

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.