

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, Espresso 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.