sense of despair at what might happen to her? He examined the saucers of light and rings within the iris. Rays of hope perhaps? Within the sadness was there a little glint that suggested someone had a plan for something better and brighter? Although he was sure that she didn’t know what she wanted to do or where she wanted to go at her age, he also saw in her eyes a ray of possibility. Some ambition even.

The last grain of sand in the timer slipped from top to bottom. Four minutes were up.

‘Wow Leila, what stunning eyes you have!’

He immediately regretted saying it. Too personal. Too direct.

She got up off the stool and stared at him again. The eyes were blazing suddenly - deep fiery black like endless whirlpools, twitching at the corner. Perhaps heightened by the stress of the challenge. A small line of spittle gathered at the corners of her mouth.

‘What did you say? You can’t say that. Leave me alone! That’s weird! Look at you. Go away!’

‘Well, this is where I live now, Leila.’

‘Fine!’ she said abruptly, ‘I’m leaving. Have a nice life. Whatever is left of it.’

It was her turn to regret saying something now, even though the traffic in her head was at peak rush hour. Too busy for an apology. It was him who apologised.

‘I’m sorry, Leila, I shouldn’t have said that. I hope to see you again.’ The voice was still measured and warm.

‘Never. Not happening. Bye!’

She clomped off down the path and was gone.

He sat down, his head in his hands.

Shit! Why did I do that? Just listen! Empathise. Sympathise. And never ever get personal! I’ve lost her now.

He'd failed. The cardinal sin. A personal comment. Deeply personal at a time of great vulnerability. They say the eyes are the windows on the soul, and he'd broken that. Shattered the windows. Destroyed a friendship.

He was experienced enough to know that there was one tiny saving grace. She'd stomped off. She'd yelled at him and called him names. She had definitely felt insulted. Violated even. But despite all that, she'd said *goodbye*.

She'd be back.

Leila Chapter 36

Lying on her bed that evening, Leila sobbed quietly to herself.

She didn't often cry.

The bare walls of the room stared down at her. A small figure curled up almost into a ball. The single picture on the wall, of a deep green forest, seemed to have shrunk so that it was almost invisible.

She always did this to herself.

She'd found someone who understood her. Someone who seemed to have that sixth sense. Someone who made her feel relaxed. Someone who helped to unravel the knitting and arrange it neatly in single rows, all heading in the same direction.

She lay there, trying to imagine his voice at that moment.

What would he do? What would he say?

He would say he was sorry, but everyone always said that. It was just that most people didn't actually mean it. She often felt that she was the only one who ever said *sorry* and actually meant it. She meant everything she said, and didn't mean what she didn't say. She could not tell someone what she felt just by looking at them, so she didn't look at them. It seemed obvious to her.

And why look at people when they always seemed to interpret your look in the wrong ways? And why play that stupid game?

So what had she actually done? She'd played his game. And she'd won! But what had he said? He had said that her eyes were *stunning*. What did that even mean? Was he saying she could stun people with her eyes? Maybe she had a special power?

She thought for a moment, and stopped crying. She rubbed her eyes with the sheet and got up to go to the small mirror which hung on the back of her door. She looked back at herself and stared deeply into her own eyes. She didn't feel stunned. Maybe you couldn't stun yourself? What she saw were a normal, if very tired, pair of eyes. Brown, almost black, in colour.

She sat back down on the bed and reached underneath it for the dictionary she always kept there. When people used stupid words and phrases like, '*It could be worse'* or '*It may never happen!'*, she tried to remember to look them up. She liked learning new words and phrases and liked using them.

Stunning. *Stun. To knock unconscious or into a dazed or semi-conscious state.* She knew that one.

Stunning. *Extremely impressive or attractive.*

She thought about what he might have meant. He'd said, *What stunning eyes you have!*

He meant they were impressive or attractive, didn't he?

She'd called him a creep. She'd wished him dead.

She went back to the mirror to look more closely. What stared back at her surprised her.

She saw eyes of the deepest brown, like his. They rippled slightly as the light from the window caught them. They seemed to smile back at her. *Impressive or attractive?* No-one had ever commented on how she looked before. Her dad might have done once, but not recently. He was more interested in the appearance of his latest. She tried to stare at herself in the mirror. The eyes stared back.

The eyes are the windows to the soul? Who had said that? She'd read it somewhere and thought how stupid it sounded. Shakespeare was it? He always said crazy things that nobody understood.

Eyes? A window? Sorry, they are not. They are lenses designed to reflect light onto a sensitising surface which the brain converts into images.

Leila loved science!

She looked again and tried to see her soul beyond. How would she even know what it looked like? As she stared at herself, she started to look around at the rest of the mirror. On the top, hair scrunched messily, but framing her face in a symmetrical tangle. Full eyebrows. Those eyes. A perfectly straight and moderately-proportioned nose. Full lips and white teeth. A round face, with clear skin and high cheekbones.

Did she like what she saw?

Not really.

No-one ever gave her compliments on her looks. Not like some of the other girls at school who always seemed to be fishing for admiration, especially from boys. The ones who wore make-up in primary school. Whose skirts were always a bit shorter than regulation? She didn’t do all that. Didn’t see the point. And rules were rules, after all.

She thought back to the afternoon. Maybe he’d actually paid her a compliment?

Stunning. Attractive. Impressive.

Any one of those words could mark him out as some kind of creepy predator. But she didn’t think so. He'd never done anything to suggest that, despite what she'd said to him. He was just a sad old man who enjoyed her company. Or perhaps any company, although she'd never seen anyone else there, apart from the planning guy. He'd never asked her into his house or anything like that. He'd always let her go when she wanted.

She decided to go back.

She would ask him what he meant. Did he mean she was able to stun people with one look? Or did he think her eyes looked impressive? She had to find out. Then she would decide what she thought of him. She actually hoped that his compliment gave her the ability to kill people! What a superpower! All she had to do to all the people who were bugging her was to fix them with a piercing stare and they would fall to the ground - stunned. Or dead!

She often wished people dead, without thinking of the implications. Maybe stunned was better. Just let them lie there for a while. Maybe conscious, so that they knew what had happened to them, but unable

to move or speak. Aware of their surroundings. Aware of their own helplessness.

What had she said to him? Maybe she should have wished him stunned? Instead she had said something stupid like *Have a nice life, whatever is left of it.* How old was he? Hadn't he told her he was in his fifties? Well, many people live into their nineties. He could have thirty or forty years left. That was cruel. She regretted saying it, not at the time, but she definitely did now. Maybe her superpowers would come true, and she'd go back to find a little old dead body wrapped in its long black coat, out there on the stoop.

I've killed him!

The thoughts started to overwhelm her. Although it was already dark, she decided to go back then and there.

Then she reconsidered.

She'd go back first thing in the morning.

Leila Chapter 37

She felt like she had a plan. The road was clear, so she started to draw.

Her dad had once bought her a large pad of cartridge paper, the kind artists use. He'd said something dismissive like, ‘See if you can do anything with that,’ but in fact it had been one of the kindest things he'd ever done for her. She spread it out on the floor of her room and lay on her stomach.

Beside her was a faded wooden box. She undid the brass clasps carefully and lifted the lid.

‘Your mother left that behind,’ her Dad had grunted when he'd fetched it down from the attic on her tenth birthday, ‘said you might want it some day.’ Leila had seen it as one of the last links to her mother, with the faded initials *EPP* or perhaps *DDP* inscribed on the front of it, and its vast range of pencils and crayons inside. Leila took some solace in what she could produce with what had been left behind.

She started with long thick pencil lines, in flowing shapes. Mostly straight but then with occasional curved flourishes. An outside observer looking down would see a tangle of fibres, a randomness. A mess. But to her, it was all logical. Leila could see what she wanted to draw, and she could see how she would draw it.

After three or four hours, the drawing had taken shape. She got up and slowly unfolded her body from so long in the same position. She had not noticed. She looked down at what had emerged onto the paper. A girl’s head and shoulders, framed by wavy hair, every strand seemingly individually drawn. The ears, slightly protruding, peeked out from behind the hair, with close-drawn contours giving the impression of light and dark, of brightness and of shadow. The mouth was full, with healthy teeth peeking out through strong shapely lips. She'd not exactly drawn out the nose, but it looked perfect - small and petite, its form highlighted in wispy shading.

Leila looked down at what she'd created and went over to the mirror. The next bit would have to wait, or she would have to work all night.

She decided to wait.

She slept fitfully, her mind clear, focused. *Stunning. Attractive.* How could she make that happen? She'd seen pictures in a gallery once and the stupid guide had said something about the eyes following you around the room. She'd run from one end of the gallery to the other but nothing had happened. No eyes followed her. Eventually she'd screamed at the top of her voice. *Follow me! Follow me!*

And had been asked to leave the gallery. A teacher had had to take her out. That would be embarrassing for most people.

She got up early and looked at the creation on the floor.

A face with no eyes. She shuddered.

This time she brought the picture up onto her desk. It wasn’t really a desk but something her dad had spent a couple of minutes rigging up between two trestles. It worked for her though, and it was under

the window so it would reflect and refract the low late-February sunlight.

She started in pencil with the left eye.

The pupil was easy enough. Lots of soft 3B pencil there, with little streaks across it, and a white area which would later form the reflection of the light from outside. Then some broader strokes with a harder pencil to give the outline of the eye itself. She worked to get this right, rubbing out bits she didn't like and then, when the outline was secure, smudging it with a brush or her thumb to soften the edges. Next she started to create the shadows under the eyes and the crease at the top where the eyelid sits. Then back to the iris, shades of grey radiating out from the middle, and then thin wispy lines into the white of the eye. She gently shaded over the white to give it some depth. The next stage was the eyelashes, which swept elegantly up from the top of the eye, and down almost reflectively from the bottom. She managed to capture a small eyelash reflection in the pool of light featured in the top of the lens.

Two hours had passed.

She stood up. *Good enough.* She moved around the room a little, smiling to herself when she thought that the eye should be following her. To her it was, at least as much as those dull old masters in the gallery.

She had a plan for the right eye.

She'd never done it before, but she wanted the right eye to cry.

Whether this was something to do with her state of mind, or was just a random thought, she didn't know. She thought now about why she was doing it. About the emotion it was supposed to portray. *Ah, emotions!* She didn't really understand all that stuff, but she'd cried twice recently. That was not like her.

She sat back down in front of her canvas. The girl in the picture looked strange with her one cartoonish eye set amongst the other features. Time to draw the other.

She started with faint outlines to make sure that the two images lined up, and started on the right one. When drawing the lower lid, she tried to picture a tear-shaped outline, as if a droplet was just emerging from a tear duct. The trick would be get some light shining in it, like the light that shone in the eye itself.

When she'd finished, she looked at her creation. She had drawn the eyes larger in proportion to the rest of the face. A caricature, but the care she'd taken meant that each individual feature was perfect, even if they were not in complete harmony. The viewer would be drawn to the eyes, of that there was no doubt. Even she was drawn in to her own creation.

She decided on a final touch. It was the only colour on the piece, but she tried to accentuate some of the depth of the eyes with two shades of deep brown, starting with a relatively light touch on the outside, and moving deeper and darker towards the middle.

She walked back to the end of the room and stood there, transfixed.

The eyes were stunning.

Leila Chapter 38

Leila set off unusually early the next morning. There was no school that Tuesday, at least not for her. She had been excluded for the day due to an incident the previous morning. A few things, culminating in her calling Walsingham an *idiot*. Never a great idea.

She approached the shack nervously, wondering whether he would even talk to her after what had happened. Instead, as she moved slowly down the path, touching every fifth tree just above the collection of ticks, he came half way out to greet her. He looked a little agitated, and was clutching the bag she'd seen him packing a week or so earlier. He tossed it aside as she approached.

'Good morning, Leila. It is good to see you.'

He spoke deliberately, and his voice gave nothing away. He did not seem either too bothered about what had happened, or especially pleased to see her. His voice was a little monotone, but still had that silky sonorous quality to it. She turned her face to the ground as she got closer.

'I'm surprised to see you. Isn't it a school day?'

Was he going to judge her too? She stopped a few metres from the deck.

'Come now, please do sit down.' He already sounded warmer. He extended a tanned hand in greeting and motioned to the tree stump. She accepted. Face still downturned.

Isn't it a school day? Why is he asking that? He's gonna judge me. Just like all the rest. He thinks I've been excluded again.

She knew, deep down, he was not like all the rest.

Well, I had a bit of a bad day yesterday,' she muttered.

'Yes, I do remember that!' he said, his forgiveness peeking through.

Even quieter she muttered, 'Oh that. Sorry. I shouldn't have said what I said.'

'True friendships mean you don't need to say sorry. I understand Leila.'

Imperceptibly, she forced out a *thank you.*

'In fact, it is me who should be apologising. I shouldn't have said what I said. It was too personal. Sorry. Let me get you a cup of tea.'

'True friendships mean you don't need to say sorry,' she parroted back gently.

He shuffled inside without waiting for a reply. She started sobbing silently again.

Can he just forgive and forget? Just like that? It was horrible, what I said. He shouldn't let me off. But I hope he does.

To her own surprise, she didn't let the subject drop. She turned slightly away from his seat, as he returned and served the usual variety of super-strong tea.

'What did you say about my eyes?'

Her question caught him off guard.

'I don't remember. Honestly. I was so annoyed at what I had said and the effect it had on you. I spent most of the night angry at myself. It was a throwaway comment.'

'A throwaway comment? You threw it at me?'

'It's just a phrase, Leila.'

'I don't do phrases.'

'No you don't do you?' He smiled. She turned to look at him. His own eyes were still the darkest brown, almost black. They gave nothing away. He looked back at her and she held his gaze.

'I remember what I said now,' he said nervously.

'You said my eyes were stunning. I spent half the night looking at them in the mirror, and the other half wondering whether I could actually stun you with them!'

He turned away as embarrassed laughter caught hold of his body. She smiled too, and took another glance at him.

'You probably could! You have power, my dear!'

This time, his use of the term of endearment seemed to pull all her strands together. She was heading straight again. The trials of the previous seventy-two hours seemed to melt away. She looked up at him. He held his mug out to her and they clinked. She took a deep draught of the warm tea. *Disgusting*.

'This tea is disgusting!'

'It is isn't it?' They clinked again, 'Let's drink to that! Now, why were you excluded today?'

If anyone else had asked this, thought Leila, it would upset her. But somehow, the way Duke put it made it seem so easy and clear.

'Lil was being an idiot. So I hit her. This time Mrs Robinson was standing right there. Almost waiting for me to do it. That's what they do. She was giving me some of the usual 'blah blah blah' and it made it worse. It was like they wanted me to do something so that they could get rid of me for the day.'

He seemed to take this in slowly. He scratched his scruffy, ill-formed beard.

'You do realise that special people like you are hard work for your teachers, don't you?'

'They're teachers. They're meant to work hard. That's their job.'

‘That’s true. But they have thirty kids to look after. You could be a full-time job on your own!’

It was the first time she'd been made to think of it that way.

‘Yes, but that doesn’t mean they have to chuck me out.’

‘Think of it as a time out Leila. A time out for you, and a reset for them. Tomorrow will be a better day. And if you had not been excluded, you would not be here.’

This time she actually stared into his eyes. Their darkness gave little away, but she felt she was giving him the opportunity to look inside her again. He seemed to stare for just a little too long, so she turned away again. It was almost as if she had to force herself. Not to look at him, but to let him look at her. She could see that he wanted to say something.

‘Your friend? Lil was it? Why were you angry at her?’

‘Well, that’s just it, I wasn’t really. It was just that there were lots of people about, it was noisy, I couldn’t concentrate, I didn’t know which way to go, the teacher was giving me her high-pitched whine, then Lil said something I don’t even know what, and then I just lashed out at whatever was nearest. She wasn’t hurt. Nobody ever gets hurt.’

‘You do.’

‘What?’

‘You get hurt. Every time. You’ve told me about all these things that happen and it seems to me that the only person who really suffers is you Leila.’

Spoken clearly and calmly, that irritating wisdom. She glanced up through the terrace window and saw that he'd tacked her picture up next to the photograph above the fireplace. It was a decent match. She got up for a closer look. As she stood, the open window swung in the breeze, towards her head. She felt something on the back of her head as he stood to protect her from hurting herself. He cupped her head gently in his hand and guided it away from the sharp edge of the window. The hand fell away.

The effect on Leila was not what she'd predicted. She'd always said to herself that he touched her she would scream and run. *Run and scream!* But the effect on her was quite the opposite.

She wanted him to cradle her head, to protect her from that sharp window frame, for ever. When had anyone last touched her? Her dad could barely manage a hug, even though she knew he was fine with hugging other people.

But he didn’t hug her.

What the hell?

She didn’t even like being touched. But somehow he had healing hands. His touch was able to super-smooth the path ahead. Her brain cleared completely. He'd steered her away from the danger. She sat back down.

‘I tried to draw what you said.’

‘What do you mean?’

She fished inside her backpack. Leila was proud of her drawing. So much so, she had wrapped it in cardboard before stuffing it into the bag. The cartridge paper itself gave it a certain rigidity too. It was pristine as she pulled it out. The air was still, so without any support, she was able to perch it on the window sill. It stood there looking out over the forest.

He rose and moved directly in front of the picture.

He stared at it intently for a few seconds.

Seconds turned into minutes. His eyes moved, but his body did not.

Minutes turned into nearly a quarter of an hour.

He could not move.

Stunned.

The only movement was a single tear escaping from his left eye, and a splash as it joined a puddle on the deck.

Eventually he spoke.

‘You have a singular talent, my dear. Please do not ever waste it. I just know you will go far!’

He made as if to hug her, but thought better of it.

He hugged her with his eyes.

She hugged him back.

With hers.

Leila Chapter 39

They had sat in silence for nearly twenty minutes, both looking deep into the eyes of the portrait.

‘What do you mean I will go far? Where am I going? How far?’

He smiled at her literalness.

‘It’s a figure of speech, Leila.’

‘I don’t do figures of…whatever you said!’ she laughed.

‘It means that you will be a success one day. Although I can’t help feeling you should get out of that school as soon as you can. Have you talked to your Dad about moving?’

‘Talked to him? I barely see him. Anyway what’s the point? They’re all the same aren’t they?’

‘Maybe. But you might just find someone somewhere who properly understands you.’

‘I have already.’

He ignored the comment and hurriedly got up. ‘More tea?’

She carried on talking. He waited in the doorway.

‘When I look at you I see myself.’

‘Well, steady on my dear! Look at me! I’m old, I’m fat, I’m hairy. My clothes are falling apart!’

‘No I don’t mean that, of course.’ She was serious.

’What do you mean?’

‘It’s hard to say. But when I look at you I see the me I want to be. When you talk to me, and I talk to you, I become myself. When I’m alone, I’m a hundred different people. Most of them shouting. Running around. Here, you make me, me.’

‘I do my best Leila. And I think I know what you mean, because now you say it, you do the same to me. I guess that is what friends are for.’

‘Yeah, maybe. But you’re a different kind of friend. I don’t really have any others.’

‘OK, so it is probably time for you to go now Leila. Please do come and visit me again. Can I keep the portrait please?’

Ordinarily she might have struggled with leaving, but she knew that he meant what he said. He always did. He'd never let her down. So long as she knew there could be another visit, she could leave with her heart held high.

‘Just one more question?’ she called through the window, standing with her elbows perched on the

frame.

‘Sure.’

‘Who is the lady in the photograph?’ She waved her hand at the photo hanging above the fire, with her own version beside it.

‘It was a Thursday, Leila. About midday. She closed her eyes, settled into her pillow. Her body gave a little shudder, and she was gone. I kissed her goodbye and sat with her for a few minutes. Then I called for the ambulance and she was taken from me. That was the last I saw of her. I tried to carry on living, but a piece of me had died with her. That picture? Well, it’s all I have left of her really. After I moved out, I just didn’t have room for more. It sailed the world with me! And finally made it here.’

‘Is there a picture of your daughter?’

‘Sorry. Got rid of all those. The rift was a deep one I’m afraid.’

‘What did she die of?’

‘It was cancer Leila. There was no cure, and there still isn’t.’ It was his turn to look down at the ground now.

‘My grandma died too. I don’t remember her. I think that was cancer. What is cancer?’

‘I don’t really know, and I don’t want to think about it. Something to do with cells in the body being rejected, or attacking other cells. It’s a slow killer, and yet it kills thousands each year. She knew she was going to die.’

‘My grandma was a nurse, and even that couldn’t save her. She left me this. I always carry it.’

Leila lifted up her sweatshirt from the bottom to reveal a sort of pocket watch hanging from the lapel of her shirt, the way a nurse’s watch would. It showed the correct time.

‘It’s very beautiful Leila, I can understand why you like it.’

‘I like to be on time,’ she smiled, ‘and although I barely even knew her, it reminds me of my grandma.’

‘I’m sure it does,’ he replied, shifting a little on his chair, ‘I hope to see you again soon, and do think about getting out of that school. It’s just not good for you.’

Leila Chapter 40

It was several weeks later when Leila found herself making her way through the woods towards the house once again.

In truth, even by her standards, she'd not had a good term. She'd regularly been in trouble, mostly small things, but they accumulated and people became wary of her.

But she couldn't help herself!

On her good days she was full of so much energy that it just had to spill out somewhere. Often it spilled out in good ways - she was always keen to answer questions and because she was clever, the teachers loved her for it.

On the worst days though, her head was so full of noise that she could not predict how she might react to people. Everything annoyed her. Nothing went right. She would lash out and proper trouble would be the result. Oh how she hated that headteacher's office, where she might have to spend the whole afternoon on some stupid worksheet!

On better days she wondered whether others had bad days too.

Everyone else seemed so happy, so calm at the right times, and so excited at the right times.

Why couldn't she be like that?

As she approached the house, she could see that something was different. The shack was uncommonly tidy, without the usual cups, plates, bits of wood and cardboard from various projects lying around. It looked like he was getting ready to leave. Or to fight.

She noticed through the window that the picture above the fireplace had gone.

He struggled out through the door with the same bag that he seemed to have been packing for weeks. He was more unshaven than usual and he looked tense. They sat down. He was out of breath. He got up again. He didn't look at her.

'Oh hello. Erm, could you come back a bit later. I'm busy.'

Busy? He's never busy. He's worried, that's what he is. What about?

She looked up at the clouds which were gathering closely into an already-darkening May sky.

'Come back later? It's late already. No problem. I'll come tomorrow. Are you OK?'

He ignored the question, picked up the bag and started to go inside.

'I think you should go, Leila. They're coming. We're in danger. I'm sorry.'

She got up. She saw his back disappear into the house before she left.

It was the last time Leila saw him alive.

Leila Chapter 41

She wandered miserably home.

I get it, sort of. But why did he send me away? What's up with him?

Even marking every fifth tree didn't calm her. Every fifth tree, four notches, yes. But now crossed out. Leila didn't notice.

She left the path and sat on a fallen trunk in a small clearing.

Why was he so worried? Did they come back to chuck him out? He didn't say that. He just said 'I can feel it'. And why did he tidy up if he was going to leave? And why did he say that I was in danger?

She fiddled with the lichen growing beside her, scratching patterns in the bark with her nails, her thoughts coursing with his rejection of her. That had never happened before.

She should go back.

She couldn't go back.

It was nearly dark.

She couldn't go back.

She didn't go back.

Duke sat on his bed, head in hands. Beside him was the bag, full now with tools and ropes and tapes and survival rations. Enough to see them through. To a new life.

He looked out of the window and wondered what she was doing, and whether she would return. Why had he told her to go? He needed her, and she needed him. They could have gone together. He should have explained, told her the truth. She would forgive, and in time she would forget.

He took out a notebook and started sketching what he could see. The trees that were his home, now puffed out in their greenest shade of leaf, forming a thick canopy across the forest. The type of cover that he needed to continue his fruitless concealment, that was about to come to an end. He drew quickly, roughly, what was in his head, filling the page with rough scrawls, of trees and bushes and pathways. He tried to draw her face from memory, but his talent was nothing like hers, and he quickly discarded the cartoonish result. He pulled out the neatly-folded portrait she'd given him from the bag, and looked intently into the eyes. He tried to read what they were telling him. He spilled out what he was thinking. The forest. The pathways out. The road ahead.

Run! Run! they said.

He decided he would stay for one more night, in the hope that she would come.

Then he would set off.

She didn't come.

Leila Chapter 42

Leila was angry because she'd lost him.

She'd go back.

Tonight.

As soon as she got out of this place. For good, like he said.

It was late-May, and warm for the time of year.

For Leila, the temperature in the classroom had built up to boiling.

The voices in her head that day had not been the voices of her teachers or her friends.

Leila, please. Come back. I need your help again. You're the only one who can help me now. They're coming. I'm sorry.

Despite the heat and noise, she could hear a voice. Clear and smooth. Duke was talking to her. She shut her eyes to hear him better.

'Leila? Leila are you OK?'

It was the gentle tone of Miss Stuart, her English teacher. The lesson was over. Five minutes over. Leila was still sitting there.

'Oh, er, yeah sorry. I'm fine. What's the time?'

'Well we finished a few minutes ago, Leila. Time to go outside please.'

She could not hear him, he'd faded. The moment had passed.

I have to go back. Tonight.

In the here and now, in the classroom, it was all shouting voices, and bells and desks and chairs screeching across the floor. She rocked to and fro in her seat trying to grab at anything familiar, something that would calm her down. She knew there was only one thing for it.

Their school was old-school. Rules and permissions for everything.

As Lil, Ollie and Olivia headed out onto the playground, Jim Smith, Head of Chemistry, was on the check. Each of them fished out the lilac card in its laminated cover, thrust it towards Mr Smith, and was waved through.

Leila didn't have a pass. She was supposed to be school dinners. Hey-ho, but this was an emergency.

'Mr Smith? Sir. Can you let me out please? I left some stuff back home that I need for art this afternoon. May I?'

Smith was day-dreaming. He often was.

‘What? Oh, I suppose so. Make it quick, mind you.’

The road ahead was not clear, and she set off without a destination or a return time in mind. She was aware of deliberately missing the passageway that led to the house. That could wait. She needed time out. She ran in the direction of the woods, and released her hair from its band to feel the wind through it.

She wasn’t going to go home that day. She had decided. It had been t-shirt weather for several days. She would stay out. Maybe even for a few hours before someone came looking for her.

Wait!

She would go back and get her sketchbook. Something to do. Something to eat. She would take him a present.

As she let herself into the house she could hear the blaring of the TV channels from the sitting room. It was not even a challenge to sneak in and sneak out. The kitchen for a few snacks, and upstairs for the sketchbook. The hallway for a coat and a quick ruffle of the dog’s indolent whiskers. In and out in less than five minutes. No-one spoke. No-one cared. She was free.

It was gone seven when her dad realised she wasn’t home. He cursed as he stumbled out, opened the car door, turned the ignition. *Where is she - this time? Better quickly go round the village, see if she’s in any of her usual haunts. What are her usual haunts?*

By eight he started to worry. No Leila. He asked the kids at the bus shelter. No, they hadn’t seen her. By eight-thirty he was on the phone to the police.

‘Calm down sir,’ it was WPC Martin, ‘how long did you say she’s been missing? You say she isn’t in her usual places? Any idea where she might be? At a friend’s house, perhaps?’

And then it dawned on him.

The woods! She likes to go in the woods. Those bloody trees. God knows what she gets up to, but now night’s falling. Didn’t she say there was some creepy guy out there?

‘Oh please! Can you help? She likes to go in the woods. There’s someone out there. It’s night. If anything happens to her, I’ll never forgive myself. Please help!’

‘Sir of course. We can help. Just tell me where you are. Right, let me repeat that. Junction of Willow Way and the main road. Number 19. We’ll be there in five minutes. Then we’ll both go and find her. Don’t worry.’

Leila Chapter 43

Leila had sat for most of the evening in a clearing just out of sight of the house, close to tree number fifteen, the third in her sequence. There she could glimpse the distant shack, with the large oak growing in front, and the pathway leading to the terrace and the front door.

She had decided that she would take him the crisps and biscuits she'd pinched later. She would do him another picture. If he was really going to leave, she would draw him a picture of his house. To remember their times together. He could take it with him.

He seemed so hassled yesterday. I'll draw the shack. Cheer him up. Go a bit later, just before it gets dark.

It was close to eight when she finished. She stared at the sketch. *Not bad.* But something was different. It should have been obvious! A missing detail. It wasn't in her picture. She looked up. Not in reality either.

No smoke.

All of her other images of the shack had silent smoke wisping out of the makeshift chimney. Like a child's spot-the-difference puzzle, this one did not. She rolled up the near-complete drawing, took a quick swig of water, and fastened the backpack.

In the distance, she heard a siren.

Leila's heart beat harder, her breath short. She trod carefully as she approached the building.

What's up? Has he left? Have they chased him out? Or arrested him?

She stood by the last tree and listened. Still nothing from inside. She moved slowly towards the door, glancing up at the smokeless chimney. She panted hard. Panic rose.

It's my fault. He's gone!

Not just one siren now. More than one, and closer. They had come for him! Or maybe her dad cared enough to finally call the police? Was that her name they were calling?

She was rumbled.

Ready to go home?

Her mind raced and she glanced this way and that down the path.

No chance! Hide. Just for a bit.

She had no plan, but she wasn't going to come quietly. She slipped herself in amongst the ferns and brambles just off the pathway, and crawled along a low gully.

If they really wanted her home, they'd have to find her.

Leila Chapter 44

Duke was finishing up his packing inside the house.

Just a couple more days and we'll go.

The nearest road was at least half a mile away, but there was a very narrow, sometimes impassable, lane which came a little closer. On a calm day if the breeze was in the right direction, the peace would be ruffled by the drone of a car engine and occasionally the drone of a rambler. They almost never came anywhere near him, which was the way he liked it, but right now there was the unmistakable sound of one or more cars heading up and down the lane as dusk fell.

He heard the sirens too.

It wasn't fully dark but from his bedroom skylight he could make out some distant lights flashing. They were the piercing blue that could only come from the emergency services. He stood and looked out at the greying night sky punctuated with blue flashes.

Sooner than I thought.

He wondered whether Mr Planner had finally got his way. But even Kevin Walker wouldn't be able to call in the full blue-light brigade for a simple eviction which was as good as done anyway. No, this felt different.

Someone's in trouble. Where?

He thought of Leila, but then reassured himself that she would never be out there at night, and that after yesterday she would probably give it a day or two anyway. In any case, she knew the woods well enough. Leila wouldn't get lost.

He stood watching. The lights seemed to flash for a few seconds, then go off. Then reappear on a different part of the horizon. He realised that each time they reappeared, they were closer to where he was standing. Then they stopped, as the last bit of proper roadway ended.

A few minutes passed.

Now, voices. Distant, but getting louder with each step.

What are they shouting? Surely not the eviction notice? No!

After two or three more minutes it became clear.

'Leila! Leila! We know you're there!'

'Leila, come out! You're safe now. It's OK!'

In that moment, everything changed. This was no planning officer with a clipboard. This was the police. Lots of them, and they weren't carrying clipboards. Hurried voices got louder and police radios chattered excitedly. His mind raced.

She must be in danger! I need to help her. But…what if they think…? What if they actually think that I…?

He considered his options. None of them seemed to make sense. His concern for Leila was overshadowed now by his terror for himself. He could not deal with this. Police in uniforms. Difficult questions. Investigations. Interrogations.

Grabbing the bag from the bedroom table, he stumbled and smacked his elbow on the solid steel frame of the bed. Swearing silently as he felt warm blood trickle down his arm, he grabbed the sheet and did his best to staunch the flow. There was no time for injuries, but the blood kept coming. He tore a piece of the sheet and fashioned a bandage which he tied tightly round his arm, discarding the rest. He careered into the hallway, just in time to see half a dozen torchlights heading down the path. He had to think quickly.

He'd been too slow to make his escape from the front, so he quickly jumped down into the basement, locking the door behind him. It was one of the areas of the house that was unlit, so he had to feel his way down the staircase until he hit bare earth at the bottom. He could hear heavy boot-steps above him, and the barking of at least two police dogs. Over the general hubbub, they were persistently calling her name.

‘Leila! Leila. Where are you? You can come out now!’

They think she’s in the house? Where is she?

He stumbled through the jumble of stuff he kept down there, just as the door he'd locked at the top of the stairs was kicked in by one of the officers.

There was a loud clumping down the cellar steps and flashes of the torches. Feeling his way in the dark, along the beams beneath the house, he crept out into the warm night.

He moved through the blackness of the forest like a feline, belying his fifty-something years. He knew each pathway intimately, after hundreds of trips to collect firewood or to hunt for protein. He could still hear the police sirens and momentarily contemplated going back to confront them. He assumed that they had made assumptions about him.

But he had run.

I’ve done nothing wrong. But I bet they think I have. They think I’ve taken her. No! But how can I explain that? She was here, and now she’s missing. Leila! Where are you?

He knew well enough that he'd not done anything, but he also knew that to explain that to a policeman, with all those lights flashing, or in some kind of holding cell, would be impossible for him in his current state.

He used the lights now, the piercing blue giving him just enough reflected light to proceed. He would not leave the forest. If Leila was in trouble, he must stay. He would dive deeper in, down into the cavern as he called it, by the lake. There was thick undergrowth there.

He would hide out until all this had passed.

And then find her.

Leila Chapter 45

Having settled down in thick woodland near the lake, Leila started calming her nerves with some of the things she'd nabbed from the kitchen. Some cheese and crackers she'd bought for him. *He said that was his favourite*. In the distance she could hear them calling her name, but she was in no mood to give up. She checked her bag. Enough food for a few hours. Warm clothes and a coat.

Sure, they'll find me. Make 'em sweat it out a bit though. All in good time.

She briefly wondered where Duke was. She hoped that he was not too upset by them going through his house. It was nearly nine o'clock, and her only other concern was that her feet were cold. It occurred to her that they might get even colder during the night.

Was she going to stay out all night? *You bet! That'll show them!* She wondered what it would be like to sleep outside. She had never done it.

She'd been thinking just that when she woke up.

She had slept where she'd sat down. She was right though. It had got cold. She looked at her watch which glowed reassuringly in front of her misty eyes. It was close to midnight. There was a dry cracking sound as she shifted position to relieve the pressure on her back and legs. At least it had not rained.

She settled back into a more comfortable position, her head resting against the backpack she'd used for the provisions, and thought she heard something. Unlike earlier in the day, her head was clear now. Her overactive mind during the day was a superpower at night. Her senses were razor-sharp, and as she inclined her head to the very best angle, she could hear something, or someone, moving about in the undergrowth, not far from where she sat. She knew that she was nigh-on invisible in the darkness, but moving was not an option - she could not be seen but she would definitely be heard.

The shuffling and the rustling seemed to get closer. Perhaps it was an animal. Yes, that would be it. A deer perhaps? That was the largest thing she'd ever seen in here. There was nothing dangerous out there, was there? An inquisitive badger? Did they bite? Weren't they the kind of creature that was more frightened of you than you were of them? The sound moved a little closer still. A regular soft plodding through the dry leaves. Animals didn't do that. Those were human footsteps. But no human would find her out there, would they? Animals used their sense of smell. Humans didn't. It was pitch dark. She was invisible.

The footsteps got closer.

She thought again about moving. Maybe running now. But she stayed calm. Cool. Listening to her own breathing. Listening to the steady parting of the undergrowth as whoever it was made his way, or her way, or its way towards her.

Leila Chapter 46

Leila shifted uneasily as the sound got closer. On the estate there was always a street light, or a light on in someone's window, or just the orange glow that hung over a town. Here, nothing. She struggled to see the hand in front of her face.

They were still out looking for her.

But she didn't want to be found. She nestled further down into the little hollow and pulled some bracken over her head, thinking it would give her protection, and perhaps a little warmth. It did not. No matter, it felt like she was more hidden.

The noise carried on, coming closer, a bit louder.

Tramp, splash, tramp.

Someone's coming. To find me.

But she still did not want to be found. Not yet anyway. She would stay out.

It's getting colder though.

She wrapped her coat and some of the vegetation more tightly around her. If she died, who would notice? She'd heard of bodies being found, frozen solid, weeks after they had disappeared. She thought this momentarily and then moved on. She would not die. A bit cold perhaps. Home in the morning.

If I make it through til morning. Maybe I should go back.

Splash, tramp, splash.

Closer now, it was almost certainly human. But no human could know she was there. If it was the police, they would have lights and would be talking with each other. Combing the place, noses to the ground.

?Maybe they'd do that for me. Maybe they wouldn't bother.

She couldn't move.

After two more tramps and splashes, silence.

She could hear her own breathing, and the wind through the leaves. And her own heartbeat. Nothing else.

She listened for two or three minutes. The footsteps had gone, or at least stopped.

Has it gone? Or is it very very close now?

Looking up her eyes clutched at the outline of a giant tree. In the darkness, she crawled towards its trunk. Her fingers reached up and traced the outline of five or six little crosses.

She almost hugged it and felt the snake-like scales of its bark, ivy intertwining, grasping at her fingers.

Leila Chapter 47

Duke had been determined not to go far.

Dogs were still barking in the distance, so he stayed in the water to try to prevent them tracking him. He'd emptied his old walking boots three times. It was getting colder.

He sat and listened. There was something or someone moving. Close by.

He dared not call out. He stared into the pitch blackness. He listened. He smelled the air. Anything to try to work out what it was that was so close. Was it a deer? Was it a dog? Surely not, or he would have been found by now.

There it was again. Shuffling feet, perhaps on the bank or just above the side of the stream. He tried to see again, but did not dare move quickly in case it was the police. For the same reason, the torch was out of the question.

He crept through the shallows on his hands and knees and slumped onto the bank of the little stream. Somewhere close he thought he could hear something breathe. A nervous panting. Not a dog, it was more subtle than that. This creature was holding itself back. Close enough to hear, but not to see.

He moved up into the shadow of one of the biggest trees in the forest. Standing up slowly, he leaned against it, his hands feeling their way through the snake-like scales of its bark.

Ivy intertwined and grasped at his fingers.

Leila Chapter 48

By six-thirty the next morning, four detectives, based on a report by Eloise, her father's latest, had joined the police at the shack. She told them that Leila often hung out there after school.

'Well, we knew he lived here Sarge. Under surveillance. We've monitored him constantly.'

Acting Sergeant Martin sounded unimpressed. Disbelieving even.

'Your usual constant monitoring? What do you mean by that? A monthly drive past?' The young constable withdrew a notebook from his breast pocket. His radio fell onto the ground. He stooped to pick it up.

'Well, as I say, Ma'am, we knew he lived here and we checked up on his movements on a regular basis.'

Martin knew this was just police-talk.

'He lived like a hermit. He didn't have any movements. What did you actually do?'

'Well, as I say, Ma'am…,' the officer was floundering.

'You just assumed he was here but actually you had nothing to suspect about him. Is that right?'

'Well, as you say.'

'Shut up, Constable.'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

The young officer almost saluted his superior, and went to make himself busy securing the crime scene. The sergeant wrote something down and looked on as two squad cars squealed out of the clearing, sirens blaring. *Did they really need to do that?* she thought to herself as she glanced at the mess they had churned up.

She stepped back.

Two forensic staff were dusting the front door for fingerprints. Martin was struck by the door - to call it a door was an exaggeration. Like the rest of the cabin it was just a few planks nailed together that more or less filled the doorway. There was a rudimentary latch on it, but it seemed clear that the hermit, or whoever he was, was not the kind of person to lock his doors anyway.

There were windows too. Wooden ones, with peeling white paint, some old metal framed dormer windows mostly rusted down to the steel frame, and an out-of-place PVC patio door which was double-width and which gave onto the wooden decking. Two stout logs sat facing each other, as if in conversation.

She looked up at the roof, which was mostly rusted tin, corrugated and uneven.

How could anyone live here?

George Swanson, Detective Inspector, got out of the passenger seat of the BMW and strode into the house.

‘Inspector! Over here! I think we’ve got something!’

Swanson walked over to where the young detective was standing, just by the empty fireside. The rookie pointed to a picture loosely tacked to the wall above the mantelpiece, which was fashioned from an upturned pallet.

‘He’s been drawing pictures of her!’

The picture showed a girl with deep brown eyes. The young officer seemed to shudder slightly and shuffled to the left as Swanson approached the drawing. The eyes seemed to follow him as he stepped aside. He stared back as they followed him, like the ghost of a perhaps-dead child seeking retribution.

‘Good work, Ryan,’ said the senior man, stooping slightly, as if the youngster had just unearthed some impossible-to-find DNA evidence, ‘photograph this, bag it, send it for analysis. Then search the house. Someone like this will have hundreds of those. And probably worse.’

‘Yes, Sir!’ said Ryan in triumph. He turned and went to look for the photographer. The eyes followed him relentlessly.

Over in the bedroom across the hall, two other officers were surveying a grisly scene. The double bed had tape across the bars where the headboard would have been, and stout string or rope strung across the mattress.

Professional and efficient, the photographer focused her lens on several specifics. The ropes. The tape. A scrap of torn sheet lying across the single grotty pillow, and a deep bloodstain on the blanket. Focus. Click. Focus. Click. It was all the evidence they needed.

Now they just had to find the girl.

Before it was too late.

Leila Chapter 49

Leila had sat by the tree for maybe an hour, maybe more, waiting and listening. She probably slept. It was silent now. Time to move.

I need to warn him. They are coming for him. It's all my fault. I should have gone home. Aghh! So selfish. So stupid! I need to find the shack.

She glanced down at her watch. Just before seven. He would not welcome her appearing at his house that early in the morning. She'd never been there in the morning. She settled back down and tried to work out where the house was, trying to retrace her movements around the forest during the night. She peered out of the little gully and looked at the smoke trail that often led her there. But the sky was clear, there was nothing. That was unusual, he always kept the fire going. A sign of life. His lifeline.

Struggling to extract herself from the brambles, she noticed that the tree she was camped by was one of 'hers'. Coupled with the smell of the charcoal heaps nearby she managed to orientate herself. She shifted carefully and poked her nose out. In the distance she could hear a police siren, or perhaps an ambulance.

He's hurt himself?

She often wondered what he would do if he got injured or seriously ill.

Who would come for him?

Leila stumbled out onto the track, then quickly stumbled back off it. There were people ahead in the distance. Police.

He's hurt. This is no eviction. Something's happened. I must get to him.

Half-walking, half-crawling, she kept to the morning shadows at the side of the path. She could see two men in uniform outside the front of the shack. She crawled into some thicker brush and made her way around the clearing to the back. It was a couple of hundred yards before she reached one of the sheds he'd constructed for his various projects. She slid under the saloon door without a sound.

Something shot out of the shadows, brushing her hand. A mouse, a rat? She stifled her shock, hand over mouth. She tip-toed across the floor, to an open window. She was just a few feet from the cabin. She slipped through the window, scrambled across the gap, and found the back door. Ever so carefully, she nudged it open and crept in.

She could hear voices. Men talking. The voices were harsh and urgent. She hoped one of them was his.

That's not him. Something's happened. Where is he?

Standing beside a doorway, and making herself as thin as possible, she slid across the little corridor into a small room dominated by a grubby double bed. *Is this how he lived?* She was somehow disappointed. *Or maybe he just left in a hurry?* The covers and sheets of the bed were ruffled, as if they had been recently slept in. His bedroom. She almost felt like checking the bed for warmth. For *him*.

She pushed the door of the room closed leaving just a crack. She was alone. There was a rudimentary

bedside table, perhaps home-made, and a couple of books. There seemed to be a kind of notebook on the top of the other two books. She crouched down on the far side of the bed, because she could still hear voices from below, and reached over to take hold of the notebook. As she did, the two books on which it was perched crashed to the floor. She swore silently to herself and slid under the bed, as far away as she could get from the entrance. She lay there for a moment, her heartbeat dominant. Until the footsteps. Coming down the corridor. More talking.

She couldn't make out the words exactly, but she heard her name. They were heading her way.

I shouldn't have come in. I should've gone home. Why did I do this? Maybe I'm in trouble now? I broke in. Shouldn't have done that. Oh sorry. Sorry. Where is he?

As the voices came closer, she could hear more clearly what was being said. Every few seconds, her own name! They were talking about her. And now, a more gentle call. Concerned, sympathetic. Hopeful.

'Leila. We know you're in there. It's OK, you're safe now.'

More chatting outside in the corridor. The crackle of a radio. Then the door opened gently and she saw boots. Lying completely still, she felt the joists and the floor bow a little as they entered. A single torch played patterns on the walls and on the floor close to the bed.

'She's here somewhere. Check over that side. Leila? Are you in here?'

And then a torch beam caught her right between the eyes.

'We've got her! We've got her!'

A shout went up from the nearest policeman. Loud this time. Triumphant. More pounding down the corridor as what seemed like a whole battalion came to investigate. She cowered under the bed without speaking. Surrounded.

Then a more gentle, female voice.

'Is that you Leila? Are you OK? We're here to help. Don't be scared.'

Leila lay there, breathing heavily, as more pairs of boots gathered around the bed.

'Just go away will you. Leave me alone! Where is he? What have you done with him?'

'Leila we can help you,' she repeated, 'please come out when you can. No need to hurry.'

Leila lay there panting, then gradually drew herself out from her hiding place and saw two female officers shooing the rest out of the room. She pulled herself up, sat on the edge of the bed and wedged the notebook under her knees. One of the officers sat down next to her. Too close. Leila shifted left.

'We are pleased to have found you Leila. A lot of people have been worried about you.'

'Where's he gone?' she whimpered.

‘I know it must be difficult for you, Leila, but don’t worry. You’re safe now. We won’t stop looking. We’ll find him. He won’t be able to hurt you any more.’

‘Hurt me? Hurt me? He never hurt me. Where is he? What have you done with him?’

‘Relax Leila, we will take you back to your father very soon.’

‘I’m not going until I see him! What have you done?’

She slipped the notebook inside her shirt, and clutched it close to her.

‘We’ve got an ambulance on the way for you, Leila. You’ve been through a lot. Do you know how long you’ve been missing?’

‘I haven’t been missing. I’ve just been in these woods!’

‘Please come with us, Leila. We need to take some details and get you checked over. We have some people who can talk to you.’

‘Don’t check me. Don’t talk to me. I need to go home now. Please let me go.’

‘I’m afraid it is not as simple as that, Leila,’ she said gently, ‘you’ve been out all night. You must be cold and hungry. And we believe this is a crime scene. We need to investigate.’

Leila looked around as they walked her out through the front door. Two police officers were sitting on the logs opposite each other, their heavy equipment discarded beside them, drinking tea and chatting gratefully about what had happened. More people by two squad cars in the clearing. There was even a reporter and a cameraman. Leila blinked as they gently persuaded her out through the compound and into one of the cars. She thought they were going to clap.

‘What’s this crime you’re talking about?’ she asked as someone bowed her head to avoid the door frame. The other rear door opened and her dad slipped into the car beside her. He patted her leg but didn’t look at her. She could see he’d been crying, or up all night. Or both.

‘It might be serious Leila,’ said WPC Martin as she squeezed in beside her, ‘abduction. Endangerment. Bodily harm. Don’t worry, your ordeal is over. You’ll be home soon. We’ll find him. Don’t you worry about that. You’re safe now. Dad’s here.’

With that the car door slammed, and they set off out of the forest.

She stared out of the rear window at the house she knew she would never see again.

Leila Chapter 50

WPCs Martin and Bayfield walked Leila into the station. First stop, the medical room. An ambulance had accompanied them from the forest and two paramedics in green jumpsuits stood by wondering if they could help. Police Doctor Wu, her stethoscope slung round her neck and clipboard in hand, entered the room and shut the door behind her, ushering out the two officers with a no-nonsense high-pitched grunt. Leila's father stood guard outside, nervously checking his phone.

'Is this a prison?' Leila asked.

'Oh no, Leila, nothing like that. It's where we have some nice people who can help you. Now, let me just check you over please.'

'Check me over? What are you checking?'

'I'm just doing my job Leila. Now, please lay down over there.'

'I'm fine. Look, I'm sorry. I just stayed out. Got a bit cold. A few scratches.'

'I just need to examine you. Please lie down and relax.'

After twenty minutes, the door opened. Leila's dad jumped.

'She OK?'

'She's clearly been through a lot. But apart from the odd lesion she seems fine. We'll get her wounds dressed now.'

'I haven't been through anything,' protested Leila, 'I just stayed out the night.'

'Well, it must have been very scary for you to be imprisoned like that,' said Martin, taking her arm.

Leila had had enough experience of social workers and the police, not to mention the idiot counsellors at school, to know where this was going. She just had to go with it even though only she knew the truth, and they would not listen to it.

'I went for a walk in the forest. I had a falling out with my dad. I decided to stay out all night. I found the shack and decided to take a look around.'

'It's very common, Leila, for people to deny bad things. That's OK. We're here to listen.'

'You're not listening! You don't hear what I'm telling you! Just listen!'

'The brain's amazing isn't it Leila? It helps to protect you. To block out the bad things. It is OK, Leila, we will give you time. All the time you need. Now, the officers who found you are running some tests on the bed. We always find out the truth of what happened.'

Leila laughed in astonishment at what they were suggesting, and in frustration at the pointlessness of her even speaking. They had made up their stupid minds and nothing would change them. She also knew that they virtually never found out what happened.

After three days on and off, back and forth from the station, and interviews at home, they finally played their trump card.

They fetched Nigel.

‘Tell me, Leila. I’m listening.’

‘Tell you what? I’ll tell you something. I’m not listening.’

‘I can feel your pain Leila. Deep down.’

Leila looked down. Deep down. There was no pain down there.

‘You can’t feel my pain, because there isn’t any. And anyway if there was, it would be mine, and you would not be able to feel it.’

‘Maybe it’s time to get back on the horse, Leila.’ He looked quite pleased with himself.

She really thought he'd lost it this time. She stood up.

‘Look, you people have tried to get me to tell you what happened. And I have. I went in the woods and stayed there the night. I’m sorry I did that. The next morning I went in the house, looking for a friend I used to visit. He was gone. And now the problem, and whatever crime you are looking for, is all yours. Where is he now? Harassment, victimisation and bullying. You may be responsible for something much more serious, and much more tragic. And if you are, I’ll be coming for you.’

She got up and left the room.

This time, finally, they did not try to stop her.

At just about the same time, many miles away, a barefooted man slid calmly across the border into South Wales, far from the constabulary that was blundering around, excitedly chasing him for a non-existent crime that he did not commit.

Leila Chapter 51

ONE YEAR LATER

Leila had returned to the woods on multiple occasions. The forest itself was still a calming influence, and she still had her trees. She studied the ticks and rough cross marks hoping for a sign, but they never changed. Each time she ventured as far as the shack it just asked her questions.

Where is he? Why did he leave? What is he doing? Is he alive?

The last question played on her mind.

The shack was being consumed by the forest. The police tape that still surrounded it had become enveloped by weeds and creepers, and the local vandals had dealt with most of the remaining windows. Everyone, it seemed, was inspired by a local mystery story. The planners, of course, had got their way, but even one year down the line they had done nothing to remove the building as instructed.

He could still have been there.

On one occasion, Leila had sat close to where she'd hidden the year before and had seen someone moving around inside the shack. Her eyes had done a double-take, and her heart had raced as quickly as it had when she was hiding out that night. But even then she was not surprised when one of the local hooligans strode calmly out, proudly holding some trophy he'd found in the house.

'Get out of there! That's private property!' she bellowed at the top of her voice. She felt some ownership and some pride over the building. Noah, who had not been there once since that first visit, was so shocked he dropped whatever he was stealing and ran for his life.

Leila played over and over in her mind what had happened that night.

She thought about how much she had depended on him. The past year had seen her try to lean on others for guidance, but no-one had matched the love and support he'd given her. As close as he could be to actual family, he'd just understood her and had been ready whenever, always there, and always able to say the right thing, or to not say anything. He'd helped keep her more or less in line for the whole of that year.

And now he was gone.

The guilt of that night occasionally overwhelmed her. She tried to reassure herself.

He was going to leave anyway. But that stupid argument? Why did I stay out all night? Why did the police have to come? Why?

Sometimes it all got too much. It was all her fault. He could be dead.

Each day at school became more of a trial and even she knew that her absence from the lessons she

didn’t like, and her attitude in the ones she did like, was becoming more and more of a problem. She'd seen *‘problem children’* eventually disappear, and she was aware enough to know that might well happen to her. Although she hated every day there, she had no alternative. At nearly sixteen, she had at least another year to complete, and just bunking off held no attraction.

Some teachers, Miss Stuart who led English and Mrs Winchett who taught Maths, seemed to understand her. The rest, with head teacher J.F.Walsingham, MA - as it said on the school sign - the worst of them, they just stuck to regulations. If Leila didn’t like the rules, if Leila couldn’t see what they were there for, well that was her problem, and she could just lump it.

All she needed to know each day was what was going to happen, when it was going to happen, and what was expected of her. That way she could plan her day, and unravel some of the confusion. That was rare.

Sometimes the boring ones were actually better! At least she knew they would be tedious for the entire hour.

Predictable!

Mrs Winchett, who Leila liked and respected, often went, as she called it, *off piste.* But going off piste didn’t suit Leila at all. Just when she thought that she was getting the hang of something, Mrs W would throw in some crazy anecdote or riff on some related topic that had just occurred to her. Everyone loved her stories.

‘Well, talking about *pi*, have you ever heard the *Pi Song?* There was this time my brother queued up for three hours at HMV to get his thigh signed by Kate Bush! He didn’t wash it for weeks. It might still be there for all I know!’

Leila didn’t like her stories.

What’s that got to do with maths?

Improvisation, to Leila, just meant confusion.

The notebook she'd liberated from the shack that night was still with her. She often thumbed through it, but apart from a few squiggles and a couple of numbers, it was empty. She should have given it to the police.

She had not.

Leila Chapter 52

A FEW MONTHS LATER

Inevitably, Leila had reached the end of the line at school.

She'd been called to a meeting - just the latest invitation that her dad had not managed to attend. She was there on her own.

She sat in the chair that had been offered to her. It was a low chair in the corner of the room, as far away from his desk as was possible. The room was decorated with the usual range of student work and meaningless certificates. Leila waited, and waited. Nothing happened. She scanned the wall. The school was still a dump.

Thank you for organising your Sponsored Silence for Comic Relief

Your donation of £67.86 will go to support homeless families throughout the UK

She remembered that one. She'd called out right in the middle of it. *Sixty-eight quid! From 1200 students. Pathetic.*

Congratulations to

Mr J.F. Walsingham MA, Eco-Head of the Year 2006

Eco-head? What the hell does that mean? What's wrong with him? Bonehead more like.

'Can we get started then?' asked Leila, from behind her phone. It was a fair question. She'd been there for ten minutes and no-one had said anything. She glanced up and noticed that Walsingham looked nervous. He shuffled a few papers in front of him.

'Of course, I'm just waiting for Mrs Robinson to join us.'

'Why? Don't you know what to say?'

She glanced up at him and thought how pathetic he looked.

Waiting for Mrs Robinson? Just get on with it! Or can't you do it by yourself?

It was another ten minutes before the Deputy Head arrived. She had, as usual, been doing several other things. She sat down next to Leila and was her usual sympathetic self. Although they'd had many run-ins in the past, she'd been one of the more understanding and supportive ones.

'I hope you are well today Leila.'

'I'm OK. Thanks.'

‘Good. Has Mr Walsingham explained why you are here?’

‘Of course not.’

JF had arrived at school that morning in nervous dread of the meeting. No staff member enjoyed difficult conversations with students, and ultimately it was the Head’s responsibility to do it. It didn’t make him very good at it, or confident that he would do it well. He had been thrown into the role and had proudly erected the sign outside, but he’d never been comfortable. The promotion was based on his availability at the time. At heart, he loved his RE teaching, but that was gone. He shuffled again.

‘Leila, is your father able to attend?’

‘He said he would try, but he’s busy.’

Leila was continually embarrassed by this. Although he was a loser, and she was better off without him, she still hated it when he did not support her. She could tell this was an important one and that he should be there.

‘Well, we’d better start. Leila, this meeting is to arrange a managed move. I’m afraid your disciplinary record now means that we have to invoke the transfer clause in the Home-School Agreement.’

‘What’s that in English?’

‘You’re going to go to another school, Leila.’

‘So you’re chucking me out?’ Leila knew exactly what was happening, but she liked the sound of the language she was using, and she knew it would make him feel uncomfortable. She stared directly at him.

‘In consultation with yourself, and your parents or guardians, we will seek an immediate transfer to a suitable alternative provision,’ he droned, staring at his bits of paper, ‘unfortunately you have reached the threshold of exclusions and Pupil Referral Unit attendances and we have no options left.’

‘Well, you’ve always had the option to support me properly.’

‘I’m not sure I know what you mean.’

‘You definitely don’t know what I mean. You never have. You haven’t even tried. But I’ve read your stupid documents too. You can’t do this.’

She knew that they could, and that they probably would, but she wasn’t going to go down without a fight. He bristled and shuffled his papers some more. Leila carried on.

‘Check your brochure and your website.’ She'd done her research. ‘It says that you will ‘treat every child as an individual’. You are not supposed to shove me, or anyone else, into one of your ridiculous little boxes. Just because you can’t label me ‘sporty’ or ‘academic’ or ‘scientific’ means that you label me ‘difficult’. And that is like a death knell in this place. Your school is like a prison to people like me. A life sentence.’

She felt like reaching into her bag for one of her pictures to show them what she could do, or even

drawing something there and then to show them how ridiculous they looked.

‘Well, if you don’t follow the rules, you deserve to be punished.’ He was struggling to make any sense. She got up.

‘Look, I don’t need your stupid school. Tell my dad you’ve permanently excluded me. You’ll be hearing from him. Expect a surprise visit.’

The threat implied by these words was not one she expected her father to carry through, but again she liked the way it sounded. The Head’s ruddy features seemed to go slightly white at the thought. The Deputy did her best.

‘So Leila, I will do everything I can to help you find somewhere more appropriate. Please come with me to my office.’

Leila crossed the room towards the door, with the thought of giving the Headteacher one more mouthful, but she thought better of it and calmly followed Mrs Robinson through the door. The urge to throw something, or to spit on the ground as she left, was one she managed to resist.

As she slumped down in a chair in the next-door room, she let out a couple of heavy sobs. Sheila Robinson handed her a tissue.

‘I’m sorry Leila, I really am.’

‘I know you are Miss, so am I.’

They sat for a few moments in silence. Mrs Robinson tapped away on her computer, and did not turn round.

‘I’m going to miss you, Leila.’

‘Thank you, Miss,’ Leila managed to squeeze out, quietly.

‘And I think you’re going to make it big one day.’

Leila stopped snivelling, and sat up, looking at the woman’s back. Mrs Robinson seemed reluctant to look her in the eye.

‘What do you mean?’

Mrs Robinson smiled and brought her hands together, linking her fingers.

‘Well, I mean what I say. Once all this is out of the way, I can see you going far.’

‘All this, Miss?’

‘School, I mean.’ She turned and unlocked her fingers, spreading her arms wide, and gestured at the walls around her. In Leila’s head they seemed to open up in front of her, ‘Once you’re done with school. A new start. I think you’re going to make it. I really hope so.’

‘You’re right Miss. One day I’m going to make it. Not today,’ she said as she looked up, ‘but one day I’m gonna make it really big!’

Leila Chapter 53

It was two years since Duke had vanished, and the interest in the unsolved mystery was waning, mirroring the slow perishing of the house. Although the police were not ready to close the case, they had given up expressing any hope of bringing anyone to justice.

The national papers lost interest after a year or so, and it was left to the *Daily Advertiser* to try to keep the story live. Their crime correspondent, Alena Adams, regularly published salacious rumours and claimed breakthroughs in the story, all without finding him or producing any evidence. She knew that Leila was the only witness, and tried to contact her every few months.

Each attempt saw more elaborate ruses to get her to talk.

Leila saw Adams cross the road towards her, not far from the old lady's house. She recognised her from the photo that appeared alongside every article. *By Alena Adams, Crime Correspondent*. Her hair was short-cropped, dyed near black, and her huge hooped earrings jangled as she approached. They passed each other on the pavement.

'Hey! Wait a minute! Leila, isn't it?'

She was a good five yards past. Leila stopped and turned. Adams knew who she was, and she knew she knew. The previous August a black Audi A4, its gold wheels glinting in the early evening sun, had pulled up alongside Leila as she left school. Adams was in the driver's seat and had asked Leila for directions, to Leila's house. Leila had run home without speaking, but the car had noted the address.

'Leila, remember me? I'm Alena! You know, from the paper?'

Leila had no need to remember her, and still less to talk to her.

'Yeah. I'm going home.'

'Well, just stop a sec! D'you feel like a chat? Look, I've got something to show you.'

Leila stopped. Adams fiddled with a scarf that was partly obscuring her face.

'What do you want to show me?'

'Photos.'

'What kind of photos?' Leila knew that newspapers weren't to be trusted with photos.

'Your friend. Duke was it? I think I've found him. Here, take a look.' Leila's heart started to thump. She could feel it.

'Come, sit down. Perhaps you'd like to go for a coffee?'

There was nowhere to go for a coffee.

'I don't drink coffee. What's wrong with your face?'

‘Well, a cup of tea…oh, never mind. Come and sit here.’

Adams motioned to a wooden bench under a flowering cherry tree twenty yards up the road. They sat right in front of the brass plaque.

Alison Porter

1961-2012

Beloved wife, mother and grandmother

Alena fiddled about in her briefcase. She brought out a thin file, and opened it carefully, laying it on Leila’s lap. Adams was nothing if not dramatic, and her methods had earned her the grudging admiration of the guys back in the office. As had her short-cropped bob, and those skirts she usually wore.

‘Do you know this man?’ She turned over one of two pictures in the file. Leila stopped, heart thumping.

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Well, who is he?’

‘I don’t know his name. He was at the shack. He was trying to get Duke out.’

Kevin Walker’s weaselly features stared out from the glossy print. Leila knew who he was, because his tales of his fruitless planning meetings and disgusting cups of tea had become quite the thing when the story broke. Any published article usually featured his face somewhere.

‘But so what? You’re not looking for him, are you?’

‘No of course we’re not!’ Adams laughed, and nervously fingered the remaining print underneath, ‘we’ve had quite enough of Mr Walker!’

Duke had disappeared into thin air. At one point there had been claims of sightings, in Dorset, and even in America, where the *Daily Mail* seemed to suggest they had scoured the endless forests of the entire Eastern states, speculating on anyone who might have recently built themselves somewhere to live.

‘What about… this one?’

Adams looked up at Leila before turning the second image slowly over. Leila took it from her.

It was a grainy picture of someone resembling him on a rural railway platform. A still from a poorly-maintained CCTV unit, it captured a stooped, hooded figure sitting alone, presumably waiting for a train.

Leila held the photo in her hands, as if tending something precious. She forced her eyes to quickly take in every detail, as if it would self-destruct under her touch.

‘Our people have run a few checks on the location. It looks like one of the stations in the New Forest,

possibly Ashurst. He's on a platform heading east. We've been to talk to the villagers, but so far nothing. Can you shed any light on where he might be?'

Leila knew what she was asking. Although she'd just been presented with as much information as there was at that time, she wasn't going to add to it. Certainly not in front of this grubby reporter.

'I need to go home. My dad's waiting for me.'

'Well just wait a minute Leila, there's another thing you might be interested in.'

'What?'

'Did you know he used to be a sailor? You know, big ships, long journeys.'

'Yes, I knew that. He told me. What's wrong with your face?'

Adams peeled back the scarf a little.

'Oh that's nothing. My boyfriend and I had an argument this morning.'

'And he hit you?' Adams lowered her eyes.

'Well, yes. But perhaps it was my fault. We bicker a lot. Of course it's *never* right to hit someone.'

She patted the bruise. It didn't seem to be hurting any more. She continued.

'Now, tell me something Leila, has anyone ever hit you?'

'No not really.'

'Come on Leila, you can trust me. What did he do to you Leila?'

Leila knew she didn't have to answer these questions, and each one was drawing her further in. Her mind started to tense, she wanted to run. To get away. She couldn't think of what she should say, without it all getting worse. Instead of a reply, she screamed at the top of her voice. Adams leapt up, stuffing the files back into her bag, looking up and down the empty street.

'It's OK, Leila, it's OK! Calm down. I'm sorry.'

A black Audi screeched round the corner and pulled up in front of them.

'Is everything alright, dear? What's happening? Who are these people?'

It was the first and only time Leila had been pleased to see Mrs Parsons. She shuffled across the road - quicker than Leila expected - and thumped the bonnet with her stick. Adams jumped into the Audi's passenger seat, and it sped off up the road. The driver looked like he'd seen a ghost.

'I've never liked black cars, dear. Sinister-looking. Up to no good. Best get home now.'

'Thank you. I'm fine. Thanks.'

Mrs Parsons hobbled back to her house. She pushed her little garden gate shut and turned to go back down the path, tutting quietly.

Up to no good. She's right. Best get home.

With school now a fading memory, Leila had thrown herself into her illustrating, and had even reconciled somewhat with her father, who at least saw some merit in what she was producing. She spent hours and hours at what passed for a desk: a four-by-two, one-and-a-quarter-inch plywood sheet propped on a pair of trestles he'd got for her from the local freecycle. Drawing calmed her. As the hours passed, the sketches piled up. She sometimes tried to recall Duke's features, and picture them. But they were fading. After all, she'd rarely looked at him.

She was lonely.

Lying on her bed one evening, she mulled over in her mind what she knew of him. He'd fallen out with his daughter. His wife had died. He'd worked on ships for a few years. He'd come back to his *heimat* and built close to home. She knew him, as a friend. She'd almost thought of him as family. Certainly he'd been a more important part of her life than her family had ever been.

Would he return?

Despite all the confusion and bewilderment that had followed the police operation, she'd managed to preserve one piece of evidence that neither the police, nor Adams, had reckoned on. The police had believed her story that the notebook she'd found in his bedroom was in fact her own sketchbook.

She took yet another look at it now.

There was virtually nothing in it apart from a few diagrams which she realised matched some of the designs which had finally made their way into the building of the shack. They were rough pencil sketches, lacking either precision or care, and perhaps explained why the shack was, well, a shack, and not something more salubrious like a *'cabin'* or a *'chalet'*.

At the back of the book there was a single page with a few lines scratched on it, map-like, but without place names or further clues. There was a child-like sketch of a four-legged animal. Leila always smiled at that, and ran her fingers over it. Art was not his thing!

Right at the foot of the page was an illegibly scrawled word or name, and a few apparently random numbers.

Leila often daydreamed about meeting him again, and how it would feel. The only thing she would never forget was that voice, and the way it used to help unravel her thoughts. When she needed soothing she was still able to conjure up its tone, and a few words it might have said to her.

I've enjoyed our little chat, Leila.

As she stared at the notebook again, she tried to piece together what she remembered, right from the first moment she'd met him. How well did she actually know him? If no-one else would find him, could she?

Then again.

Is he even still alive?

She thought again, and started doodling into the back of the book.

A violin. And a chair.

The wooden terrace, with the log-seats facing each other.

She drew a rough outline of a ship, piled high with blocks of containers.

She sketched an eye, smiling as she recalled the four-minute challenge.

But how well did she really know him? She closed her eyes, trying to recall the softer details. His face and clothes. The picture above the fire. His mannerisms. His smile. She thought about how dependable and predictable he'd been for her.

He wouldn’t have gone far.

He’ll be back.

He’d been seen near the New Forest, maybe. That made sense! He was the forest-man!

He’d been heading east, perhaps. Along the south coast. She wondered how far. She looked out the map and was intrigued to see Southampton and Newhaven to the east. Wasn’t that where he said he'd worked on the ships? Maybe he’d go back to that? That would suit him. Or perhaps not - he was another ten years older.

The only remaining clue from the notebook was a scratchy number. A phone number. *Whose? Who knows? Where*? She couldn’t read the last few digits, but it started with 0127398…and then it tailed off, like it had been written in a hurry.

His daughter in Australia? That would make sense. His only family, the other side of the world. Away from everything.

Leila had just about decided in her head that that was what had happened, but then thought a quick check of the numbers she had would be worth a try. She felt like a proper detective as she typed the first few digits. She stopped when she got to the 3 as the screen started making suggestions. East Sussex. Brighton. Eastbourne. Newhaven.

Leila jumped up.

Newhaven!

Of course!

He’s gone back to sea!

Leila Chapter 54

Where is he? thought Leila.

I'm guessing back to sea. Newhaven. But where?

She reached for Duke's notepad, turning to the scrawly lines he'd drawn. Was it a map?

She ran to the village library, panting as she rushed to the section with the OS maps, in their plastic covers. *Newhaven? Which map is that? OK, 198.* She ran her finger along the shelf to where 198 should be. 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 199…*Oh no!* Was it out? She cast her eyes along the shelf. 200, 201, 198! Someone had put it back out of sequence. *Typical!*

She took the map to a table, removed it from the plastic sleeve, opened it, spread it out. Now the roads, the railways, the rivers - did they resemble Duke's tired scrawl? But try as she might, focusing in turn on the main roads, the rivers, the railways - nothing seemed to match.

But still she tried to find him.

Leila was not one to let him get away.

On one occasion she'd liberated a small amount of cash from her father's wallet and set off for the station. In addition to *needle in a haystack* she'd learned another stupid idiom. *Wild goose chase.*

But she didn't have a lot else to do.

Taking the train stressed her out. The journey east to the port of Newhaven was just over an hour, but for her the experience of being imprisoned in a metal tube played on her insecurities and her fears of other people. The train was a local stopper, without the airiness and freedom of new rolling stock. It seemed to have carriages from the steam age, such was the decrepitude and filth of the banquettes and the windows.

Her only companions in the carriage were a teenage couple, close to her own age, who spent the entire journey kissing and cuddling each other.

'But I do! I really do!' She kissed him again on the forehead, leaving a sticky lipstick mark, and tickled him like a baby.

'I love it when you do that!' he giggled stupidly, wiping his head with the sleeve of his parka.

They made no attempt to conceal any of this. Leila had twice moved seat, but could not escape their nonsense.

She could have moved carriage, but she'd set her mind on being in the fifth one along, so that was impossible. There was no-one else on the train - it was the middle of a Tuesday morning after all and very few commuters or business-people were travelling at that time.

She looked forlornly out of the window as the train rumbled on through the villages and towns of the East Sussex countryside, Polegate and Glynde and Lewes. Each time she saw a little copse or a larger woodland she wondered, just wondered.

Is he out there somewhere? Has he started building again?

She imagined the spring sunshine dappling through the trees onto the new deck, and him offering her a revolting cup of tea. She smiled to herself at the thought. At Lewes she changed for the branch line down to Newhaven.

Newhaven? Really?

Over the previous few weeks she had convinced herself that the notebook held all the clues. An East Sussex dial code, including Newhaven. She'd tried many times to work out the other digits of the number, and had even started dialling possible numbers until she realised the set of combinations was almost endless. On one occasion a man had even answered. A rough, brusque voice, and the name of a farm she'd not properly caught. She'd hung up in panic. The drawings that might, just might indicate a harbour, or the route to get there. The name scrawled above the number. She hadn't looked at it for a while. It seemed to end in -*ick* or something, but she couldn't make out the full name. And *Newhaven*. A new home!

It made perfect sense the more she dug herself into the theory.

The train trotted through the village of Berwick without the name registering.

At Lewes she left the train and sat down on the platform, waiting to make the ten minute journey down to the port. This time she seemed to be the only one on the two-carriage train.

Leila was getting hungry. She'd decided to treat herself to a proper lunch. However pointless the quest, she would make a day of it! She would find a café somewhere and have something horribly unhealthy, with chips! Or she might even find a pub. Could she carry that off?

As the train crept south, she tried to imagine what sort of a sight she presented to others.

Someone might stop me, but what the hell? All alone down at the seaport on a Tuesday?

But she'd got considerably taller in the last few months, so any puppy fat and chubbiness had disappeared. In fact, although she wouldn't tell anyone else, or admit it, when she looked in the mirror she rather liked what she saw, at least in contrast with her younger days when she'd been full of self-loathing and doubt. Strong cheekbones. Clear skin. Silky hair, most of the time. And eyes! A little borrowed mascara to accentuate the lashes and bring out the deep brown.

She wore a heavy black coat, three quarter length, with little epaulettes on each shoulder, giving it a military look. Underneath she had a thin top and a sweatshirt, with tight blue jeans partly covering her legs. The kind of jeans with holes already built in to them when you bought them. She smoothed them down as she got up to leave the train and caught a glimpse of herself in the window.

Might they think I'm eighteen?

Probably.

Leila Chapter 55

Leila got off the train at Newhaven.

She'd shifted carriages, even though there were only two of them, because a ghostly voice had scratched over the intercom to say that the platform at Newhaven Town was being modified and that she would have to *alight* from the first carriage. Even on her own she'd laughed out loud at the thought of her *alighting* from anywhere.

As she got off, she was surprised not to immediately see the sea and the port area, until she realised that the line continued for a few hundred yards further, down to where a few desultory cranes dotted the horizon and a couple of cargo ships stood, their funnels glinting in the weak sunshine.

Her heart said, *'that's where he'll be!'* and her head said, *'don't be an idiot!'*

She strolled out of the sunlit station entrance and turned right. Leila looked at the sign.

Town Centre, 1 mile.

Too far, I'm hungry, she decided.

She followed the road signposted towards the docks instead, hoping to find a café or perhaps a corner shop where she could get something to eat.

Five minutes into her walk she saw the black-painted gable end of The King's Arms. The houses down one side of the street looked over warehouses and industrial units on the other. The pub had seen better days, but the door was open and at least it attempted to welcome its patrons, with promises of *Hot food all day*! and *Live music tonight!*

Leila peered through the window. The lights were on but no-one was home. Perfect. She took a deep breath, bowed her head, and went in. She had never been in a pub on her own.

The array of tables and chairs in the dingy saloon bar were temporarily overwhelming. She fell into a chair at a table for two right by the door, the first one she came to. She picked up a menu, hid behind it, and pretended to know what she was doing.

'It may never happen, love!'

Dean strolled over from behind the bar. A handsome twenty-something, he flashed a professional smile at Leila, his irony lost on her.

Leila looked up and her eyes caught his. She didn't smile, and her face twitched slightly at his use of the familiar. He backed away a little.

'What can I get you?'

Leila tried to think of grown-up drinks but her mind went blank. *Don't people in pubs drink beer? In pints? That won't work.* She sat up straight in the seat and ordered a coffee.

'Americano? Skinny Latte? Flat White? Espresso?'

The range of options was overwhelming, so she only really heard the last one.

‘Yes, Expresso please.’

‘Espresso,’ he corrected, ‘Single or Double?’

Too many questions! Leila didn’t drink coffee.

‘Yes, right. A double please.’

After a few bubbling noises from the bar, the young man came over with the tiny cup and an even tinier biscuit.

‘Normally, you come up to the bar for this.’

‘Sorry?’

He dropped the subject. He could see that she was under age. She knew she was. But he needed the custom. Even a single drink would help.

‘Anything to eat, darling?’

He really was the most annoying poser.

She took the tiny cup between her forefinger and thumb and took a sip of the coffee. It was hot, as she expected, but she'd never tasted anything so disgusting! Her face did that involuntary thing where it takes on a life of its own, screwing itself up, its cheeks twisting and turning to writhe away the unfamiliar bitterness, her nose burning in sympathy. The waiter smiled again. She wasn’t able to smile back.

‘Er, just some chips if you have them please,’ she forced out. Her unease pushed out her plans for a slap-up lunch.

‘Coming right up!’

Oh shut up! she thought crossly to herself. At least she was still in the pub and had more or less navigated the hurdles of ordering food and drink.

As she relaxed, she realised that she wasn’t the only person there. A couple were sitting in the far corner, close to an old piano. Mack and Julia lived next door, and always took lunch there on Fridays. As Mack looked up from his fish, he gave Leila a little wave. She didn’t wave back. She turned back to her menu, and thought about her fruitless mission.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the dregs of the espresso - the strongest part - and by a single figure shuffling into the bar. Momentarily, she thought she'd hit the million-to-one jackpot at her first attempt, but the man was short and skinny, his huge coat dwarfing his neat body. He carried a small briefcase and sat down at one of the tables near the piano. The waiter greeted him by name, and Julia got up and kissed him on both cheeks. The man ordered a beer. He grasped the glass, raised it, and slurped it down in one go. He put the glass down loudly, too loudly.

What is wrong with him? thought Leila. Then to cap it all he sighed. Not a real sigh, but one of those sighs to show off and make sure everyone has heard.

Idiot, thought Leila.

Leila realised she'd been looking at him too intently, like you do when you are on your own somewhere with nothing else to do. As he glanced to look at her, she turned away and pretended there was more left in her cup, bringing it to her lips as if to drink. He smiled at her in a slightly sickly way. The walls of the dark room, adorned with garish posters and memorabilia, seemed to be moving inwards on her, and the noise from the ancient jukebox seemed to get louder. She must have looked as she felt. Becoming uncomfortable. Not cool.

‘You playing tonight Dennis?’ asked Mack from the corner seat.

‘Yes I am. ‘Bout 8.00pm. Hope to see you there!’

‘We’ll be there! Nothing else to do round here!’ It seemed a well-practised routine.

‘Just going to sound check and practise a bit. Hope that’s OK?’ He looked across from the couple to Leila, as if seeking her approval. She said nothing.

‘Go ahead. Don’t mind us.’

Dennis pulled an A4 loose-leaf folder from his tatty case and manoeuvred himself towards the piano. He perched the music on the lid, but didn’t open the folder. He had taken off his coat to reveal black jeans and a black polo sweater hanging off his bony frame. He reached down into the coat pocket and removed a small pair of wire-rimmed glasses. Almost a *pince-nez*, they clung onto his full nose. He looked down intently at the music on the stand. It was perhaps new to him, because he seemed to be silently practising it, his fingers rehearsing their movements over the keyboard without actually touching it.

After scanning the paper, and scanning the keyboard, he pulled at the sleeves of his sweat top. He was ready. He closed his eyes and started to play. The room was suddenly full. Of notes. Of echos. Of vibrations.

Leila leaned back.

Her head was clear.

Leila Chapter 56

As the notes poured out from under his fingers, he started playing deep left-hand tones only, leaving his right hand free to adjust a microphone which stood on top of the piano. He pulled it close to his mouth and fiddled with a switch on the top. When he managed to turn it on, there was a loud fuzzy click as the microphone connected with a speaker. Leila could not see it. He called *'one-two'* a couple of times. The old speaker roared into life with surprising clarity.

Leila recognised the melody from somewhere. She was not good at naming tunes or remembering their names. She could almost always play them though.

He cleared his throat.

'I hear her, before I go to sleep, and think about the day that's been.'

The words were clearly sung. He sang them in tune. He stopped and smiled.

'Go on then, that's cool!' said Dean from behind the bar. Dennis laughed.

'I can't sing that one! I don't know the words, and it's a girl's song. It needs to be sung by a girl! I like the piano part though.'

Leila thought for a moment they were going to ask her to sing.

He turned back to the keys, and started playing the tune behind the words. Leila sat back and took in the resonance of each note. She might even have closed her eyes as the left hand picked out the chords of the song and the right hand tinkled out the tune on the high notes.

She rocked to and fro gently as the music played. It seemed to transport her. Her head, which was so often full to bursting, allowed the music to find its own pathways, each one razor-sharp but soft-edged enough so as not to hurt. Vibration and resonance.

But resonance with what? Her mind took her up, so that she was looking down on herself. She was in a pub, in a strange town. She wondered what on earth she was doing there. But in some way, she felt closer to him.

As she listened to the music and the performance of a song she vaguely recognised, she stared out of the window and tried to think about where she'd heard it before. She thought the chords fitted with something she knew. Something she played? Or something she'd heard.

She kept her eyes closed as the man played on. She listened intently, imagining other instruments layering on top of what he played. An orchestra. A symphony.

'More coffee? You OK?'

'Oh, er, yeah I'm fine. Nice playing.'

'Oh that wasn't me. That was Dennis.'

She felt like saying that of course it wasn't him and that from what she could see he clearly had little

talent for anything apart from waiting table. He smiled goofily again, perhaps expecting her to warm to him or expecting a return smile. He did not get it. She really wanted to tell him that he was ignorant and annoying and in the three minutes she'd spent in his company he'd done about ten things that pissed her off. She managed to resist saying all that. She got up.

She was about to leave, without destination, when Dennis stopped playing momentarily, and stretched his hands behind his neck, fingers entwined. He arched his back and groaned slightly. She walked over.

‘What’s that song?’ she said, without a ‘hello’ or an introduction. He smiled.

‘I wish I knew,’ he replied, before adding, ‘or rather what I mean is I would like to know what the song is called, and I don’t. Do you?’

‘I don’t.’

‘I find that I keep playing it. I must have heard it somewhere. I absolutely love the chord progressions.’ He looked at her assuming she would not know what he was talking about.

‘Yeah that change from the C to the A minor at the start of the chorus is the bit I like.’

Astonished, he looked up at her. The chords did change in that way. He rehearsed the first two bars of the chorus again. C to A-minor.

‘So, you play, do you?’

‘Not really. My dad doesn’t like me playing in the house. A bit of guitar maybe.’

‘Well if you can help with the title of this one please do!’ He turned back to his keyboard and popped out a few more notes. The unnamed song sang once more.

I definitely know that from somewhere, she thought.

‘I’m playing here later. Come along if you can.’

‘Thanks. I can’t do that.’

She always spoke her mind.

Leila Chapter 57

After he'd finished playing, Leila got up to leave and paid the barman hurriedly in cash. She realised that she'd not taken her heavy coat off during the entire hour she'd been there, sipping her drink and picking at her chips.

Must be cooler next time I try to pass for eighteen.

She stepped out onto the sunlit street and set off down the road towards the derricks and the ships.

Something was different. Leila drew on her photographic memory. *A missing funnel.* One of the boats had sailed.

Please don't say he's left, just coz I was having that stupid coffee.

When she reached the harbour, she found to her dismay that it was really nothing more than a concrete slab marking the end of the railway line, and the beginning of the dockside. There were a few hi-vis jackets milling about on the quay, and a ladder or drawbridge leading up to a small doorway on the side of the container ship. She'd never seen anything that size before, but it looked like it was ready to leave.

She sat alone on a bench overlooking the quayside, and took a swig from the water bottle she'd brought with her. She watched as the jackets started unhooking huge twisted ropes from the bollards adorning the dock. The ship started to groan and sway in the swell.

As the boat started to creep down the waterway, one of the men, his job done, made as if to join her on the bench. She was sure he looked her way. *Didn't he?* She was going to get up, as if she knew she shouldn't be sitting there, but then thought better of it, as he turned away with just a sidewards glance in her direction from under his protective clothing. The song still played in her head.

Her heart bumped noisily at her chest. She got up. Watched the yellow jacket walk towards a shed. She started to walk after him. There was a small prefab office just beyond a metal-link fence where, now the ship was on its way, the men were heading. She kept her eye on the man she had seen. His hi-vis gear was a slightly darker shade than the others, and his hood was up.

She jogged slightly until she could see him closing in on the office building. Without thinking, she quickened her pace until she was within a few yards of him. She could almost smell him. The body shape was the same, and the hair and beard were unmistakable.

'Hello!' she called out quietly. No response. He carried on.

A little louder this time. 'Hello! Excuse me!'

She expected him to turn round and fall into her arms. He did not. But he did stop and turn.

She faced the figure now staring her down.

'Staff only beyond this point, love. Sorry. Stop following me. Go away.'

The voice was as hard as granite, devoid of emotion. His words came from a face younger than Leila had expected. His voice was flat and monochrome. He looked tired. Twelve-hour shifts were hard

going.

She shrunk back and turned away.

One thing was clear.

She'd not found her man.

Leila Chapter D

Well, it's nearly finished.

I have just one more chapter to write.

I think it is important for us to see how Leila progresses into adulthood, so you will get a flavour of that in the next chapter.

Then we'll be done.

What you're reading is something like the second draft. I've been through the text so many times that it feels like I know every word off by heart! It gets to a point where you are so familiar with your characters that you think of them all the time. They become part of your life, and you catch yourself thinking about them in everyday situations.

What would Leila buy in the supermarket? How would she react to a long queue at the checkout? How would Duke help me if I got stressed in a traffic jam?

I hope you're still with me.

I guess if you've got to this stage you're still here, and I thank you for that.

I've been busy in other ways whilst finishing off the manuscript. One of the things you need, if you are serious about getting a book published, is an agent. An agent is someone who works between the author and the publisher, negotiating a deal to get the book produced, distributed and marketed.

My so-called agent is useless!

Larry. Even his name is pretty old-school.

He used to be well-connected.

He keeps asking me for re-writes and edits. He wants it perfect. Each set of requests can take weeks or months to implement, and it feels like I'm re-writing the thing each time. You have to dig deep.

I like that phrase! *Dig Deep*. It could be a metaphor for life really. Some days go well, some just do not. Good days, when everything seems positive and all you want to accomplish gets done, and other days when no matter how hard you try, you seem to get nowhere. I like to end each day feeling like I have achieved something. It could be a tiny thing, like tidying a shelf or drawer, or it could be something major, like finishing a chapter.

I make lists.

Lists of the most trivial things.

Sometimes if I do something that is not on the list, I will add it to the list and immediately cross it off. That way it looks like I am working through the list.

A good day for a writer is when you complete a chapter, or a page, or even just a sentence that you're

proud of. A sentence that you know will sit handsomely in the final edit. In a previous book I used the simple phrase *'he pulled at the far corners of his memory and dreamed of future possibilities.'* I'm still proud of that, and a day which resulted in that one sentence would have been classed as a good day.

A bad day for a writer is when nothing of substance gets written. I often find that a day which starts as a bad day can often turn into a good day, but you have to work at it. You may start a day with very few ideas, but the process of getting something - anything - down on paper evolves into something good. Today has worked out well, and I have got the final chapter of *Leila* more or less written.

A real bad day is when nothing comes out, nothing flows, and no useful words hit the paper. At that point it's probably best to do something completely different. Go for a walk. Do the shopping. Watch a movie.

Tomorrow will be a better day.

I have shown *Leila* to a number of people now, and most are pretty enthusiastic. They like the character of Leila herself, and they tend to sympathise with her issues and sensitivities. One person said that they felt a little sorry for her, because she seems to have no friends, but another commented that they wished that they too had her self-confidence - to go into those woods, to meet a stranger, and to seemingly come to no harm. Two people said that they admired her resilience and her courage. She seems to be her own woman - knowing what she wants. The last person who read it (an artist friend of mine) said that they loved her drawings and thought she could make it big one day!

Everyone seems to like Duke! They hope he is safe and well, and happy, wherever he is.

The only problem is this idiot agent. He thinks he knows it all. He thinks the format is wrong, and the story is slow-moving. But that's the point! Her life is a bit dull. She wants to make it better, which is why she engages with Duke and confides in him. He is her sounding-board. Someone she trusts (amidst all the people she doesn't trust).

Talking of people I don't trust, I must get a new agent.

Leila Chapter 58

FOUR YEARS LATER

Leila hesitated before struggling her way through the revolving door.

She'd taken the train into London. There were people. Everywhere. She'd struggled not to turn back more than once. But this was the first interview she'd had, and she was determined to steer a straight path towards a job that seemed made for her. They had told her to take a taxi from the station. She paid the driver the exact amount on the meter, in cash, which she counted out carefully in front of him.

He scowled and drove off without comment.

It was one of those offices styled for creatives. Lots of grey glass, a central atrium. Multiple sweeping staircases, and lots of open plan. It was nestled just south of the river, about half way between Charing Cross and London Bridge, and looked as if it had once been a warehouse or barn, with wooden beams and brickwork left tastefully exposed in all the right places. Split into pods, or distinct work areas, it housed five or six separate small businesses.

‘Oh hi there, I’m Candace, welcome to Hotfoot Productions.’ Her drawl was mid-Atlantic.

The woman could not have been much older than Leila. Twenty at most, with the tightest of tight black jeans, and no shoes. She made to air kiss Leila’s cheek. Leila was having none of it.

‘Er, OK I’ll go and get you some water,’ Candace said coolly, without asking whether Leila would like any, ‘please sign in just here, take a seat and make yourself comfortable. Nick will be along in a minute. You can use the guest wifi. No password.’

Leila looked down at her old Nokia, not even knowing whether it could access wifi or why she would want it to. She'd dressed in a way that she thought seemed appropriate, although over the preceding year or two she'd experimented with her hair, a range of body art, and piercings. She assumed those things were normal, and even encouraged, in such creative spaces, although as she looked around at some of the pods where people seemed to be working, she didn’t see anything quite like her own half-dyed hair, intertwined with brightly-coloured woollen braids. She shuffled in her seat and tried to pull her sleeves down over the tattoos. Especially the one on her forearm that showed a wild she-wolf. It was her favourite. Her calling card.

But she felt a bit out of place.

‘You must be Leila,’ said a man, looking around the otherwise empty space for his interviewee.

Fortyish, she thought, *and rich-looking*. She couldn’t quite put her finger on such things, but the cut of his jeans, the crispness of his white shirt, and the elegance of his jacket seemed to spell success, and money.

‘Thank you for coming. I’m Nick.’ He extended a hand, which Leila ignored.

‘I’ve got my portfolio here, would you like to take a look? You look rich.’ Leila started fiddling with her case.

Nick smiled.

‘No, no, not here. We’ll use one of the meeting rooms.’ The water had not arrived, and Candace had disappeared. It was just the two of them.

‘So, did you have a good journey? How far have you come?’

‘I came about the job. They said I could have an interview.’

The nerves were almost visibly pouring out of her, like sweat, and his attempts at small talk fell on deaf, anxious ears.

He abandoned his attempts at conversation, and got down to business.

‘Well, I must, say, Leila is it? I must say Leila that we have been interviewing a few candidates today, so I don’t want to get your hopes up unrealistically.’

‘My hopes of what?’

‘Well, of getting this job.’

‘What job?’

‘Ah yes, the job. Of course.’ He seemed nervous in turn. This was not going quite how the others had gone. The two others he had seen that morning had asked earnest questions about working hours, and holiday pay and pensions.

‘We had a look at your portfolio, Leila. You have a real talent there. We liked a lot of it.’

‘A lot of it? What didn’t you like?’

‘No, no I didn’t mean that, not at all. It’s just that some of the themes…’

‘Well your colleague told me to send a range of different styles as examples of what I can do.’

‘And that you certainly did. Thanks.’

Leila had submitted ten pencil drawings, mostly of human faces and woodland scenes. She'd been practising recently on crime stories she'd read in the paper, trying to picture what was reported. There had been a couple of robberies and even an attempted murder. She had drawn what she'd read, bodies and all.

‘We’re looking for a children’s illustrator, Leila. As I think you were told, one of our main products here is the *Bailey the Bullfrog* series. We need someone who has a track record of animal drawings.’

‘Track record? What do you mean?’

‘Look, Leila, you may have misunderstood. We are offering a short-term contract for someone to illustrate for *Bailey the Bullfrog* and *Terry the Tortoise.'*

Leila looked at this grown man with a degree of contempt. Although she'd heard that the two series had been successful, she wasn’t sure that she wanted to spend a year drawing for them, or even why he was bothered.

‘I can draw animals,’ she said.

‘OK, can we see a few examples please.’

Leila reached inside the case, and pulled out a blank sheet of cartridge paper, and started putting together a picture. Nick Jones went to the door.

‘Er, I’ll just go and fetch a colleague. Be back in a tick!’

Leila drew for perhaps five or six minutes. Jones came back in, with a severe-looking woman. Her hair was pulled super-tight into a bun, dragging her ears and chin backwards and her skin into an unattractive tautness.

‘This is Lola. Lola, Leila. Lola is our lawyer.’

Leila meets Lola the lawyer. Lame, thought Leila without looking up, pushing the drawing across the big table to where the pair sat down. She got up.

‘Look, I’m not sure this is for me. Sorry if I’ve wasted your time. I need to get home.’

Nick looked at the picture. He was temporarily stunned. In six minutes, she'd drawn the two animals in perfect proportion to each other, the tortoise side on and behind it the frog, its exaggerated cartoonish features including two enormous animated eyes which jumped out of the picture and seemed to follow them both as they moved.

‘This is extraordinary, Leila. Did you really do that when I went out to call Lola?’

‘I don’t know what you went out to do.’

‘Well, when I went out and came back with…oh never mind. That’s amazing. Lola will just draw up some terms and conditions and we can take a look at them. But let me take you for a tour of the office.’

‘Is this the office, then?’ She looked at the busy figures, each one in their little booth, beavering away on their important *Bailey the Bullfrog* duties.

‘Yes, everyone works here, unless they are travelling or at clients.’

‘At clients? Travelling?’

‘Yes, they are here about half the time, out and about the rest. Ah, here we are. This would be your pod.’

They stopped at an empty desk, with some blank panelling to about waist height, and a jumble of

computer cables. Levi, a thirty-something man with a prominent name badge, tired eyes and a well-tended beard, smiled from across the adjoining desk and then went back to his spreadsheet.

Leila sat down on the chair, which swivelled as she moved. She pulled it up to the desk and looked around. Despite the dividers, she could see at least twenty other people from the hot desk. Her mind multiplied them until there were forty, or sixty, all dressed in garish colours. And the noise! Work? *Really*? *It's like school again, just with adults. Even noisier.* At least at school everyone dressed the same.

Leila had made up her mind that she could stay one or perhaps two minutes more without losing her cool. She made towards the atrium.

'Look, er, thanks for the interview. Good luck..with your er… rodents. I-I-I, I'm sorry, but I couldn't work here. I'm not good with noise, or colours, or travelling. Sorry. Or clients. What are clients?'

'They're the people we work for, of course.' His tone was no longer affable, 'that's how we make our money.'

'Well, you'll have to make it without me.'

Lola the lawyer strode out of the corner office with her sums.

'We can offer you a competitive starting…'

'Please don't offer me anything. I need to go. Bye.'

Leila almost ran towards the fire exit door which swung towards her automatically as she approached. She flung herself through it and across the wide London pavement. Breathing heavily, she sat on a bench on the far side with her elbows on her knees, and checked the time of the first train home.

'You look like you've just escaped from somewhere!' said an elderly man who occupied the other half of the seat. Leila looked up at him and smiled.

'Yes, I think I probably have,' she replied, staring across at the display of human mice in the glass-walled office, each on their own little treadmill of life.

She went home.

It had been her first trip to London.

And it turned out to be her last.

Leila Chapter E

So I got a new agent.

She is lovely!

The main thing is that she loved *Leila*! I had revised it another couple of times and she said that it painted a proper picture of someone in Leila's position. She said the characters and the settings were rich and believable. And she said that the relationship with Duke was sensitively handled. What she meant by this was that it never got creepy or weird (which it could have done). The man is a decent person who genuinely seems to want to bring his experience of life into Leila's. That is a good thing. He never invites her into the house or anything like that. They always sit - him on his chair, her on her log stool.

She also mentioned the term *neurodiverse* to describe Leila. I had never thought of her that way - to me she was just a bit different and a bit special. But if the truth is that her brain perhaps works a little unconventionally, I like that. I still think she could go far!

So agents are a strange breed. You kind of need them, but you wish you didn't.

This new agent is called Susan. When I first showed her the draft of the book - an early draft - she described it as *'quite good'*. That is called *damning with faint praise!* It isn't rude, it just means that you are saying you like something, but you are not getting really enthusiastic about it. So her praise for the book was a bit faint. A bit feeble.

But she is a good person, and she had suggestions. For example, she said that Duke needed a clear back story. What that means is that he could not just sit there each day and help Leila through her life without having some experience or something relevant to be able to advise her. So we set him up as a former teacher. Hopefully a decent person.

At one point Duke tells Leila that he left his job (to care for his wife) after twelve years. Imagine all that he would have seen! Good days, and good classes, where everything fell into place and everyone did as they were told. Bad days, when his lessons were boring or badly prepared, and the children picked up on that. The occasional difficult pupil. A myriad of difficult parents. Children with joys, and fears, and challenges.

Children, like Leila, who were just considered a bit different.

Duke says to Leila at one point that the tricky classes and the difficult children were those from whom he learned the most. The children with special talents, who thought differently, who acted differently, who challenged his experience and forced him to *dig deep* to try to help them. The children who probably benefited most from his support. The constantly needy ones. The fledglings who struggled to fly. The ugly ducklings. But often the most majestic, soaring young adults.

So Susan kind of liked the first draft but really helped to improve it through drafts two and three.

She takes twenty percent of whatever I earn from the book. That is one fifth! If I sold a million copies she would make about two hundred grand. Up to this point, she has earned absolutely nothing, because I have sold no copies, and made flat nothing from it. In fact she has cost me money! She suggested I get a hundred copies bound and printed so that I could show them to potential readers, test them with the

sorts of children in my target market, and so on. That cost me nearly a thousand quid!

But today, Susan came with some very good news.

She has been speaking to a publisher who may be willing to take the book on. That means someone who is prepared to print it, bind it, advertise it and get it into all the major booksellers! That is such a big step forward! The publisher will also appoint an editor, who will help to make further improvements. You know, I've had some dreams in my life, but this is really like one of those dreams becoming reality. A published author? I am getting closer.

Susan has put together a kind of timeline for what happens next. There will be meetings, with an editor who will help get a final version ready for publication, and with the publishers themselves. I don't really like meetings.

Have you ever thought how much it costs to produce a book? Of course, these days much of the work (the basic writing, typesetting, formatting and so on) is done on a computer. Most of it by me in the case of *Leila*. But the costs of ink, paper and binding are colossal. Then you have the costs of creating covers and artwork, which need proper input if you are going to have something displayed on a shelf begging to be bought. Then there are the costs of getting it on display in important shops like *WH Smith*, *Waterstones*, and of course *Amazon*. Finally there will be a big social media and marketing campaign, to try to encourage more people (like you) to read it.

After all that, Susan reckons a hardback version will sell for £11.49, the paperback for £6.99 and the electronic (eBook) version for about £2.99. The net effect of all that is that I (the most important person in all of this!) might be lucky to receive £1.00 a copy. Not fair! I wrote the thing! Without me, there is no binding or advertising or marketing! Anyway, apparently that is the way it goes. And again, as we haven't sold anything, there is nothing to calculate.

And no twenty percent for Susan either!

Leila Chapter F

So you won't believe this!

I can't actually believe it either.

I'm sitting in the lobby of an office on the 33rd floor of a tower block in, wait for it, New York City! This is like the realisation of a distant dream.

Of course, it is not all plain sailing from here, but this office is home to one of the biggest publishing houses in the USA. And therefore the world. I am sitting on a plush low sofa, about to meet Chica Delaney. Chica is a top publisher who specialises in children's stories. I've never met her before, but her reputation precedes her like a suit of armour. She's tough. She's mean. But she wants a piece of me!

It is rare enough to get to this stage, but Susan submitted a summary of the first three chapters and made a couple of phone calls, after which Chica and her team were interested enough to call me over for a meeting. In one short weekend I've sorted a visa, booked flights and organised a hotel.

To be honest, I've been talking to myself all weekend. At home, in the taxi, at the airport, on the plane. I've been trying to practise for the few short minutes (maybe half an hour) I'll get with Chica.

The velour of the sofa clings to the wool of my suit as I shift nervously in anticipation. My watch suggests she is late. Well, she's a top publisher, so I suppose she's allowed to be late. I'm going to breathe deeply and try not to get stressed, even if lateness is one of the traits in others that I truly despise!

Anyway. Put that out of your mind. This is big. The huge oak double doors are opening.

'Earl! What a pleasure! I love the book!'

No introductions. No handshakes. But this was already going well. Chica was smaller than I expected, although her shoulders were well padded and her suit was well expensive. Without thinking, I held myself a little higher and smoothed down my Marks and Sparks jacket.

'Pleased to meet you. And thank you. I'm glad you liked it.'

'I'd like to get your views on how the finished version will play out in the marketplace.'

This seemed like a bit of a trick question. Surely she was the one who should have the marketing ideas? Perhaps it was a bit of a test.

'Well it is designed to appeal to late elementary and early middle school kids. Eleven to thirteen year olds really.'

'Don't underestimate the importance of the themes to older children. Fifteen-year-olds love a story with a message. And you have a powerful message here.'

'Thank you. Neurodiversity is currently quite big in the news.' I'd learnt a new word.

‘It’s more than that, Earl. You’ve got vulnerability, loneliness, a coming-of-age story. We very rarely go for anything new. Teenagers like to know what they’ll read. But this has a few twists too. And lots of kids will identify with Leila. That is very important. What’s your social media like?’

I was actually dreading that question. What appeals to a publisher is when an established author can boast millions of followers on Instagram or Twitter so that the book can almost sell itself without investments in conventional marketing or promotion. My social media profile is pathetic! I don’t even have friends in real life, let alone pretend friends on Facebook! So that is a bit of a non-starter.

‘Well, I’m developing my presence across a number of channels,’ I lied, clearly not convincing her.

‘We’ll need you to put some effort into that.’ It wasn’t a topic for discussion. Her next statement brought it home to me.

‘Clearly we’ll need to take that into account with our advance. It sounds like we’ll have plenty of investment to make.’

Even to an amateur like me, this sounded like a bargaining ploy already. Because I wouldn’t be helping sales much myself, they would reduce the amount they could pay me up front so that they could spend money on marketing.

‘So I understand that you are trying to decide on a level of advance,’ I said, stupidly.

‘My people will get onto money later, Earl. As I said, there is less investment available these days. But we like your work, and we like you.’

I looked around the room. There was no-one else there. She must have been talking about me.

‘So this is how it needs to go. We’ll do some basic press here over the next couple of days to signpost a launch. Then we’ll need you to respond to a few edits so that we get a final draft to our marketing team by the end of the month. Then you’ll be back in Europe with our local sales teams. It’s a long slog, but you’re up to it.’

‘Long slog?’ I asked.

‘Well, we have to get you out there, Earl. That’s what we do.’

I momentarily thought of friends who had self-published their books. They had all spoken of the difficulties getting it marketed, and in fact only one was prepared to say that she'd made any money out of it. But for someone like me, who doesn’t like crowds or wide open spaces, this was beginning to sound like a nightmare. On the other hand, here I was, in New York City, talking with one of the world’s most renowned publishing houses.

And they loved *Leila*.

‘I need you to read carefully through this Earl. You might want your attorney to take a look too. It includes a section at the end on film rights. Although it is just part of our standard contract, we think this thing has legs Earl.’

I could have made some quip about the legs and the lame metaphor, but I thought better of it.

‘Yes, Hollywood loves these kind of feel-good stories. You could be onto a screenplay next. We’re gonna push for that. Water?’

I wasn’t really aware that I had written a feel-good story! What do you think? I guess he made her feel good, until he disappeared, but ultimately he left her, or got arrested or fled the country or whatever, so she can’t feel completely good about that. I suppose her reactions to the environment - especially the forest - show that it is a good, calming influence.

I took the bottle of water she held out in front of me, even if by then she was taking a phone call with the other hand. In my head the drink tasted of money and power, no doubt a flavour carried through many of the rooms and buildings of the city.

‘Yep, just listen to me. You can blather on all you want. Ultimately it’s your call. Take it or leave it.’

Chica. Doing a deal whilst doing a deal.

‘Sorry. My daughter. She gotta pull herself together. No drive. No ambition. Teens eh?’

I nodded dumbly and felt a bit sorry for her daughter.

She turned back to me, holding the door open and handing me a sheaf of papers. The entire meeting had been less than twenty minutes.

‘Have a good look. Let me know any issues you have. Well done - we look forward to working with you. Tomorrow 7.00am. The breakfast shows. You’ll have sixty seconds max, so prepare it well and make it snappy.’

She was now telling me how to talk on a radio show. Rude. Anyway the paperwork seemed to contain quite large numbers. Good numbers. Numbers that would keep me going for another year at least. Maybe on the sequel to *Leila*.

I stumbled out of the elevator on the ground floor in a bit of a daze. It was like I’d been in a dark room and suddenly hit sunshine. Although the autumn evening was not bright, I felt like I had been touched by sunlight in there. A publishing deal! It was all I’d ever dreamed of.

I spilled myself out onto the street. I’d only been to New York once before, but it almost felt familiar, such was the ubiquity of the city in films and music. But what the heck! I was still a tourist at heart. I headed for a diner on West 48th Street to take stock of where we were.

I settled into one of the booths and picked up the menu. *Philly Cheese Omelet*, or *All Day Breakfast Sandwich?* The choices were bewildering. As the waitress came over I decided on something called the *Texas Prairie Dog Wrap.* Honestly, I didn’t care what was in it. As I waited I imagined some supermodel or celebrity gangster inserting themselves into my booth. Right opposite, like they do in the movies. In fact it turned out not to be that kind of diner, and a mixed cast of local business and tourist characters popped in and out of my eyeline. I felt I could sit there watching them all day.

When the food arrived I paid the bill directly and added a healthy tip. Bewildered as I was, I had not lost sight of the fact that I had just snagged myself a deal to publish my little book!

There’s an industry standard saying relating to the characters in works of fiction.

As an author, you have probably spent several months, and sometimes years, of your life developing this work, and it becomes very personal to you. In fact I just did a little double take as a tall woman in a red dress walked past the booth. Even the music on the jukebox seemed to fit in. Elvis's tasty vibrato on *Alison*.

To be honest I'd like Leila to have seen all this and been part of it. It is ridiculous of course, but it's apparently a common feeling. I suppose most characters in books are bound to be derived from the author's own experience, but the feeling that you'd like your characters to be with you is a strange one. Not one I've ever had before. But I can't help but feel that young Leila, who you've read all about, would be happy. She wouldn't like the city, and it might freak her out a little, but if she was here, sitting opposite me in this cheap diner, I think she would smile.

Stupid.

Talking about a fictional character like that. But I feel I know her, and if I've done a good job you should feel you know her too. She's responsible for all this, so keeping her in my thoughts, just at this moment, cannot be a bad thing.

Actually, I hope she would be proud.

Leila Chapter G

TWO YEARS LATER

So I've settled close to the little village of Berwick. Nothing much to it really. A satisfied English village with a small shop, a pub and a church. I occasionally nod to one of the locals if I'm out walking, but I'm not one of those people who can just strike up a conversation and immediately enjoy it. Actually I hate it. And I'm really bad at it!

Let's say there's a bit of a crisis. I'm your man. I can normally sort out minor medical emergencies, light engineering problems, and a modicum of DIY. Small stuff around the farm? No problem. And I know who to call if it is something more serious.

But to sit and chat about the weather, or the news or something. Nah! I'm hopeless at it. Fundamentally that is because I'm not interested. Take the weather. It is what it is. You can't do anything about it. If you have a job where your livelihood depends on it, like you are a farmer, or you sell ice-cream, then maybe you need to take a bit more interest. But for most of us, the weather just happens. Can't do anything about it, so no reason to talk about it!

The problem I have with Berwick is that everything that makes it what it is, is also everything I hate about it. Let me explain.

I'm very happy here. I have the most wonderful set-up on the farm. More of that later - there is quite a story!

I quite like the shop. It is kept by a Mrs Filkins. I don't know her first name. She is a lady of a certain age. She has three aisles, nice and straight, stocking some very basic items, and behind her, on eight shelves, she has exactly eighty glass jars of sweets. Ten per shelf. The old-fashioned types, which she will weigh out for you into a bag. It used to be *quarters* and *halves* but even Mrs F has gone modern, and will gladly sell you 200g of sherbet lemons, or 100g of aniseed balls. The prices always surprise me - we used to buy things like *penny chews* which actually did cost a penny. And a quarter of aniseed balls for a shilling. Those were the days!

Mrs Filkins understands me. We enjoy each other's company, but mostly in silence. There is a transaction to be done. She serves and I pay. I would do anything for her, but only if she needs it. She knows she can ask me anything. I once fixed a gushing leak under her sink. No problem. I had the tools, I knew more or less what to do, and it was done in a jiffy. Saved her eighty quid calling a plumber. I got a few extra bonbons for that!

There is a main street of sorts, just down from where we live. It gives me a headache. It wins awards for being *Britain's Best Kept Village.* I suppose it is pretty, but for me it's just a ramshackle collection of old cottages all thrown together along each side of the winding lane. Everyone does different things to their houses. Picket fences, privet hedges, high laurel. Wooden gates, wrought iron, or arches. Some painted white, some brick, brick and flint, even a green one! A million different kinds of plant growing up them. Pretty? Maybe. Not to me. Pretty is what you make of it.

I like houses in straight lines.

The pub seemed good at first, but I mostly drink at home now. Just to relax. We have started growing grape vines on a small scale, and our first batches from the lower field will be ready for drinking soon. I'm no connoisseur, but I know what I like when I like it.

I went to the *Jolly Sailor* a few times when we first moved down, but the problem loomed large as soon as I got there. Think about it. English village. Wealthy rural area. Not a lot to do.

I stood against the dark wooden bar with a Guinness, and talked with the young barman for a few minutes. In came an elderly gentleman who greeted the barman warmly.

'Ah Tristan! How good to see you young man! How on earth are you, I haven't seen you for ages!'

Even I could tell that this was a charade because the old guy came in at exactly the same time each day.

'Would you like a drink Ronald?'

'Well, what a splendid idea! Thank you so much. I'll have a G&T I think. Perhaps you would be so kind as to make it a triple?'

This was again the lamest kind of fake surprise. He always drank the same, triple fortified, and it was always his idea, not the bar staff's. And most days he seemed to have got himself started with a few at home, so that by the time he arrived at the pub, his puffed up purple hands needed the bar for support.

We chatted awhile, and although his stories of a life well-lived in the military kept the conversation flowing, the gin now seemed to have replaced all that. Each day he moaned about the weather, strikes on the railways (which he never used), and protested about political correctness.

Those first impressions of Ronald - a dull old soak - were corrected one day by Mrs Filkins. His wife Kate had died a year ago. Dreadful cancer that lingered and reduced her to a thin shadow. Ronald had doted on her. Love of his life. They were inseparable. After the funeral, he was lost. He couldn't face the evenings sober. Mrs F gives him a year or two at most, before he joins up with his Kate.

'Do you know at the doctor's they asked me what pronoun I would like to use?'

'Yes, it is a thing now, to cater for all, including the non-binary community.'

I knew my response would elicit a rant. He spluttered his gin and tonic all over the beer mat and picked up a towel from the bar to wipe himself down.

'Asked me if I wanted to be called 'she' for heaven's sake!'

He shook his head, turned back to his glass, and drained what remained in it.

Leila Chapter H

To cut a long story short, the book did pretty well!

Yes, it was a real success.

Phenomenal.

In fact, soon after it was published it was quickly on the curriculum of what seemed like every school on the planet. And they all bought twenty or thirty copies! They said it was a *sensitive treatment and a celebration of autism.* I'll agree with that! It was all that.

Averaged out over the different markets (it's popular all over the place!) the deal with the publisher eventually netted out at just over £1.00 on every physical copy sold, and a little more on each download or eBook.

And it's sold nearly seven million copies!

As Chica might say, *you do the math!*

Here are a few of the early reviews. They're mostly great, although you always get one…

Let's get that one out of the way quickly.

1 star

Leila is just another worthy coming-of-age story with a message. It deals quite well with the subject of autism, but readers are subjected to endless descriptions of forests and woods, and to be honest, although Leila wanders round them all the time, she never gets out of them. She might as well get lost for good as far as I am concerned.

Google Reviews

5 stars

Some of the individual scenes are outstanding, particularly those describing what is going on in her head. The car crash and bookshop metaphors work really well, and as a lifelong celebrator of my own superpowers, I can identify completely with what is going on. Especially as a child, those were the feelings I had. Only an autistic author could describe them with such intensity and empathy. Brilliant.

Amazon

4 stars

The relationship between Leila and the old man is developed sensitively and never strays into the Lolitaesque creepiness that it could have done. His support and empathy are a constant, and she responds in her own unique ways to him. Ways that she is unable to handle with anyone else. Without plot-spoiling, some unexpected twists and turns made the story readable, and I was left wondering what might happen to her next. The story is ripe for a sequel.

The Sun Book of the Week

Unputdownable! I had a W-eila of a time reading this! A real page-turner with a feisty heroine and a kindly gent. Some lovely descriptions of their rural lives and a nice twist in the tale at the end. Roald Dahl would be proud!

American Autism Review

This is an elegant treatment wrapped in a gripping adventure story. Leila is sympathetically drawn, and we warm to her despite and because of her neuro-atypicalities. The support she receives from him is unwavering, calm and dependable, just like we all need. He is part saint, part psychologist, part family. He is the man we would all seek, if he exists at all. I will go on looking for him!

Leila Chapter I

The farmyard, dominated by a huge raised flower border in the centre, is open to fields on one side. My house takes up most of one of the other sides, and there are two small cottages on the western corner, with the stables behind them. I must get those done up some time!

We're working to get the outbuildings spruced up. They're going to be great as offices or for storage. Even holiday lets. Renovation takes time though, and money. I quite like doing it. Some woodwork, mostly just planing and sanding. A bit of painting here and there. I've built some little beds, bordered with my own brickwork. They're just about holding up! Nasturtiums, Bizzy Lizzies, some shrubs from Lipton's Nursery in the village. Never finished, but I can imagine how it will look when it is.

And there is someone - she lives in the second cottage down.

It was initially a favour - a friend of a friend asked if I would rent out the space for a short time - but it has become more than that. Occasionally we will have dinner together, or watch a bit of TV. We've taken the odd weekend away too. She is a professional person, a solicitor, so she helps me with the business end of my life, but she is a bit more than that to me. She rides horses too.

I really must get those stables done up.

We are separate, but also together.

I wouldn't swap her for anyone.

There's just one other person on site, who lives in one of the houses further down the lane, where the grape vines are now developing nicely in the chalky south-facing soil.

There's a bit of a story to that.

Manuela, who comes in three times a week to keep the farmhouse and the cottages tidy, was on her own in the main house. I was on the train on the way back from a meeting, with ManCave Publishing in London, when I took the call.

'There's someone here who says he wants to meet you.'

Manuela was used to people occasionally dropping by the farmyard. It is on a couple of rambling routes, and although we could block them, we don't. Ramblers tend to be the most benign of trespassers, and we don't have livestock or anything else that would be bothered by them. They keep themselves to themselves, as do we. Sometimes someone will hail a far-off greeting.

This was different.

'He's quite insistent. I've tried to move him on. Said you aren't here.' Her latin inflections sounded clipped and urgent.

'What's he like? You don't know him?'

'No, I don't know him. He's kind of untidy. Although he looks familiar.'

‘OK. I’ll be back in ten minutes or so. Stay inside. Take care.’

I pulled into the drive.

Sat on the step, stooped over and peering at an ancient map or drawing, the outline was unmistakable.

He had a certain posture that could only have been inherited from our parents.

Our greeting was wordless. Just one long, lingering hug. How long had it been, exactly?

It was certainly before I started writing the book. We’d had that minor falling out about some money our grandmother had left us, but that should not have led to the estrangement that followed. I’d heard that he'd been living rough somewhere. That always played on my mind, and I’d sometimes had that sixth-sense twin feeling that he might’ve been in danger.

The reunion was nearly two years ago.

I was nervous at first. It had been ten years or more. I gave him one of the shacks down the lane, but he wasn’t offering much more than to be around. Of course I enjoyed his company and we used to reminisce a bit. But he'd not had a job for many years and had no discernible skills. After a few months, I felt that I needed to formalise it a bit, even for my brother. So instead of me just looking after him, I suggested that he look after the farm buildings and the patchwork of small fields surrounding them, in return for some basic accommodation and a living wage.

I have to say it has been remarkably successful.

It turns out that he spent much of the last decade or so living out and learning a vast range of country skills. He can grow or otherwise source the most astonishing range of organic produce, he has transformed much of the grounds into either ornamental beds or productive horticulture, and he has introduced a set of activities to keep himself busy and which has really pushed me to take a proper interest in the little world that is literally in my backyard. So we have three beehives, making honey. We have chickens providing a regular supply of ultra-fresh eggs. We have a few pigs and sheep for meat when the time comes. We have small stands of peas and beans, corn and various brassicae. We have fish in the lake he has fashioned by diverting a local stream. We have everything we need, and he supplements the little income I give him by producing and selling charcoal, making it the traditional way with earth banks and wet grass, like we remembered as kids.

We are never in each other’s pockets, but he has a deep wisdom - deeper than I remember really - and I seek out his advice on anything difficult.

And if ever I’m struggling to get something down on paper, I head on down the lane.

He’s always there.

Calm. Wise.

It works well.

Leila Chapter J

I interviewed yesterday.

We are looking for a designer to help liven up some of the covers and chapter heading pages. Simple line drawings are good. I put together a short job ad and placed it in some local papers. I could have gone more national with it, but I don't really want any *London types* - at London prices! Maybe someone short-term who could work freelance.

To be honest, the novels in the series so far all have a very *local* feel. All but one are set in England, and the fifth in the series has a strong Welsh element. They are all rural in nature, with *Leila* being a case in point. Much of that is set around the woods and the hidden house. The trees and the bushes. There is very little reference to her school. Or her home. She's adrift in a sea of her own confused thoughts and the beauty of the countryside.

So I made my mind up to try to hire someone from round here. Apart from anything else I'm all for boosting the rural economy and keeping things local. In my mind there'll be someone out there, perhaps a late-career designer or illustrator with time on his hands, and a degree of talent. All I want are some basic line drawings and maybe a front cover or two. Something that would make the next editions look more like a set, and perhaps would give the reader some clues as to what the characters might look like.

I know what I want.

It is clear in my mind's eye. But almost impossible to explain!

Maybe someone will be able to figure out what I am thinking.

Leila Chapter K

As it turned out, we only had one applicant. I felt really let down by the lack of interest and I spoke with a friend, who runs an accounting business locally and is used to the hiring process, about whether we should re-advertise to try to attract someone from the London creative scene. She said that we should at least look at this candidate first. She offered to help with the interview.

Maybe we'd be lucky first time.

After all this writing, although I would now consider myself a creative person, I also feel that I am pretty normal. I'm nearly sixty, a bit grey around the temples and wider round the middle than I would like, but otherwise healthy and without any skeletons. I work hard. I support those around me. I give a bit to charity.

But when this character walked through the door, I realised just how square I really am!

She'd emailed over an application form of sorts. More a letter really. I was somehow impressed by the start of it. She'd written in an uncommonly formal style for a young, creative type, but it touched me.

Dear Sir or Madam

This seemed to be someone serious. She'd also enclosed some tiny pencil drawings, almost doodles in the corner of otherwise blank A4 sheets. I'd needed my full-strength reading glasses to see that they were actually exquisite, minute drawings of animals and people in quaint rural settings.

Will you take a look?

I'd hired a room up the road at the business park.

As she approached the door, she seemed to stop briefly, touching the sides of the door frame, and reaching up to tap the lintel above, almost like she was inspecting it for safety. She was certainly dressed for work, wearing a pair of the biggest Doc Martens you have ever seen. At least eighteen holes, maybe more. I didn't count, because moving up from the boots were a pair of combat trousers, a grubby red t-shirt, a multicoloured and extravagant scarf arrangement, and a topping of purple-tinted hair. Her skin was multi-pierced and mega-tattooed. I have to confess I was both a little overawed by her, and convinced that this would be a short interview and she would be on her way. A little scared even. Hopefully nothing would go missing.

She introduced herself.

'I'm Allie.'

She sat down and it was noticeable that her hair covered her bent head like a veil. She could see through it, but it was difficult for me to make eye contact. I did try, but maybe she liked it that way.

I explained as best I could what we were looking for.

'I can do that,' was all she said really, and I could not think of that much to ask her. She kept her eyes inclined downwards and didn't smile like I expected her to. She didn't seem really that bothered about the year's work that I might be offering her, nor the office and salary. I could tell Yvonne the

accountant was not impressed. There was an awkward silence.

‘I’ve been reading *Leila*,’ Allie said after a long pause, ‘I like it. The characters are good. Leila. The old man. It made me feel understood. Books can do that.’

I tried to regain the initiative.

‘Well, er, you said you would bring a portfolio.’

‘I did not. I said I would show you examples from my portfolio.’

I was unclear of the difference.

‘OK, well please could we see an example at least?’

She reached down into her small satchel and produced a single sheet of paper. She laid it on the table.

It was blank.

In her hand, she held a standard HB pencil. It slowly became clear that she was going to create the example there and then. She pulled nervously at her hair, which was adorned with a multitude of coloured plaits and odd accessories.

Then she paused.

‘The way I see it, Leila is a lost soul. Her face is that of an innocent teenager, but her eyes reveal a lifetime of pain and rejection. Her skin is almost perfect, but around the eyes are lines of anxiety, layered from years of screwing up her face in anguish. Her hair is usually well cared for, but she uses it as a veil and one day she will appal the old and delight the young with one of her styles.’

This monologue continued for several minutes as she rehearsed the character of Leila out loud in front of us. I must say that she seemed to nail my heroine almost completely. As she talked, she'd started sketching, almost explaining to herself in real time what to draw.

What started to emerge from the paper was just remarkable! Seemingly unrelated swirls of pencil seemed to magically assemble as if possessing a mind of their own. Facial features slowly gathered together, the few fronds of hair became a cartoon beehive. The mouth was full and almost sensuous.

And the eyes.

The eyes were endless, with repeating concentric circles of pencil adding to the depth.

And to the feeling that you could drown in them.

Leila Chapter L

Allie pushed the drawing into the centre of the table, and returned the pencil to the pencil compartment in the fold of her satchel.

‘That’s amazing Allie! Welcome to our team!’

Allie hadn’t seen much of a team.

Team? What team? He’s a writer. I’ve read his stuff. Surely you do that on your own?

She was unable to let questions go unanswered. An unmet question made her feel physically sick and the traffic started to build. She didn’t hesitate.

‘What team? I thought you were a writer?’

‘OK Allie, look. You need to understand something.’

Allie began to understand that he was somewhat patronising.

‘Look, quit talking to me as if I’m some kind of kid. If you want pictures, I can help. Because I’m pretty good. If you just want someone young to add to your so-called team, you can get anyone. What is your team anyway?’

He began to warm to her. He knew that in his own way he was trying to impress her, and he was impressed that she was not impressed.

‘You…you’re right Allie. Writing is pretty solitary and I like it that way. But I also like the business side of publishing, and to do that right you need some people around you. Like editors and translators and proof-readers. Not to mention lawyers and accountants.’

‘And illustrators.’

‘You’re right. Illustrators. Look, we’ve got a little setup down at the farmhouse. You might like it. Would you like to walk down with us? It’s a mile or so down the road. We could do brunch.’

He was still being a bit of a jerk, at least in Allie’s eyes, but her sixth or seventh sense for these things had already marked his card as being a good person. He had that peculiar sense of Britishness that meant much of what he said was conditioned by upbringing and class. Most people would judge him favourably by his accent and sense of style. None of that impressed Allie, and she was intent on making him realise that. She was more interested in *what* he said, and in particular *how* he said it. She would have to work with him, after all. But she felt comfortable in his company, almost as if they shared a history.

The accountant gathered up her laptop, and the three of them left the glass-walled office into the lobby and out into the crispness of a late November morning. The sun had crept out from behind the clouds and although not delivering discernible warmth, it filtered the light, which flickered in shafts through the clouds and onto the trees.

Pretty village, thought Allie, *Berwick isn’t it? Sounds familiar.*

As they strolled past the back of the *Please drive carefully through our village* sign, the countryside opened out. It was quintessentially English. Rolling meadows and thick low hedges. Friesians and Herefords dotting the fields. Mighty oaks and ashes on each field boundary. A distant tractor. And now, four or five hundred metres down the lane, the entrance to a farmyard.

Allie had seen farms before. They were usually constant works in progress, with pretty houses and barns mixed with dilapidated ones, and immaculate new machinery cheek-by-jowl with rusted hulks.

Unbelievable. Real farms aren't like this. Too shiny. Too new.

The farm was perfect. She didn't see how it could be a working unit. A couple of Range Rovers - not unusual for a farming environment. But shiny and new? *Not a working farm!* A large house and various outbuildings. Lots of pretty flowerbeds. A beautiful well-groomed labrador bounding out to greet them? *Not a working farm!*

'Please follow me Allie. I usually write in the house. I have an office up in the attic, and another one out here. Sometimes, depending on what I am working on, I will walk around the estate or up to the top of the hill there. It is great exercise, and I get ideas.'

Allie looked around. It was almost too beautiful. Life was not like that. They would call it *picture postcard*, like a lot of the surrounding villages. Villages that won prizes. Villages which required a lot from their residents. Sensible behaviour. Trimmed hedges and lawns. Newly washed cars, and children who said please and thank you. Not really her scene at all.

He could see her looking around. Her face betrayed her sense of wonder.

'It's pretty nice, isn't it?' he smiled.

'Yeah, it's not how I imagined a farm to be like!' she laughed nervously.

'Well I don't really have time to work on it. My brother helps out. He keeps things tidy and looks after the chickens and pigs and so on.'

'But the yard is like something out of a film set!'

'I must admit it's looking good today. It's all recycled too! Beyond there, it's all being re-wilded to attract bees and butterflies, but where it needs to be neat, he keeps it neat. We share a lot of the same ideas. I can be writing for a few days and hardly come out, but when I do I'll often find something new - some new shrubs planted, or some little thing he's built - and I always like it. In places he's taken down dilapidated old structures and re-purposed them into something new.'

'I love all that design and upcycling stuff.'

'Well, you ought to meet him sometime. He keeps himself to himself. His cottage is round the back. I'll introduce you.'

They reached the other side of the yard and approached a small wood-framed building with a high arched roof. It was connected to a barn one side and was open to the countryside at the other. There was a small clock set in the tower above a little self-contained courtyard.

‘So we had someone trying to help us with illustration, but he didn’t last long. He seemed to spend more time putting his studio together than actually doing anything in it. He also couldn’t draw very well. Went off to work at some animation studio in the end. Where computers do the drawing instead. We want something more basic Allie. More genuine. Here, this will be your studio.’

Allie pushed against the heavy wooden door which creaked as she walked through it. The room was well lit by a big window overlooking the rolling fields beyond, and there was a good sized bench arrangement with a couple of high stools and a professional-looking slanted draughtsman’s desk.

‘OK, OK, what's this?’ she said, spinning wildly as her senses shot out of control, ‘I can’t work in here! I really can’t! I need to get out!’

The flocked wallpaper and the concertinaed Roman blinds were like something out of Allie’s worst nightmares.

She started pulling back from the doorway.

‘Er sorry, what’s the matter Allie? You don’t like the room? We can move you! We can redecorate!’

‘I need white! I need blank! I can’t work with all that going on.’

‘Well, if you want to reconsider?’

‘I don’t want to reconsider, I just want somewhere to work. Somewhere to produce my best work. If you’ll let me gut this place, I can have it just how I want it.’

‘Well I suppose Nigel did have a certain taste for the flowery and the aesthetic.’

‘It can’t be both. Aesthetic is plain. It is predictable angles. It is lines.’

‘Well, I suppose they say beauty is in the eye of…’

Allie gave him such a look that he knew not to continue. She pulled at a corner of one of the pieces of wallpaper just above the dado rail. It had a dado rail! The paper pulled upwards and skyward so that the whole strip came tumbling down on top of her. She looked, panting, at the plain walls behind.

‘OK. OK. Calm down Allie,’ she said almost to herself, her breathing approaching normal, ‘we can make this work.’

The temporary traffic jam started to ease, and she started to imagine herself in this strange place. Strange county. Strange village. Strange house. But if he was as good as his word, he was going to pay her for creating beautiful things for his books. She was going to get paid for doing something that she would probably have done anyway.

What could be better than that?’

‘We’ll get someone in to redecorate Allie. We like to use recycled materials here, so everything is always a bit old-fashioned I’m afraid. Is that OK?’

‘I’ll do it myself if it’s all the same to you. Recycled is good.’

‘Absolutely. No problem. All good with me.’

He looked slightly nervous, which made her smile inside. Whilst she was glowing with pride and excitement, she couldn’t help an inner smile.

Does he really know what he’s just hired?

She looked around the room for a second time and tried to imagine it plain. Brown perhaps on the walls, or something to match the oak beams. Something neutral and soothing. She walked over to the window, and looked out. She could see the farmyard, but it was far too clean and uncluttered to be working. Not many distractions there. She strolled over to the other window, which looked over rolling countryside. A single wisp of smoke rising in the distance.

She imagined her desk just in front of it, with her standing, pencils poised.

Perfect.

Leila Chapter M

Allie spent the first week stripping her new office.

She didn't mind the beams and the wooden windows sloping up to the roof - she recognised those as a product of their time. Having pulled at the wallpaper and removed the curtains, she was left with grey-brown streaked walls and a red tiled floor. She looked around and felt a calmness that had not been there when she had first walked in. The second week was spent painting. He'd lent her a pair of what he referred to as 'agricultural' dungarees, and although the denim was rough and itchy, they were at least five sizes too big for her so there was plenty of room and she didn't feel restricted. After nearly two weeks she had the setup she needed. Soothing walls in a light green tint. Plenty of display space. Two free-standing lights over her desk.

He'd managed to source a large drawing board from a friend of his in the village, which sat on top of the oak desk. It was tatty but it suited her. The board was easily A0 size in itself and would comfortably fit her sketch pads and the A3 or A2 she would use for the final designs.

My studio! Can't believe it.

He'd even offered to put a bed in there. Although she'd taken a room at the *Jolly Sailor*, they both knew she would prefer her own company in her own place. The studio had at one time been a holiday let, so it had the essentials.

She wanted to get started right away - he'd said something about meeting the publishers *in the next week or so.* But first, time to check out the farm. She slipped on her favoured tatty red dress and the Docs, laced half way, before strolling out into the farmyard.

Leila stood calmly at the doorway and looked around. Although she hadn't produced anything yet, she had a brief for what she needed to do, at least for the next year or so. And a target for the next week. They had asked her to produce a base drawing of *Leila*. Easy. More or less a self-portrait.

She closed the front door behind her and walked down the narrow passageway towards the yard. She could stand at the corner and see the comings and goings. But not a lot went on. His Range Rover came and went, and she'd already noticed a light on in one of the farmhouse windows from a very early hour. She remembered him saying that he generally worked during the mornings, and in his very British way he'd apologised for that, despite it not bothering her, or anyone else except perhaps his family.

Family? *Does he have anyone else there*?

If he was married he'd not introduced his wife. She'd read somewhere that he had been married and had a daughter. How old would she be? Had he mentioned a brother? Maybe.

She walked across the yard and paused at a wooden gate. Five-barred, traditional. She bent forward and leaned against the top bar. The whole of Sussex seemed to be spread out before her, and she found herself almost screaming at the beauty of the myriad hedgerows, the patchwork of colours, and the majesty of the trees laid out before her. At that time of the evening the air was still.

To her right was a huge field, neatly planted with something green growing in perfect rows. She knew that he didn't work this land himself. Perhaps it was rented to someone, or perhaps she was looking at a neighbour's plot. It was all tourist-poster pretty though. She thought of going back for a sketchbook to

try to capture it, but instead just tried to take it all in, ready to draw next time. Perhaps it could form a backdrop to some of the pen portraits or chapter headings?

She turned at the end of the track, and headed left up a small lane that led back to the farmhouse. She could see her little flat in the distance with the light she'd left on, welcoming her home. It actually felt like home. She was alone enough, but there were people around if she needed them. She had control over her life, her house. She was away from cities, from traffic, from noise. There was a bus she could get into town if she needed groceries, or he'd said he could take her during the afternoons.

Staring at a wispy line of smoke rising in the distance, for the first time in a long time, she felt calm.

And happy.

Leila Chapter N

So we're ready with some of the proposals for the new editions.

I've done a little re-writing here and there, and added a new chapter to *Leila*.

Allie has done some fabulous work.

She's an odd one. She keeps herself to herself. Often I can see the light burning bright late into the night and the next morning she has invariably produced something absolutely stunning. She has real talent, and she is helping to push the series to a whole new level.

Although I don't like picture books or graphic novels, we have extended Allie's brief to include a range of illustrations that might sit within a chapter, rather than just at chapter or section headings. The style is always the same, but each picture is unique and is a little work of art in itself. To me it brings to mind Quentin Blake, or Edward Ardizzone, who illustrated kids' books when I was reading them back in the sixties and seventies. *Stig of the Dump* with that distinctive cover art and writing.

This morning we have a meeting with my publisher to show off these latest efforts. They have reviewed the text changes and their editors are busy 'working' on them. I always hate editors! How dare they think they can do better than me! Actually I'm lucky - mine are quite benign.

Normally we'd take the train up to London Bridge, and jump in a cab to their offices just off Fleet Street. We'd work through lunch - normally a bought-in buffet of fancy wraps, cheese and fruit, with wine for anyone who wanted it. The whole bunfight would last until about four and we would stagger home, perhaps via a show or something in London. I don't get to London much any more and I miss it.

Problem! Allie flatly refused to travel.

I remember her face as soon as I proposed the meeting. She went a little pale, and I thought I saw her shaking slightly. She immediately started talking about aspects of the trip and asking a million questions! *How long would it take? What sort of train would it be? How would we get from the train to the car? Who would be there? What are the offices like?* Lots and lots of questions. She actually got quite upset, and I had to drop the subject for a few days. When I revisited it later, she was a little calmer, but eventually just dropped her head and said, 'Sorry. I can't go.'

I know now not to push these things with her. She's very sensitive to these kinds of unfamiliar things, although a trip into London is something that most people round here do quite regularly, and even relish.

Clearly not her.

So Susan and I were going to go by ourselves, until Allie came up with an idea.

'Why can't they come here? Day out for them! I could show them my studio.'

She has really made the most of the space we have given her! Over the last few weeks she has cleared more of it so that she can hang up some of the ongoing work and display it - largely for herself. I have to admit the whole scene looks pretty cool - she works in just the way I would imagine a brilliant creative to work! A bit eccentric. Odd hours. No timekeeping. But just fantastic! Her sketches and

some of the finished drawings cover one wall. Another wall is stripped bare so that she can work without distraction.

When I spoke to Susan about it, to my surprise she was quite enthusiastic. She pointed out - correctly - that I was in charge here. I've sold a lot of books for them, so I can call the shots! That's true - half a dozen first class train tickets out to Lewes is the least they could spend! So it was arranged. They'd come here, we would get some catering in, and we could show them around a little.

They might even enjoy it.

They are due in a few minutes.

Leila Chapter O

They have tried their best, but they look really out of place!

There's me, today sporting a faded denim look! I know it doesn't really suit me, but this is my place, and I can wear what I want. I'm certainly not going overboard on the smartness today. I want to put across an image of cool and casual creativity! Susan is, well, just Susan. She can't help being smart but she's also got a pretty nifty style thing going on, so she looks OK.

Then there's Allie!

'What have you done?'

I couldn't help it.

'What do you mean, done? I've just worked on my hair a bit!'

She'd certainly worked on her hair. It was yellow! And not a gentle shade either. It was a vivid yellow colour, weaved in and out with purple and green braided cotton which hung down in great plaits at the side. I don't know how to describe what she was wearing - perhaps she'd just topped off her usual leggings and t-shirt with a flowing red dress? Chiffon or something? I don't know. She looked great. Out of this world!

The publishing dudes had done their best. I even saw a couple of them dragging off their ties as they got out of the SUV! They had pulled out all the stops, and had even brought the MD and the finance director with them. Whether that was because we were about to make a ton more money, or whether they just fancied a trip out to the Shires, I didn't ask.

There was endless small talk as we sat around the table waiting for something to happen. Allie took no part in it. She'd inevitably brought a small sketchbook to the table with her and was apparently starting to draw the scene in front of her. The oak meeting table, six executives trying to make themselves feel comfortable, herself, Susan, and me.

I remember the MD turning to me and whispering, none too softly,

'What's she doing?'

'She's drawing. That's what she does.'

As no-one seemed to be in charge of the meeting, and it was their meeting after all, just on our turf, I waited for the MD to take charge. Eventually he did.

'Well, good morning everyone. We should get started. Has everyone got water?'

It was like having water was the most important part of the whole meeting. A couple of the execs sucked on their bottles like newborns, as if it was the right thing to do.

'Good. Well as you know we are here to go through some of the final drafts for the second editions. We have already worked on *The Goodnight Trilogy,* but we are also anxious to press ahead with *Garden of Eden* and especially with *Leila*. But perhaps we should start with some introductions.'

I always loathed this part. The junior executives there (a couple of creative guys, two finance people, and two from marketing or sales - I never did know the difference) always tried to be witty or clever. *We just need your names!* I was first in line, so I tried to set the tone.

'Hi I'm Earl. I write books.'

'I'm Tristan. MD of ManCave Publishing.'

The introductions passed in a *blah-blah* blur, and I realised that I had forgotten most of the names almost before I'd been told them. I have to confess it is a big failing and it sometimes bothers me. I know it doesn't sound good, but I can't help it. It certainly isn't anything to do with memory - I could meet the same person ten years later (in a calm environment) and instantly recall their name!

The *blah blah* continued until we reached Allie.

Predictably she didn't introduce herself. She just carried on scribbling. When she did look up, she looked towards me. I gestured towards her.

'This is Allie. She has been with us for a couple of months now. She is our illustrator.'

Without a word, Allie launched into what she does best.

'I've got some ideas for Leila,' she said, waving her hand at a flipchart set up behind her.

'We're all products of our own environment. The uncaring adult world. The succour of the forest. The certainty and comfort of the shack.'

A couple of the young turks looked at each other uncertainly.

'For example, this meeting. We are all, to some extent, in an alien world.'

She turned her sketch pad over to reveal a rough drawing of eight people, in suits, sitting around a table surrounded by trees and bushes. So far so weird. But the trees were like giants, almost human in form, bending over the table with branches outstretched, threatening the tiny figures seated at the table.

'We can picture ourselves at the centre of an endless struggle against the odds. Leila, for example, needs stability, needs comfort, needs someone.'

There was visible discomfort around the table at what she was saying, and what she'd drawn. But no-one could deny that, in ten minutes, she'd captured an essence of the scene in the room.

'Your readers need to feel the character.' She drew out the word *feel*, stretching out her hands to the centre of the table and drawing them slowly back towards her chest, ending with a fist bump on her heart.

'You have the words in front of you, and you can conjure up your own images. I'm just giving you a helping hand. Imagine a filmmaker, with all those resources and people and dollars at her disposal. I can see this book as a film. But for now, I have a pencil. This is what I do.'

She stood up. No-one at the meeting had said a word, bar introducing themselves. She gently pulled up

the cover page of the flipchart, revealing a complex pencil drawing of Leila seated on the stump on the deck of the shack. Characteristic flowing lines marking out her form, and exquisite detail of the surrounding scene. Knots in the wood of the walls. Trunks, branches, even individual twigs and leaves of the surrounding natural environment.

Two of the boys actually clapped.

‘That’s extraordinary!’ exclaimed the top man. ‘Allie, is it?’

‘Yeah…Allie,’ replied Allie uncertainly, ‘do you like it?’

‘Like I said, it is extraordinary.’

‘But do you like it?’ she almost shouted the words, ‘Extraordinary? That means out of the ordinary. Are you saying it is not ordinary?’

‘We love it Allie.’ One of the junior creatives, a woman perhaps two years older than Allie herself, spoke up. ‘Where did you study?’

‘In my bedroom,’ Allie replied, matter of factly, ‘bit of *YouTube.* Lots of practice.’

‘Amazing,’ muttered another from the far side of the table.

‘So where were we?’ said Tristan.

I think I stepped in next.

‘Well, as you can see, we were anxious to show you our proposals for the new editions. If you are properly relaunching, we think we need new covers, new frontispieces, chapter headers and so on. I hired Allie to make a start on just that. What do you think?’

‘I think the meeting is over!’ Tristan replied, with a giggle, ‘we can definitely use this, right Michaela?’

There was a smile and a nod from the other side of the table.

‘And even if we go colour on the front covers, black and white pencil drawings won’t change production costs. Am I right?’

He turned to Paul who was the only one not to have removed his tie. There was a note of triumph in Tristan’s voice, and a general hum of agreement from round the room. Allie picked out an apple from the bowl in front of her with her left hand, and carried on sketching with her right.

I was secretly delighted with the way things had gone. These meetings in my experience were often doomed to disappoint, because each person tended to feel they had a viewpoint and had to speak. Allie had totally hijacked that process! Although I need these people to turn my random jottings into money, I also resent them for their disinterest in the reality of what I am doing. I am pouring my heart out on a daily basis! This is not a job! It is my life. And now it is Allie’s life too. *What a hire! What a girl!* Or should that be *What a woman!* I don’t know any more. I looked out after her as she almost ran off towards the studio. She had something in her head.

Let her get on with it!

There followed another half hour or so of discussion. Important things like deadlines and publishing schedules. There was actually no pressure on me. I'm on the first stages of my twenty-second novel. It's set in a country town and deals with a struggling author and an autistic teenager who come together to produce extraordinary things. Just a few ideas at the moment, but I'm optimistic.

I actually love this stage of a project, when I just sit down each day not knowing what will emerge onto the page. A thousand words, that's all. I can often do that in half an hour and then I wonder what to do for the rest of the day! A walk. Some fixing around the farmyard perhaps. I love tending to the lawns - I have a wonderful ride-on mower that keeps me busy for hours. The walks often throw up ideas. Anyway, right now, no pressure on me. The focus is on getting the drawings done.

I don't even know if Allie feels pressure. She just seems to feel passion. For the project. For the characters. I know she will work to her own deadlines. I just hope that hers match ours. I know to my cost that to push her would not be useful. I once told her that I wanted to show my brother one of her sketches and wondered if she might have it finished by the next day. Oh my word! She started scribbling onto it right in front of me, and before I knew it she'd ripped it into several pieces and flung it on the floor!

Best not to push her.

As the meeting drew to a close, Allie returned and sat down, starting to draw feverishly on the next page in her pad. One of the young executives sidled up to her and sat down. She noted his presence, but did not acknowledge it.

'That's amazing Allie. You're unbelievably talented.'

'Thanks,' she said without looking up.

'I'm Lee. Boyfriend?'

Maybe this was London-speak or something, but I saw her shudder in response. I had the feeling it might not end well.

'Or girlfriend, maybe?' He giggled slightly and gurned at one of his young colleagues as he politically-corrected himself.

Allie continued to do the two things she was best at. Not looking up was one. Drawing was the other. As he spoke, she turned over to a new page, and started sketching. She glanced up at him two or three times. He was still sitting there, stupidly expecting an answer from her, but he clearly didn't know how to progress his enquiry any further. Like a puppy expecting a treat or to be taken for a walk, he sat there whilst she drew, somewhat open-mouthed.

She grunted something and shoved the paper over towards him.

He studied it for two or three seconds, then got up sheepishly and almost ran from the room, squeaking slightly as he left.

On the paper was unmistakably his face, on top of a body that had been mangled, almost every bone

bent and broken tortuously out of shape, blood forming a huge pool around it.

The face contorted in the most unspoken, silent, terror and agony.

Leila Chapter P

For the next week, Allie was productive in a way that she had never thought possible. The meeting had ended with an agreement that she would focus on the characters of Leila and Duke, getting their basic features in place, before attempting to locate them in particular backgrounds or settings.

She'd already drawn the character of Leila a thousand times, at least in her head.

Casting her mind back to some of the drawings she'd done as a teenager, she realised that she'd unconsciously developed a signature style that had never left her. She always drew intense, close-cropped lines giving both a flow to the drawing and an impression of muscle and power.

Standing at her desk, she was working on eyes. She'd practised them obsessively whenever she'd had the chance, and Leila's eyes were a source of fascination to her. She occasionally looked in the mirror to summon up the last details.

The word *stunning* was always foremost in her mind.

She looked around her office and smiled with a quiet pride to herself. On one wall was a series of developments of the Duke character. She'd started with him just sitting on his deck, looking out, as a default scene, but she'd also worked to show him inside the house, and him and Leila chatting on the stoop. There was even a scene where he towered over the weasel-like planning inspector. The wall was arranged so that the early drafts were high up - more numerous sketches - but they led to a smaller set of more intricate and detailed portraits. These were closer to being the final versions. On an adjacent wall the same pattern drove Leila from a rough sketch up high into an almost lifelike teenager, with the lines of her life etched into her face, and her eyes roaming the room in a Gorgon-like challenge to anyone who dared to look.

Allie had positioned the two most finely drawn portraits facing each other.

As if they were on the deck.

She needed a break, so she grabbed her sketchbook and decided to take a walk out to see if she could build some of the surroundings in which her characters should sit. She realised that she had always focused on people and faces, and that nature might require a little more research.

She set off.

The lane she was on was perhaps two hundred yards long, and off to its left was the line of smoke she'd seen on the day she arrived. *I'll find out where that is from too*, she thought to herself as she set out.

About three-quarters of the way down the lane she noticed a woody smell on the wind. She couldn't quite place it - it had been a long time since she'd last smelled it. She felt it as a sign of her childhood. She just couldn't decide which sign.

Benign or dangerous?

She tried to peer over the hedge and was just able to make out a smouldering pile of grass, or perhaps fresh manure, sitting in the field beyond. And beyond that, the thin plume of smoke rising almost straight into the clear winter sky.

The signs were there.

She just didn't realise.

She continued until the lane was diverted into two parts by a triangle of rough grass, out of which grew a regal oak tree. She approached the tree and touched it, the way she used to, almost begging it for direction. Under her fingers were two deeply gouged arrow marks. They pointed to the left. To the burning grass piles. To the rising smoke. To the music she now heard. Perhaps in her head. A violin perhaps. A chord sequence from long ago.

As she took the left lane, she saw a small house set back from the road. Calling it a house was overstating it. It was more like a one-storey cabin, with decking running round the front of it.

There were two stools set out on the deck.

Allie's mind was as clear as it had ever been. She had her job, which she adored, supporting this successful writer. She had somewhere to live away from the city and from her own troubled past. She could look forward to seeing her work in print all over the world, and her name in lights. And yet that afternoon, there was only one thing she wanted.

She peered in through the window of the cottage, rubbing at the sheen that had gathered on the small pane of glass. There was very little inside the room. A single armchair. A couple of pictures on the wall. She strained to see the one furthest from her. The head and shoulders of a girl, drawn precisely in pencil or crayon, perhaps by a younger, less experienced artist. With large staring eyes which seemed to be gazing straight back at her. Deep deep brown - even from a distance.

Next to it hung a picture of a small child. Seated on the lap of a middle-aged woman in a wheelchair. A man standing to the side. A happy picture. She stared at it intently for a few moments. Underneath the picture was written *Allie.*

She didn't even turn round when she heard the man's voice.

'That's my late wife and my granddaughter, a few years ago.'

'No. That's me,' she replied, still staring at little Allie sitting with her grandparents.

'That's right, Allie. That's you.'

Allie turned slowly, and looked straight at him. Straight into his eyes.

He looked different. Older. But somehow better than when she had last seen him. He had lost weight and had trimmed much of his facial hair back to a tame stubble. The lines on his leathery face were a little deeper. But the deep dark eyes, and the voice.

'It's just wonderful to finally see you again, my dear.'

Her heart sang.

She collapsed into his arms.

And sobbed tears of joy and relief.