

## 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.