

Leila Chapter 43

Leila had sat for most of the evening in a clearing just out of sight of the house, close to tree number fifteen, the third in her sequence. There she could glimpse the distant shack, with the large oak growing in front, and the pathway leading to the terrace and the front door.

She had decided that she would take him the crisps and biscuits she'd pinched later. She would do him another picture. If he was really going to leave, she would draw him a picture of his house. To remember their times together. He could take it with him.

He seemed so hassled yesterday. I'll draw the shack. Cheer him up. Go a bit later, just before it gets dark.

It was close to eight when she finished. She stared at the sketch. *Not bad.* But something was different. It should have been obvious! A missing detail. It wasn't in her picture. She looked up. Not in reality either.

No smoke.

All of her other images of the shack had silent smoke wisping out of the makeshift chimney. Like a child's spot-the-difference puzzle, this one did not. She rolled up the near-complete drawing, took a quick swig of water, and fastened the backpack.

In the distance, she heard a siren.

Leila's heart beat harder, her breath short. She trod carefully as she approached the building.

What's up? Has he left? Have they chased him out? Or arrested him?

She stood by the last tree and listened. Still nothing from inside. She moved slowly towards the door, glancing up at the smokeless chimney. She panted hard. Panic rose.

It's my fault. He's gone!

Not just one siren now. More than one, and closer. They had come for him! Or maybe her dad cared enough to finally call the police? Was that her name they were calling?

She was rumbled.

Ready to go home?

Her mind raced and she glanced this way and that down the path.

No chance! Hide. Just for a bit.

She had no plan, but she wasn't going to come quietly. She slipped herself in amongst the ferns and brambles just off the pathway, and crawled along a low gully.

If they really wanted her home, they'd have to find her.