

Leila Chapter 24

Duke regretted their last meeting.

Kids like her. It needs to be about them. Not about me. Why did I tell her that stuff? She's not interested, and anyway I'm not proud of what I did. I lost too much. Almost everything. A least I have her. And she needs me. Mustn't lose her. Not yet.

He regretted letting slip details of his past and his family, but it had come naturally. And she had seemed to relish it. She was a good listener, and a good talker.

She's perfect for the next part of the plan.

As he sat now and thought about it, the January chill assaulting him from behind as his face and torso lapped up the heat from the fire, he thought back to some of the troubled families he'd had to deal with in the distant past, and how vulnerable single people like himself could be in these situations, with little or no support, and the perception that they were the easiest to move on and re-house. It was always the families that got looked after first, especially those with several children living in a house that was too small or otherwise unsuitable.

But if his suspicion was right that they would show him little sympathy or mercy as a single, older person, he would doubtless end up being allocated to some hostel or dingy bedsit. He really could not imagine anything worse. The smaller the house, the smaller the room, the smaller the bed. Almost a coffin. Which might be preferable.

He reached outside the door and grabbed another log, glancing down the long lane of trees as he did so. The fire pitched back into its life-affirming glory.

He thought about how he could wangle himself yet another delay. Sometimes these things dragged on for years, and in a few cases actually went away altogether. He remembered the case of a farmer who had secretly built a mansion behind a giant-sized haystack, which shielded the evidence of any construction until it was complete. After years of legal wrangling, it had been allowed to stay.

He'd looked into the possibility that the land was so-called 'common land' and that as a commoner he had some claim to it. He'd even made it to Mrs Dunsmore at the local library and she'd helped him to try to find out its legal status. It was indeed defined as a community resource. But that didn't mean that anyone could just build on it, in fact the rules and regulations seemed to be even more strict. He rather hoped that he would be able to find a distant relative who had once owned the estate which she'd donated to the community, or that he would be able to make up such a story. He'd considered trying it on the planning officer, but had then thought that such a great idea would anyway be wasted on the petty bureaucrat.

No.

What he needed, for a few more months of grace, was a family.

Just then there was a knock at the door.

It was Leila.