

Leila Chapter 14

What had he said? He said I wouldn't be able to name the tune. That thing he was playing on the violin? Hardly a tune, really! Some nice notes. A melody. Calm. Hmmm...what was it?

Leila was not one to ignore a challenge, however pointless. She had run home with the tune teasing at her musical brain, and his question annoying her.

The next day she had again wanted to avoid Mrs Parsons on the way home, and although she could have gone straight, no-one really cared if she stayed out for a bit, and something pulled her towards the centre of the forest. As before she acted out her little tree ritual, touching every fifth one on the route, but failed to notice a little carved tick mark under each of her fingerprints.

Her return caught Duke unawares. Not only a visitor, but a repeat visitor. He could not remember whether that had ever happened before.

'Oh, hello again! Weren't you here yesterday?'

'Yes, I came when I heard that music. Was that really you? I thought I knew the tune, but I can't place it.' Leila stood well back from the house, keeping to the side of the path and grasping one of the smaller trees for reassurance. She kicked and scraped at the muddy ground with the toe of her trainers.

'That was me! I like to practice a bit as the sun goes down.'

'The sun doesn't go down, it's just the rotation of the earth.'

Leila liked science to be right.

'I used to play the guitar. A bit.'

'Oh that is wonderful,' he replied, 'I love it when young people want to play music!'

'Well, yes, but I'm not very good.'

'Keep going, my dear, you're only fourteen years old after all!'

'I'm fifteen actually.'

'I knew I'd miscalculated! Sorry! I used to teach in the secondary school, so I was a pretty good judge of age. But it's been a long time, perhaps I'm losing my touch! You all look so different these days!'

There was something about his voice that made her want to go closer, but as she edged forward she stopped, trying to regulate her breathing. She thought again about sitting down, but again thought better of it. She moved forward and leaned against the wooden columns supporting the front of the structure. As she moved, he again motioned to the stool. For a moment it looked like he was going to take her hand. She recoiled slightly and he withdrew.

Leila did not like to touch people at any time. Even her father, or perhaps especially her father, would be met with a withdrawn hand if he tried to take it. He didn't try too often. She didn't like being touched, or touching anyone else. She took the normal corridor-jostling at school personally. More than

once she'd lashed out after imagining some personal slight had occurred in the *melée*.

Duke was clutching a mug. Leila could see a scummy foam on the top of whatever was in it.

'Something to drink?'

She held up a hand to decline the offer, checking again that she was far enough away to run if she had to. *Stranger danger* they used to call it in school. Yet looking across at the hunched figure, tea in hand, silently looking up at her, she felt a certain calmness and pride in her courage. He was thinking the same.

'You're a brave little thing, aren't you? Does anyone know you're out here?'

Leila took in the words.

What is he? A mind-reader? He seems to know what I'm thinking.

'Honestly I was just walking and I got a bit lost. I heard some music. I had a bad day.'

'Bad day at school? Or don't you go to school?'

'Yes it was bad. I barely managed to stay in a lesson today.'

'Annoying teachers? Other kids bothering you? Terrible school dinner? Afternoon dragged on?'

He seemed to know exactly what her school was like.

'Well yes, all of those things actually. I hate school.'

'What's so bad about it? You don't really mean that do you?'

Normally she would have resented the question, but his tone was one of sympathy, rather than judgement. He continued.

'I used to think I hated things, and I've made lots of mistakes in my life because of that. Often by the time I realised it wasn't so bad, it was too late.'

She tried to make sense of what he was saying.

'Yes I make mistakes too! But at the time I just can't help what I do. It always goes wrong.'

'Well, that's it, isn't it? Mistakes happen in the heat of the moment. But the moment soon passes. And it's better when you talk about it.'

She had to admit that talking about it, even with a total stranger, helped.

'I never really like school that much, though. Just a few people sometimes, and some lessons.'

'There you go! So there are a few things that you like!'

‘Yeah, but I did have a bad day.’

‘I know you did.’

He spoke with his hands clasped together and tried to catch her distant gaze. Had Leila looked up she would have seen his understanding smile, suggesting he actually did know how she was feeling.

‘So may I know your name? I’m Duke by the way.’

The question was relaxed, casual even. It flowed naturally, sounding almost disinterested, so that if she didn’t want to say who she was, it was like it wouldn’t matter. Because of that, she told him.

‘I’m Leila.’

‘Ah yes, of course. Pleased to meet you Leila. That is an unusual name. And a beautiful one too.’

‘Yeah, er...thanks.’ She thanked him because she felt she ought to.

‘I think perhaps you should be going Leila. It’s quite late and your parents wouldn’t want you out in the woods past dusk, would they?’

She stared hard at the ground. No eye contact.

‘If I was lucky to have what normal people call parents, they’d care. Maybe.’

‘Oh... I’m so sorry,’ he said, hastily retracting.

‘It’s OK. I live with my Dad. I don’t remember my Mum. My Dad is always busy. He really doesn’t care where I am.’

‘Well, adults often appear uncaring Leila, but I’m sure that soon enough he’ll start wondering where you are.’

‘Yeah, maybe. OK, goodbye then.’ There was a part of her that didn’t want to leave.

‘It has been great meeting you Leila. Your best route out is to take that path there, and then turn right when it hits the fence. You’ll end up back on the lane.’

That’s odd. He didn’t ask where I live.

The directions to the lane would work, although she was confident that her tree-trail would also take her back. She stepped away from the porch.

‘Thank you. Nice to meet you.’

‘The thanks are all mine, my dear.’ He stood up, pushing the chair backwards and nodding his head slightly.

‘It has been a pleasure meeting you. I don’t get many visitors. Goodbye.’

At that moment, Leila resolved to come back. There was something familiar and reassuring about him. He seemed wise and honest and genuine. And she didn't meet many people like that. Most of the people she met seemed to her to be the opposite - stupid, and disreputable and fake. She took part of the path he'd indicated, then turned off when she found what she thought was her own route back to the garden. She studied the tree in the half-light but could not see the vague marks she'd left before. She had a moment of panic when she thought she might be lost, then breathed again when she realised she was one tree out.

She tapped lightly on the right one, her first marked tree, and looked back along the path. She could see through the gap the wispy smoke rising through the trees, from the ever more distant home-made chimney.

She paused and thought she could hear the sound of a violin, playing a gentle but happy tune.

E minor.