

## Leila Chapter 2

Deep in the forest, Duke was hard at work. The grassy piles, smouldering gently, could tend themselves for a few days more, given the good weather, so he'd turned his attention to the shack. He'd achieved a considerable amount in one day. In addition to the basic octagonal shape he'd originally planned and built nearly four years previously, he'd made various improvements, adding rooms off the main hallway, levelling some of the surrounding earthworks, and digging out the cellar. This week he'd worked on a deck area outside the front door.

*100% recycled!*

He talked to himself a lot when he was working, sometimes silently and sometimes out loud. He'd had a radio once, but when the batteries went he'd seen no reason to replace them. He used to listen to pointless news or to the inane witterings of the local DJs and their love of cheesy music, neither of which he missed.

But he needed to talk to someone, and as nobody ever came to this part of the forest, he ended up talking to himself most of the time.

*Not beautiful! Not functional! But all mine!*

To him the shack felt like a palace. In his head it was always *The Shack*, even though the connotations of that name were mostly negative. For him it was all positive. Away from the world. Somewhere he could be at peace, with himself and with nature. Recycled materials. Birds and squirrels and rabbits befriended him. The odd badger if he was lucky. Occasionally he would hear human voices or a dog barking, but usually at a distance and usually heading away rather than towards him. The smoking grass guarding the clearing usually put them off.

He liked it that way.

At the back he grew most of his food, so much so that his trips to the village shop were down to about once a month. He would sell them his charcoal, and use the cash to stock up on some basics like soap and toothpaste. Maybe knife or saw blades which they would get for him if he ordered them. He sometimes spoke to them in the shop. Often he didn't.

He stood back and admired his latest work.

The deck was built from sawn-up logs from trees he'd taken down when clearing around the front of his property. Property? Who was he kidding? He knew deep down that it was not sustainable and that the pressure from *the authorities*, whoever they were, would only grow. They had visited a couple of times over the summer, but he'd seen them off - once with a hefty stick brandished at the front door, and the other with a bit of charm and a smile and a lot of understanding reassurance that he would do the right thing.

He had no intention of doing the right thing.

Or of moving anywhere.

*I could even have guests out here. On my new verandah!*

He chuckled to himself and imagined entertaining on the new deck, and picked a couple of stout logs to act as stools. He positioned them just to the right of the porch, and sat down with a glass of murky water harvested from the rain butt. He would chat to them about the weather. About politics. About planners and local bureaucrats.

But he knew no-one would come. He was struck by a momentary pang of sadness when he recalled what he'd left behind, but then he did what he always did. He looked around him at the environment in which he lived, the beauty of the natural world, in the beating heart of the forest, and at the ramshackle collection of boards, blocks and beams that he'd cobbled together.

That he now called home.

The home he knew he was going to have to fight for.