

Leila Chapter 44

Duke was finishing up his packing inside the house.

Just a couple more days and we'll go.

The nearest road was at least half a mile away, but there was a very narrow, sometimes impassable, lane which came a little closer. On a calm day if the breeze was in the right direction, the peace would be ruffled by the drone of a car engine and occasionally the drone of a rambler. They almost never came anywhere near him, which was the way he liked it, but right now there was the unmistakable sound of one or more cars heading up and down the lane as dusk fell.

He heard the sirens too.

It wasn't fully dark but from his bedroom skylight he could make out some distant lights flashing. They were the piercing blue that could only come from the emergency services. He stood and looked out at the greying night sky punctuated with blue flashes.

Sooner than I thought.

He wondered whether Mr Planner had finally got his way. But even Kevin Walker wouldn't be able to call in the full blue-light brigade for a simple eviction which was as good as done anyway. No, this felt different.

Someone's in trouble. Where?

He thought of Leila, but then reassured himself that she would never be out there at night, and that after yesterday she would probably give it a day or two anyway. In any case, she knew the woods well enough. Leila wouldn't get lost.

He stood watching. The lights seemed to flash for a few seconds, then go off. Then reappear on a different part of the horizon. He realised that each time they reappeared, they were closer to where he was standing. Then they stopped, as the last bit of proper roadway ended.

A few minutes passed.

Now, voices. Distant, but getting louder with each step.

What are they shouting? Surely not the eviction notice? No!

After two or three more minutes it became clear.

'Leila! Leila! We know you're there!'

'Leila, come out! You're safe now. It's OK!'

In that moment, everything changed. This was no planning officer with a clipboard. This was the police. Lots of them, and they weren't carrying clipboards. Hurried voices got louder and police radios chattered excitedly. His mind raced.

She must be in danger! I need to help her. But...what if they think...? What if they actually think that I...?

He considered his options. None of them seemed to make sense. His concern for Leila was overshadowed now by his terror for himself. He could not deal with this. Police in uniforms. Difficult questions. Investigations. Interrogations.

Grabbing the bag from the bedroom table, he stumbled and smacked his elbow on the solid steel frame of the bed. Swearing silently as he felt warm blood trickle down his arm, he grabbed the sheet and did his best to staunch the flow. There was no time for injuries, but the blood kept coming. He tore a piece of the sheet and fashioned a bandage which he tied tightly round his arm, discarding the rest. He careered into the hallway, just in time to see half a dozen torchlights heading down the path. He had to think quickly.

He'd been too slow to make his escape from the front, so he quickly jumped down into the basement, locking the door behind him. It was one of the areas of the house that was unlit, so he had to feel his way down the staircase until he hit bare earth at the bottom. He could hear heavy boot-steps above him, and the barking of at least two police dogs. Over the general hubbub, they were persistently calling her name.

'Leila! Leila. Where are you? You can come out now!'

They think she's in the house? Where is she?

He stumbled through the jumble of stuff he kept down there, just as the door he'd locked at the top of the stairs was kicked in by one of the officers.

There was a loud clumping down the cellar steps and flashes of the torches. Feeling his way in the dark, along the beams beneath the house, he crept out into the warm night.

He moved through the blackness of the forest like a feline, belying his fifty-something years. He knew each pathway intimately, after hundreds of trips to collect firewood or to hunt for protein. He could still hear the police sirens and momentarily contemplated going back to confront them. He assumed that they had made assumptions about him.

But he had run.

I've done nothing wrong. But I bet they think I have. They think I've taken her. No! But how can I explain that? She was here, and now she's missing. Leila! Where are you?

He knew well enough that he'd not done anything, but he also knew that to explain that to a policeman, with all those lights flashing, or in some kind of holding cell, would be impossible for him in his current state.

He used the lights now, the piercing blue giving him just enough reflected light to proceed. He would not leave the forest. If Leila was in trouble, he must stay. He would dive deeper in, down into the cavern as he called it, by the lake. There was thick undergrowth there.

He would hide out until all this had passed.

And then find her.