

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.