

Leila Chapter 5

Going to sea was the right thing to do at the time.

Duke had needed to put the shame out of his mind. The shame of bickering and falling out with them all. He knew that they should have pulled together. Supported each other. That's what families do in times of crisis. But they'd all said too much, without thinking, and it quickly spiralled downwards.

He would probably spend the rest of his life regretting it.

So he joined a shipping company operating out of Southampton. He'd always thought that he would go back to the Sussex countryside when he returned, but he'd sold the house anyway. There was no-one to live in it, so why keep it? He'd ended up splitting the money. He had sent half to Australia. It had felt right at the time.

The work was hard, of course, but the manual labour was actually welcome, and at forty he was still stick thin and strong. He'd signed a six-year contract, which paid enough for him to look after family commitments and store a little away.

It was mindless work, but it stopped him losing his mind. He saw the world, especially the sea corridor between Southampton and North East Brazil. He remembered to this day the warm smell of the cargoes. Usually tropical products from the plantations near Recife. The sweetness of the sugar cane, the richness of the coffee beans. Some friends and some one-night stands, mostly in distant ports, and the odd enemy, mostly on board. Some fights.

He'd seen out those years and then stopped. With a bit of money in the bank and some memories. But he'd finished without regret and had come back to the shadows of where they had lived. There was no question of buying a house, and he knew he could not live in one, so he had set out for his recollections of a distant forest, dense and protective, where families of charcoal burners used to camp out each summer to tend their smouldering stacks.

Over four whole summers he'd cobbled together the shack, and worked on his own wood-burning business. It had made him strong. He was healthier now than he had ever been, eating a mostly vegetarian diet, augmented only by the chickens he kept and an occasional hunt for a rabbit or a pheasant in the forest. He'd become happy and confident in a lonely sort of way, living his life how he wanted, unburdened by the modern world, and far away from the conflicts and difficulties he'd left behind.

In his darker moments, he did think of her all the way out there in Australia and was overcome by a sense of shame and embarrassment, even though he'd heard that she was happy and was forging a new life. He even occasionally thought about his brother, and wondered what he was doing now.

Then again, if there was another log to put on the fire, or another little project to get working on, he forgot all about all of them.