

## Leila Chapter 7

Each day Duke, when he wasn't drinking home-made tea on the stoop, busied himself around the house, usually focusing on a particular room. With no-one ever coming to visit, these projects took precedence, and keeping the place tidy was never a priority. Occasionally he swept the floor with a makeshift broom and removed some of the worst effects of forest-living - the leaf mulch and mud which caked themselves into every crevice from October to May - but he could not claim to be houseproud.

That morning, however, he was focused on his own bedroom. He'd had a bad night.

It was a small space, the walls of which had once supported a rickety old storage barn which he'd 'reclaimed' from one of the farms down the lane. He'd removed the timber plank by plank and transported it on foot, mostly at night, back to the shack. It was good quality hardwood, the kind that was barely available in these environmentally-conscious days, but which back in the day had been plentiful. It would last forever, so the room felt solid, comfortable and usually warm. On one wall he'd attempted some decoration, by plastering it with old album covers lifted from the house. There were gaps now, where the damp had got to them, and the graphics were faded. He smiled at a couple that were still important to him. *The Kick Inside*, with that half-staring eye, *My Aim is True*, featuring a stick-thin Elvis, and the iconic prism of *Dark Side of the Moon*.

He used to feel the eye's protective gaze as he fell asleep each night. He imagined his beautiful Alison was still with him, next to him. It was her, looking down on him, wasn't it? She was there alright. He would fidget until he got comfortable, settling into the sag of the mattress and remembering how he loved to look into her eyes. Into her soul. To tell her how much he loved her. And now, how much he missed her.

Every night.

But the bed had given up on him. He had brought it from the old house, and although it held some sentimental value, it was never built to last. That night it had finally quit, and in response to a gentle shifting of his weight as he slept, the head end had collapsed, with him asleep on it. He'd woken with a start, fearing an earthquake or even the imminent bulldozers, but had found in fact that the legs of the head end had simply given up, and he was lying with his feet a good eighteen inches above his head, which was now at ground level. He'd spent the rest of the night trying to lie across what was left of the bed, but kept rolling off onto the unfinished wooden floorboards. A rough night, for sure.

The previous summer he'd built himself a sort of workshop, out back behind the house. Above a basic workbench, one wall supported an impressive if ancient array of hammers, screwdrivers, chisels and saws, plus a range of different-sized boxes containing nails and screws. In the end he settled on two old reliables - some gaffer tape and some stout twine, with the intention of lashing the bed head back to its departed body. After an hour or so of re-screwing some of the torn-out fixings, and the application of tape and string to the joints, the bed, although rickety, was back standing. *At least a few more years*, he thought, with a wistful glance at the picture above the bed, momentarily jolted back to the better years that it had seen.

After fixing up the frame, he tried to sort out the mattress, which tended to ride up and ruffle. He was obviously a rough sleeper in more ways than one. With a bit of string at each corner, he managed to secure the corners of the mattress to the corners of the bed frame so that it shouldn't move as he slept his restless, tormented slumber each night.