

Leila Chapter 23

It was even colder the next day when she went back. She had hoped to find him in a better frame of mind. It was not like him to be down. He was wearing the jumper. It was shapeless on his bony form, but she was proud to see it. He shuffled into a little model-like twirl as she approached. She smiled.

‘You like it?’

‘I love it Leila. Thank you.’ They sat down.

‘I’ve brought you something else.’ She reached into the rucksack and pulled out two mince pies which she’d liberated from the kitchen at home. He accepted one from her, and they ate in silence.

‘Why are you doing this for me, Leila?’

‘Doing what?’

‘Bringing presents. And coming back.’

‘I like coming. It clears my mind.’

‘I’m not sure I’ll be clearing your mind just now Leila. I’m afraid mine is full of stuff at the moment.’

‘Maybe I can clear yours!’

He looked at the young woman sitting in front of him, and thought that yes, probably, in the right place and at the right time, she could. He checked the backpack was still to hand by the doorway.

‘So why did you come out here? Was it just because she died?’

‘Oh I didn’t come straight out here. When she died it felt like I had nothing to live for. A bit of a cliché I know, but I went to sea!’

‘A cliché?’

‘Yes. Something predictable. Something people do in a crisis.’

‘Well, I’m often in a crisis, and I don’t go out to sea!’

He laughed.

‘Er, OK Leila. Have you ever been to the beach and gazed out over the waves?’

She admitted that she had. The predictability of the swell and the swoosh of the breakers lent her a certain calm.

‘Well I just took it a step further. I needed to get away, and the long, boring journeys actually helped. Not the Navy, but what they used to call the Merchant Navy. Crewing on bulk carriers. I only did six

years, but I saw the world! Based out of Newhaven, just down that way.'

He waved his hand in the vague direction of the coast some ten miles to the south.

She looked at him and thought he looked a bit like a sailor. Rough, weathered skin. Big strong hands.

'Where did you go?'

'Well we had a regular route between England and Brazil. Recife was our main destination, picking up sugar and other crops, every couple of months. But I saw the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, lots of South America too. Interesting places. And I used to like the journeys. Endless water, nothing but sea.'

'So why did you stop?'

'I was only in it to get away. In the end it got too much. Too much travelling. No roots. And I missed England. I came back to chill out a bit and to settle. And to maybe see my daughter again.'

'So why did she leave?'

'Oh, it was my fault really. We just had a falling out. I objected too much to one of her boyfriends. Just didn't like him, But really that was her business. I should have left it at that.'

'Well then, it wasn't really your fault, was it? I mean, if your daughter did something wrong, then you were right to speak about it. If her own father was not able to speak about it, then who would? I'm sure you had your reasons.'

He marvelled at the girl's logic and calm.

'I knew he was cheating on her. I could tell. He was that sort. She didn't believe me of course, until it was too late. She got hurt. She always had her issues. Problems at school. You know, found it hard to make friendships, that sort of thing. I often had to go and pick her up early.'

He looked into the far distance, down the track where the winter sun was rising.

'Neither of us really got over her mother dying, I guess. They'd call it 'mental health' nowadays, but in those days they would say you had 'flipped' or 'had a breakdown'. That's what happened. I just couldn't cope, losing the two of them like that.'

'She sounds just like me!' laughed Leila.

'Well she was like you in many ways. You remind me of her.'

'I feel sorry for her! Where did she go?'

'I think she ended up in Australia. As far as I know that's where she still is. I've tried to make contact, but she's never responded. She was always the kind of person who made up her mind about things and stuck to it. Difficult to convince otherwise. The baby didn't help.'

'She had a baby?'

‘Yes, she had a daughter, but she found that hard too. She was not a natural mother. Too busy worrying about herself. You would have thought that having a baby would focus her mind. Concentrate on something small and vulnerable. She did, for a while, but then like everything else, she just sort of lost interest.’

‘She left the baby?’

‘Yes, that’s right. A toddler by then, but she left it all the same, while she flew half way round the world. That deepened it for me. She’d gone too far and I could not forgive her.’

He was talking slower now. More deliberately. He seemed to be choosing his words very carefully as if there was more he wanted to say but he could not. The whole story obviously continued to upset him, but he also showed a hardness that she’d not anticipated. There was clearly more there, but she decided not to press him now. *Another time.*

‘I still don’t get why you left a perfectly good house and came out here.’

‘Memories Leila. Mostly. Of a wife and a daughter. Both gone. I felt as lonely as I had ever felt when I came to the realisation that I would never see either of them again. I would wander around the house, looking at the made-up beds. I would ruffle them gently so that next time when I peeped in that room it would look as if someone had slept there. I made cups of tea for both, or all, of us. A cup for me, and then one or two for the rest of the family. I kept their clothes. I’ve still got some of them. But I would wash the clothes once a week, as if they had been wearing them. Would you like to see them, maybe you would look good in them?’

‘Sorry that sounds weird.’ He missed the point.

‘It was. I slowly became convinced that I was going mad. I knew I had to get out of that place.’

‘Did you see a doctor?’

‘A shrink? No! My family didn’t believe in doctors. We went if we were dying, and then only if it was a real emergency! No, we were brought up just to make the best of it. Get on with life. Look forward. So that’s what I did. I decided that sitting there in that house, surrounded by ghosts and memories, would drive me crazy. So I sold it and left. Ended up here.’

‘I love it here!’ said Leila.

‘So do I, my dear, so do I. And as they say, time heals. Most of that pain has gone. Memories yes, but the pain has gradually been soothed and absorbed into the forest, in the same way that the trees take in carbon dioxide. Living here has sucked the pain away, and allowed me to look forward. To establish my little house, and my little business. And to meet people like you.’

‘Do you meet many people like me then?’

He laughed his big strong chuckle. His spirit was returning.

‘Oh no! I’ve never met anyone quite like you! Maybe one other that I can remember. But I don’t meet many people. I speak if I’m spoken to, but I can go days and even weeks without speaking to a soul. I occasionally see someone in the far distance, but I don’t need to talk to them, and if they see me,

they tend not to linger.'

They sat in silence for a while. Leila tried to digest what he'd said.

'So you don't meet anyone? You don't have any friends?'

'Not really. There was someone once. A couple of years ago now. She used to bring her dog.' He smiled as he spoke. 'We'd sit right here, although I hadn't built the porch then.'

'So what happened to her?'

'Oh, well, she just stopped coming really. I'm not exactly the most interesting company! I did think she might've been the one who got onto the Planning Department. She was a bit intense, to be honest.'

'Intense?'

'Yeah, she'd worked as a psychic, or psychologist, or astrologist or something! I never did know the difference. She had these staring blue eyes! She made me do this thing called the *four-minute stare*. God knows, something she'd read in a magazine I guess. But it was odd. I never mentioned anything to her, but I thought I saw something, something not quite right.'

'I don't really know what you're talking about!'

'The stare. We did it. For the life of me, I can't describe what I saw. It was a moment, a fleeting moment, barely even that. But it wasn't right. Something of the night, if that is not too corny. Don't get me wrong, I don't believe in all that stuff, but I could see something, something that wasn't for me, probably not for most people.'

'Ooer, all that from just staring at someone?'

'Yes, you wanna try it?' Duke was smiling.

'Definitely not! No thanks!' she giggled, 'When are the planners coming back?'

'I'm never sure. But I have a little idea in place to deal with them this time.' He reached down to touch the bag again.

'I wish I could help you.'

'Well maybe you can, Leila. Maybe you can. But I think you should get home now. Thank you for coming. And thanks for the pie!'

With that she got up and left, the freezing breeze flapping the sleeves of her coat.