

Leila Chapter 48

By six-thirty the next morning, four detectives, based on a report by Eloise, her father's latest, had joined the police at the shack. She told them that Leila often hung out there after school.

'Well, we knew he lived here Sarge. Under surveillance. We've monitored him constantly.'

Acting Sergeant Martin sounded unimpressed. Disbelieving even.

'Your usual constant monitoring? What do you mean by that? A monthly drive past?' The young constable withdrew a notebook from his breast pocket. His radio fell onto the ground. He stooped to pick it up.

'Well, as I say, Ma'am, we knew he lived here and we checked up on his movements on a regular basis.'

Martin knew this was just police-talk.

'He lived like a hermit. He didn't have any movements. What did you actually do?'

'Well, as I say, Ma'am...', the officer was floundering.

'You just assumed he was here but actually you had nothing to suspect about him. Is that right?'

'Well, as you say.'

'Shut up, Constable.'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

The young officer almost saluted his superior, and went to make himself busy securing the crime scene. The sergeant wrote something down and looked on as two squad cars squealed out of the clearing, sirens blaring. *Did they really need to do that?* she thought to herself as she glanced at the mess they had churned up.

She stepped back.

Two forensic staff were dusting the front door for fingerprints. Martin was struck by the door - to call it a door was an exaggeration. Like the rest of the cabin it was just a few planks nailed together that more or less filled the doorway. There was a rudimentary latch on it, but it seemed clear that the hermit, or whoever he was, was not the kind of person to lock his doors anyway.

There were windows too. Wooden ones, with peeling white paint, some old metal framed dormer windows mostly rusted down to the steel frame, and an out-of-place PVC patio door which was double-width and which gave onto the wooden decking. Two stout logs sat facing each other, as if in conversation.

She looked up at the roof, which was mostly rusted tin, corrugated and uneven.

How could anyone live here?

George Swanson, Detective Inspector, got out of the passenger seat of the BMW and strode into the house.

‘Inspector! Over here! I think we’ve got something!’

Swanson walked over to where the young detective was standing, just by the empty fireside. The rookie pointed to a picture loosely tacked to the wall above the mantelpiece, which was fashioned from an upturned pallet.

‘He’s been drawing pictures of her!’

The picture showed a girl with deep brown eyes. The young officer seemed to shudder slightly and shuffled to the left as Swanson approached the drawing. The eyes seemed to follow him as he stepped aside. He stared back as they followed him, like the ghost of a perhaps-dead child seeking retribution.

‘Good work, Ryan,’ said the senior man, stooping slightly, as if the youngster had just unearthed some impossible-to-find DNA evidence, ‘photograph this, bag it, send it for analysis. Then search the house. Someone like this will have hundreds of those. And probably worse.’

‘Yes, Sir!’ said Ryan in triumph. He turned and went to look for the photographer. The eyes followed him relentlessly.

Over in the bedroom across the hall, two other officers were surveying a grisly scene. The double bed had tape across the bars where the headboard would have been, and stout string or rope strung across the mattress.

Professional and efficient, the photographer focused her lens on several specifics. The ropes. The tape. A scrap of torn sheet lying across the single grotty pillow, and a deep bloodstain on the blanket. Focus. Click. Focus. Click. It was all the evidence they needed.

Now they just had to find the girl.

Before it was too late.