

Leila Chapter 11

Leila was scared of the deeper reaches of the woods. What young person would not be? Although her occasional route to school just kissed the outer fringes of the copse, she sometimes wandered further in. Of course it was no rainforest, but even during the daytime its deeper regions were darkened by the canopy and the thick understory, where the trees were mature enough to deny nurture to the forest floor, which remained damp and boggy much of the year round. By November you'd need boots. Leila knew that in this part of southern England there were virtually no animals or bugs that weren't more scared of her than she was of them. Twice in her memory someone had reported spotting an adder sunning itself on a pathway, and once a fox had bothered a dog-walker. But no-one had ever been hurt. There were birds of all shapes and sizes, rabbits aplenty, and several families of deer to add to the normal population of harmless bugs and beasties you would find anywhere.

She took her favourite path, the one that curved into the woods, cutting through two huge bramble patches. She liked the look of the trees by this path - their trunks were wide at the base, only slowly tapering as they grew towards the distant sky. She cared less that the path was muddy. It was leading her right to the heart of the forest. Further in than most dog walkers ever went. She felt the taller trees frowning down on her, seeming to bend in the half-light of the evening and then spring back up as she passed. Perhaps there was a little breeze that was gently ruffling some of the uppermost branches. She looked back as the forest seemed to close behind. She knew it wasn't actually closing.

Was it?

Leila had developed a habit.

She liked habits.

This one was to mark her regular path between the trees by touching specific ones in turn. She smiled to herself when she saw that there were little markings from where her fingernails had rubbed the lichen and moss off the bark each time she'd gone through this little ritual. She'd not been to the woods that often, maybe three or four times, but often enough to leave her signature on the way through.

This was just another walk, but after she'd passed the five trees she normally touched (every fifth one in the row), she started to head a bit deeper in. This felt like more of a challenge, as if the trees were daring her to take herself further. She looked around at the shadows casting down from above. She couldn't help a little shudder and a glance back over her shoulder at how alone she was.

She was just about to turn back and search out the five-tree routine again, when her eye was caught by something just sitting on a bank beside the thicker undergrowth of the copse.

Don't panic, but that shouldn't be there. There must be some logical explanation. Stay cool.

Her heart seemed to beat irregularly. She thought it back into rhythm, and breathed.

It was a chair. Not a camping chair or something you might find by a path if someone had forgotten it, but a formal wooden chair. It was broken and moss-covered, and it occurred to Leila that it might once have been from a dining set or was even a rocking chair, whose runners or rockers had long since gone. It was perched on a slight rise in the ground.

She stopped and blinked a few times when she saw it. It was at an angle that made it look like someone

had been recently sitting in it, or was still there, even though it was empty. She thought she saw it rock slightly. Maybe it was the wind.

Then the air brought something else. Something from deep inside the forest, that she had never heard before.

At times like these, Leila's mind took on an extraordinary clarity. Throughout most days her brain was awash with conflicting thoughts, sounds, sights and smells. They overwhelmed her. But here, at the doorstep to the forest, alone, she was clear, soothed by the breeze and the warmth of the forest aroma.

She breathed in, then held her breath. Closed her eyes, taking in the stillness.

In gentle waves the wind brought her something new, from far away.

A vague but sweet sound, unlike anything she'd ever heard before.