

## Leila Chapter 13

Although it was not dark, Leila thought she could make out a light, or lights, through the dingy forest. That scent of burning wood was there too.

Her instinct was to run. Nothing about this situation was good. It was getting darker, she had seen someone in the distance, and she'd heard odd noises.

But she knew the routes through most of the woodlands pretty well, and she'd marked her way, so still she went on, driven perhaps by the peacefulness of the forest and the pulling power of the tune.

As she got closer, and the wood smoke got stronger, she came upon a clearing. Right in the middle of it was a mound, perhaps five feet high, apparently constructed out of grass and dried mud. She stopped just before the clearing and stared at this unusual shape. A mist of thin smoke clung around its top.

She skirted around the clearing by keeping close to the trees that fringed it. Leila had seen bonfires in autumn, when gardeners stash their random rubbish and set light to it, but those piles are usually a couple of feet high, no more. This was more structured, more organised. She looked to her right and thought she saw another one in a clearing through the tall pines. The same pall of smoke just hanging there above it.

And then, she was there.

Deep in the forest were three or four small wooden buildings. The largest one had a rough terraced area, with a small picket fence around it.

As she got closer, the music died away. The pulling power was gone. She stopped as it stopped.

Instinctively she moved away from the main path which approached the door. She couldn't see anyone. Up on the low roof was a chimney fashioned out of what looked like a narrow metal can or bucket, perched on top of a car tyre. A thin column of smoke rose from it - the line she'd seen from the school yard.

She took in the shape of the main building. No bigger than a large shed, it had a door and a porchway made of dark wood, and a rusted metal roof. As far as she could tell there were just two windows, and one of those was propped half-open with a long stick liberated from the forest. She could see part-way through it to a room beyond.

Leila was about to turn back to leave, ready to retrace her route by the trees she'd marked, when she noticed movement.

'Built it all myself, you know!' called a deep voice from within.

Leila's first instinct was to run. She took several steps away down the path, and dropped into the ferns until she was definitely out of sight, but then found herself peering back out from where she was hiding. She noticed a violin and bow lying on a table in front of the door.

'100% recycled materials. That's what you young people like isn't it? Environmental credentials!'

The voice had a smile in it and lingered on the word *credentials*.

How did the voice know she was young? She momentarily looked around to ensure she was adequately hidden and to verify that he was not talking to anyone else. Maybe she'd been seen on the way in. The path to the front door was ramrod straight and lined with trees. Sure, she'd been spotted. She slid her way carefully out of the thicket, straightened her jacket, and crept onto the last few metres of the path.

‘Ah there you are! Welcome!’

Leila still could not see anyone, but the shuffling from inside the house, and the rattling of the door as it slowly battled its rusting hinges indicated that someone was present. Above the door was a hand-written sign with a single word. *Heaven*, or perhaps *Haven*. A few seconds later, a prematurely aged man shuffled out of the half-open door and pulled out after him a battered chair. Leila recognised it as the one she'd seen at the head of the path, or something very similar.

‘Do come over, my dear,’ he said, clumsily re-arranging a sawn-off log at the other side of the chair which would serve as a kind of stool. He swept out his left arm, motioning to her to sit down, as he took his place on the chair. It had been a rocking chair, but the runners were long gone and it perched precariously on what remained of its legs.

Leila didn't move. Her mind was alert.

*Stick or twist? No way am I going closer. Can I run if I have to? No-one else here. I could get away, no problem.*

Still, she declined the offer of pulling up a seat.

‘Erm...I'm sorry to interrupt,’ she said, from where she stood, a few yards from the shack, ‘I heard some music. Least I thought I did.’

‘Music? Oh I don't know about that. I hope it didn't bother you.’

Leila looked at the ground and pulled a few strands of hair across her eyes. She knew she should not be engaging with this stranger. She looked up at the darkening sky.

‘No. It was fine. I like music. E minor I think. Erm, sorry. Actually I think I should go.’

‘Well that is what I would call a flying visit! I don't get many visitors. So did you recognise the playing? And you knew it was E minor?’

The gentleness of his rich voice seemed to pull her in. Luckily her rational head took over.

‘Er, I think I should go,’ she repeated, ‘nice to meet you and all that. Thanks. Bye. Nice playing.’

Duke watched as she hurried back down the path, jogging to touch each of the five trees in turn.

He smiled to himself, staring intently at each tree, and called out to her.

‘Bet you can't name the song!’

His words were whisked away on the breeze.