

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!