

Leila Chapter 42

Leila was angry because she'd lost him.

She'd go back.

Tonight.

As soon as she got out of this place. For good, like he said.

It was late-May, and warm for the time of year.

For Leila, the temperature in the classroom had built up to boiling.

The voices in her head that day had not been the voices of her teachers or her friends.

Leila, please. Come back. I need your help again. You're the only one who can help me now. They're coming. I'm sorry.

Despite the heat and noise, she could hear a voice. Clear and smooth. Duke was talking to her. She shut her eyes to hear him better.

'Leila? Leila are you OK?'

It was the gentle tone of Miss Stuart, her English teacher. The lesson was over. Five minutes over. Leila was still sitting there.

'Oh, er, yeah sorry. I'm fine. What's the time?'

'Well we finished a few minutes ago, Leila. Time to go outside please.'

She could not hear him, he'd faded. The moment had passed.

I have to go back. Tonight.

In the here and now, in the classroom, it was all shouting voices, and bells and desks and chairs screeching across the floor. She rocked to and fro in her seat trying to grab at anything familiar, something that would calm her down. She knew there was only one thing for it.

Their school was old-school. Rules and permissions for everything.

As Lil, Ollie and Olivia headed out onto the playground, Jim Smith, Head of Chemistry, was on the check. Each of them fished out the lilac card in its laminated cover, thrust it towards Mr Smith, and was waved through.

Leila didn't have a pass. She was supposed to be school dinners. Hey-ho, but this was an emergency.

'Mr Smith? Sir. Can you let me out please? I left some stuff back home that I need for art this afternoon. May I?'

Smith was day-dreaming. He often was.

‘What? Oh, I suppose so. Make it quick, mind you.’

The road ahead was not clear, and she set off without a destination or a return time in mind. She was aware of deliberately missing the passageway that led to the house. That could wait. She needed time out. She ran in the direction of the woods, and released her hair from its band to feel the wind through it.

She wasn’t going to go home that day. She had decided. It had been t-shirt weather for several days. She would stay out. Maybe even for a few hours before someone came looking for her.

Wait!

She would go back and get her sketchbook. Something to do. Something to eat. She would take him a present.

As she let herself into the house she could hear the blaring of the TV channels from the sitting room. It was not even a challenge to sneak in and sneak out. The kitchen for a few snacks, and upstairs for the sketchbook. The hallway for a coat and a quick ruffle of the dog’s indolent whiskers. In and out in less than five minutes. No-one spoke. No-one cared. She was free.

It was gone seven when her dad realised she wasn’t home. He cursed as he stumbled out, opened the car door, turned the ignition. *Where is she - this time? Better quickly go round the village, see if she’s in any of her usual haunts. What are her usual haunts?*

By eight he started to worry. No Leila. He asked the kids at the bus shelter. No, they hadn’t seen her. By eight-thirty he was on the phone to the police.

‘Calm down sir,’ it was WPC Martin, ‘how long did you say she’s been missing? You say she isn’t in her usual places? Any idea where she might be? At a friend’s house, perhaps?’

And then it dawned on him.

The woods! She likes to go in the woods. Those bloody trees. God knows what she gets up to, but now night’s falling. Didn’t she say there was some creepy guy out there?

‘Oh please! Can you help? She likes to go in the woods. There’s someone out there. It’s night. If anything happens to her, I’ll never forgive myself. Please help!’

‘Sir of course. We can help. Just tell me where you are. Right, let me repeat that. Junction of Willow Way and the main road. Number 19. We’ll be there in five minutes. Then we’ll both go and find her. Don’t worry.’