

## Leila Chapter 16

‘There’s this guy who lives out in the woods. I’m going there.’

‘What the actual...?’

They hadn’t yet made it to school. It was already nine thirty and Leila was late. Noah was also late, as he often was. Leila occasionally talked to Noah. Although he was a year older than her, they often met in the isolation unit. They would try to snatch a few words through the walls of the booth desks and compare notes on what they had done to be sent there. He was usually there because he always turned up late.

‘No, seriously. I met him there. He’s built a house and stuff.’

‘OK, well take me there then.’

Leila thought for a moment. In just three brief meetings she’d built some kind of rapport with the old guy. She already felt protective of him. She already wanted to go back. Alone.

‘Er, well maybe I can take you there sometime, if you like.’

‘Now. Let’s go.’

Leila looked at the time. She was already thirty-one minutes late. Noah grabbed her arm. She didn’t like being touched, and pulled away from him. Noah was a special kid.

‘Come on! You don’t dare, right? We’re already too late to go in anyway. Show me your mystery hermit!’

It was clear that Noah didn’t believe her and just wanted to bunk off school for an hour. He was already diverting from the main school entrance towards the path that led away to the woods.

‘If you don’t come I’ll just find him myself!’ He was laughing, taunting her.

‘He doesn’t like being visited,’ she muttered. She started to follow, wondering to herself why she was acting defensive. Who was she protecting?

‘He doesn’t exist, that’s why!’ yelled Noah, almost skipping down the path. Leila ran after him.

As they made their way alongside the fence that separated the school from the woods, Leila wondered whether she was more scared of being alone in the woods with the old man, or with Noah. Maddie from Year Nine had told Leila that last summer, walking home alone with Noah, in that stretch of the path where there’s usually few people about, he’d asked if he could kiss her. It was all she could do to keep him off her. Leila momentarily thought about turning back, but there was something pulling her along. She caught sight of the narrow plume of smoke rising from one of the clearings. It felt supportive, protective even.

‘It’s this way,’ she said, stopping Noah’s headlong rush into the forest, ‘can you just calm down a bit. He doesn’t like strangers.’

She came to the first tree in her set of five. She touched it with her fingers as usual, reinforcing the little wearing away of the green lichen. She pressed hard to make her mark, just above three small gouges in the bark. They were neatly cut, and fresh. Counting but missing the next four as they headed into the undergrowth, she stopped just before she touched the second tree in her set.

'Hey, wait!' she stopped Noah, whose enthusiasm for the trip seemed to be waning.

'We probably ought to get back, actually,' he said, his bravado deserting him.

'We're nearly there. He's probably heard us coming by now.' She looked at her tree. Underneath the mark where she'd scraped it, perhaps a dozen times, was another new mark. Carved into the bark. Almost a tick mark. Her heart gave a little thump as she looked at it. She waited for Noah to get closer.

'Look at that. What is it?'

'What? That mark?'

'Yeah, I haven't seen that before.'

'Oh that's just a mark they make to indicate the tree needs cutting down.' He sounded convincing, although she wasn't sure. They walked on, more slowly now, talking nervously. To the third tree.

More ticks, just under her finger marks.

And the fourth. *All marked for felling?*

It didn't seem like it.