

Leila Chapter 22

She'd barely been out of the house for a month, and was immediately struck by how unforgiving the forest could be in late December. The ground did not yield beneath her feet and she could feel the icy footprints of others through the soles of her boots as she walked.

Each tree was covered in a fine layer of frost, and she regretted the fingerless woollen gloves she'd put on. She scraped away at the finger marks, and counted the ticks, making sure they were still there as she went from tree to tree. The jumper was in a small rucksack on her back. Although it wasn't quite as perfect as she'd wanted it to be, she knew he would understand.

Her feet crunched in the brittle iciness of the leaves and twigs as she stepped on them. It was the shortest day of the year, and the moon in front of her had not yet been replaced by the sun rising behind. She noticed how the straight path towards the shack was orientated almost perfectly with the moon, sitting in a deep orange morning sky, and the sun on the horizon as she turned and looked back. The smoke from the shack rose in a precise bisection of the two orbits. It gave her hope that today would be a good day. She was looking forward to his reaction.

'You know I'm in trouble, don't you Leila?'

He didn't greet her or look up as he busied himself with something on the table outside the front door.

'Hello. I've bought you a Christmas present. What are you doing? You making something?'

'Oh I'm not making anything, just getting a few things together in case I need to move out quickly.'

He hurriedly stuffed something into a small bag. It looked like a knife, although she didn't quite see it.

'Why do you need all that stuff?'

Arranged on the table were an odd collection of items. There were about ten aluminium cans, unlabelled but which she presumed to be food, another knife, some rope, a box of matches and some gaffer tape. There was a stout home-made walking stick.

'Sorry, Leila, now isn't really a good time.' He hadn't properly spoken to her and had ignored the prospect of a gift.

'Are you OK?'

He looked up. Leila thought she could see redness around his eyes.

'OK so now I'm worried about you. What's going on?'

'You. Are worried. About me?'

'Yes. What's wrong?'

He sat down on the terrace and she followed. He slumped down with his elbows on his knees.

‘Well, you know, I’m not really supposed to be here and I’m getting close to my last warning from the planning people and the police. I’ve tried to stave them off for too long and they are losing their patience.’

‘You have to leave? Where will you live?’ She glanced around at the home he'd built for himself.

‘Oh I don’t know. I’ll be OK.’ She instantly worried when he said this. It felt like he was putting on a brave face.

‘They have talked about ‘re-housing’ me. Can you see that happening?’

‘When was the last time you lived in a real house?’

‘Almost exactly ten years ago, just a few months after she died. They’ve said they might be able to offer me a flat or something. I just just can’t see myself living that way.’

Adults often said difficult things in ways which didn’t make them seem so bad. Leila heard differently.

‘So you can see yourself dying?’

He laughed.

‘It’s not funny. You’re going to die, alone in a pokey little apartment?’

‘No Leila, you don’t have to worry about me! I have plenty to live for. But I’m not going to no flat!’ He semi-gestured to what was around him, but it was unconvincing. Leila didn’t point out that the future was a bit uncertain for him.

‘So where will you go?’

‘I’ll probably head west, and rebuild out there.’ He tapped the bag at his feet and rested his hand on a notebook or sketch pad that was lying on the table. ‘I’ve packed enough for two, so that should keep me going for a while. It won’t be easy. Alone. Maybe I’ll try to contact my brother again.’ He looked up into the sky, his gaze suggesting the implausibility of that succeeding.

Leila thought that *heading west* and *out there* sounded like a long way away. From her.

‘So you’re just going to start again?’

‘Yes, why not? Find some land in a forest. Perhaps build something a bit bigger next time. Sell some charcoal each summer.’

‘You would rebuild everything?’

‘Sure, but to a better design. Anyway, it may never happen. I just want to be ready when it does.’