

## Leila Chapter 10

Leila slipped out of the back door, and headed down the garden path towards the gate. The latch on the outside presented its usual challenge, and she had to jump up on the low wall beside the gate to reach the clasp from over the top of the wooden door. She carefully pulled it towards her and slid out into the cool dusk air.

Their small house had a tiny back garden, but it backed on to an extensive wooded area, which eventually morphed into a deep forest. It was perhaps bigger than it seemed to her, but Leila's dad once joked that it was their '*real back garden*' as if he could boast this vast tract of public land as his own. Probably all the neighbours claimed the same.

Leila usually just left the garden and sat amongst the saplings and fallen trees just into the woods. There was a shallow ditch to navigate, and walking into parts of the wood was a struggle unless you stuck to the few marked paths, the ones the dog walkers take every morning and every evening. By summer, the spaces around the sycamores and the pines in the first glades would be taken up by brambles and ferns. From where she normally sat she could see the back of the house, and although she was carefully just out of sight, she knew where she was and could easily return. She would take a book or a sketch pad.

Hours would pass.

Mr Allen, who kept the village hardware store, would tell you, if you asked, that there was something in the woods. Something deep in the forest; perhaps something that you should avoid. Older adults talked of an extended family of travellers who brought their wagons each summer to spend it making charcoal, and the smouldering grass piles they created to protect the burning coppiced branches until they turned into almost pure carbon. Then one year the town council had decided that the charcoal-burners were trespassing, and the ditches had been dug to put a stop to their work, although Leila did wonder about the smell of smoke she occasionally sensed on the wind.

Now the only villagers who walked the paths were those walking their dogs, early morning and just before sundown. They ambled along, throwing sticks and balls for their Labradors, Alsatians and Spaniels to retrieve. They rarely got more than half a mile into the woods before they'd turn around and start chucking the sticks back the way they came.

Leila avoided them and when she couldn't, she ignored them. It seemed wrong to her, the way they didn't notice anything other than their sticks, balls and dogs. The ones on their smart phones were the worst: they didn't see anything. Their dogs took them out, their dogs took them home.

Off those paths, the woods were quiet. Not that they were empty. A careful walker, a walker who paused making no sound, would occasionally be rewarded with the sight of a muntjac. And those who lifted their eyes could watch the nuthatches, thrushes and crows who made their nests in the bigger trees.

Today though it was strange for Leila to see in the distance, down one of the straight pathways, a stooped figure bending into the undergrowth and emerging with an armful of twigs or brushwood. A man perhaps, in an oversized coat, he glanced up and down the path, his head darting this way and that, before moving quickly with his bundle back into the bushes.

Leila crouched a little flatter to avoid being spotted. She was sure the man had not seen her, and he did not reappear.

But it upset her normal afternoon, so she decided to head back to the gate. It was unusual for anyone out there not to have a dog with them.

She got back to the garden, closed the gate behind her, and bolted it top and bottom.

On entering the house, she removed her outdoor shoes.

Cairo looked up dolefully and seemed to breathe a sigh of relief that any pressure to go out was now definitely over.