

## Leila Chapter 17

Duke was sitting on his new deck, reading a bit, writing a bit. It was comfortably warm despite being early November, and he always had extra layers.

That morning he had looked in his so-called wardrobe, which was more like a single long rail suspended at either end by two loops of thick rope from the ceiling, and which was full of what he'd retrieved over the years from clothes banks and charity shops. He'd managed to pick three layers of cardigan which were not too damaged. The colours didn't match at all, but that didn't bother him. If he'd had a mirror, he might even have admired the green, beige and scarlet combination with some satisfaction.

Sitting out there, rocking gently with a huge mug of tea in his hand, he was surprised to hear voices in the distance. Although unusual, especially for that time in the morning, there was no need for him to get up or to worry. He knew the planning guy wouldn't be back for several weeks, and although he could hear walkers occasionally as they perhaps got slightly off their own beaten track, they rarely stumbled so far in that they came across his compound.

Today was different and even from a distance he knew that the invisible voices were young and were holding a conversation. The lilt and intonation of each voice was responding to that of the other. As they got closer, the two voices sounded excitable and nervous.

Rather than draw attention to himself, he got up and went inside. The few visitors who saw the shack often just had a quick peek and then left, often taken aback and alarmed if they actually caught sight of him.

The voices had seemed to fade, so he was surprised to hear a gentle knocking on the front door.

'Hello, are you there?' It was Leila's voice. 'Hello?'

'You've been kidding me, right? What a joke!' Another voice. One of those teenage voices recently emerged into adulthood. A tuneless song of highs and lows.

'No I told you. He's here somewhere. Sit down.' She pulled up the log and motioned to him to sit on the other one. Duke took a deep breath and shuffled out.

'Leila, what a wonderful surprise!'

The boy shuffled nervously backwards, almost losing control of his stool.

'Oh don't worry about me. I'm Duke,' he paused slightly and looked at Leila, 'pleased to meet you.'

He extended his hand, but the boy didn't budge. Leila leaned forward and thought about giving him a little hug, but then thought better of it.

'Good morning, my dear. Shouldn't you be in school? And please do introduce us.'

She ignored the question.

'Oh yeah sorry, this is Noah.'

Noah tried a smile but he had the kind of face that was really a permanent scowl, and if a smile were to break out it would be nearly invisible.

‘Oh yeah. Hi,’ scowled Noah uncertainly.

‘I wanted to show him where you lived.’

‘Is that true Leila?’

‘Er, not really. I wanted to prove to him that you exist. He thought you were just imaginary!’

Duke chuckled into his tea.

‘Noah is one of us,’ she said finally, ‘we’re both bunking off this morning.’

‘And I thought you just came to introduce me to your boyfriend!’

The moment the words were out, Duke regretted them. Teenagers could be touchy about such things. But he’d said it. Would a smile serve as an apology?

Noah’s scowl became even more deeply furrowed, if that was possible. Leila ignored the apologetic smile. Neither spoke.

‘One of us, you say?’

‘Yeah, Noah likes things to be done just right, see.’

‘Well, he won’t like all this then!’ He spread his hands to indicate the ramshackle mess of buildings behind him.

‘Actually I like building things,’ replied Noah matter-of-factly, ‘but they excluded me for that.’

‘You said you were making stuff out of Lego in a maths lesson. Not the right place. They’d told you not to.’

‘And I’d told them that I was going to. So I did.’

‘I was a teacher once,’ said Duke, ‘It’s not easy. You need to do as you’re told.’

Noah looked at him with contempt. Just like all the rest.

‘I do what I like,’ he said, getting up and stepping down off the deck, ‘C’mon, we’re off.’

‘Good to meet you Noah. I’ll see you again Leila.’

He knew he wouldn’t see Noah again.

Thank goodness.

They walked out together, waiting until they were just out of earshot.

‘I told you. Old man living in the forest. You were rude.’

‘I don’t like him. The way he looked at me. Creepy.’ Noah was definitely not going back.

‘Well, I think he’s alright. He makes me feel relaxed.’

‘You shouldn’t go there alone. Why would an old guy just hang out in the woods like that?’

‘He told me why. His wife died and he couldn’t face the house any more. He didn’t get along with his family, but he wanted to stay close. So he came back here. It’s simple.’

‘Fine then, you go back if you want. But be careful.’

‘OK. I will.’

She touched her five trees on the way out, the little tick marks pointing the way back.