

## Leila Chapter 4

There was one house on Leila's route to school that most of the local kids avoided if they could.

In the summer months with the light mornings it was fine. The house stood there like a malevolent presence for sure, but there never seemed to be anyone around, and the sunlight glinted reassuringly off the broken window panes. But now it was October, and the mornings had started to draw in. This morning, the sky loomed as a background to the twin gable ends of the house, their elevated chimneys outlined and prominent, and the ivy-clad exterior damp and unwelcoming.

Very occasionally Leila would negotiate a longer route to avoid the house. They knew that there was a woman who lived there, but there was virtually never a light on, and there was no evidence of the house or garden being cared for or looked after by anyone. In the two years that she'd been walking this way to school, Leila had only seen signs of life a few times. Sometimes she walked with a friend, but often she didn't have anyone, and walked alone. This morning Leila was in a race with her watch. She absolutely hated being late. Some of the kids preferred the other path, the one by the forest, but it took longer. Not an option today.

She'd just passed the front of the house as she did most days, when there was a scrabbling noise from the front door, which opened with a scrape along the ground. Leila was almost past the frontage, when a figure shuffled out, clutching a plastic carrier bag. Leila sighed. She knew what was going to happen, and when it did it set the day up badly.

'I've lived here since I was a little girl, y'know!'

It was a random opening line, and it did not invite conversation or comment. Leila turned her head to the ground as she walked on past. Her long brown hair curtained low over one eye and she glanced through the gaps to see if anyone was really there. The woman was emerging from her doorway, making her way through the rough undergrowth of her front garden. Leila hastened her already-brisk walk, and looked towards the other side of the well-maintained street, against which the house stood out as an anomaly. Most of its windows were boarded up and several were broken.

'Morning Mrs Parsons,' Leila mumbled, without looking up.

'What did you say? Since I was a little girl, born in nineteen-sixty-two I was!'

Another random if familiar comment, after which she turned and disappeared back into the house, tutting and mumbling.

Leila could not imagine this person as a little girl. She was one of those older people who had always been...old, with her near-translucent skin and limp hair. Some of the girls used to joke that she was already dead and what they were scared of was a hologram or ghost. But Leila's maths was sharp and she quickly worked out that Mrs Parsons was just old, and harmless. Over sixty years old. Leila just quickened her step and arrived at school early, without further incident.

She managed a brief chat with a couple of her friends who'd had a similar experience when passing Mrs Parsons that morning. They both told her not to worry about it. When Leila persisted and tried to make a big drama out of it, they told her to go away. When she didn't, they did.

The morning went as mornings did. Lessons, and breaks, and more lessons. Quite often Leila would

turn lessons into breaks by just getting up and leaving. She had her ways of doing things. She'd just turned the middle of one of her lessons into a personal breaktime and was milling about outside, not bothering if someone noticed her. She looked across the vast wood beyond her personal prison gates and reflected on how still the scene was, now that the late October sunshine had penetrated the greyness. There wasn't a breath of air, and certainly no wind or breeze to disturb the scene. She felt a certain peace as she looked out and tried to calculate how long it was until she could escape, and how long it would take her using the longer route.

*Forty-five minutes to go.*

Leila's mind cleared as whatever had happened in the lesson faded. She stared out and down over the expanse of forest and felt at peace for the first time that day. Between two distant vapour trails fading into nothingness, she was amused to see a small vertical line of thin grey smoke rising above the trees. Almost dead straight, it seemed to lend order to her normal sense of chaos. Deciding to avoid Mrs P that afternoon, she would take the longer route home, and perhaps seek out the smoke some day, as if tracking the end of a rainbow. Maybe she'd find a pot of gold. She sighed.

*That wouldn't happen to me. Nothing ever happens to me.*

She shook herself out of her daydream, but resolved to check it out sometime. She didn't forget anything. But now, someone was coming. She'd be in trouble.

*Again.*