

Leila Chapter 28

Leila had spent the last two Saturday afternoons out in the park with a group from school. Because they had little or no money, the shops were out of the question, so the park was the main option, even though most of the time it was bursting with younger kids. By six pm the little ones had gone and they tended to have the place to themselves. Occasionally they got tutted at by one of the departing parents, but generally they were left alone.

On the second Saturday the group had grown to six, with her friends Evie and Lil, and a couple of boys she didn't recognise. She noticed that the girls seemed to have got dressed up - more than you normally would for hanging out in the park. The taller of the two introduced himself to Leila.

'Er, hello. It's nice to see you here. Isn't it?'

It was the lamest of lame chat-up lines.

'What?'

'Well I just meant that, er, you're Leila aren't you?'

'Of course I'm Leila. You know that. You sit behind me in almost every lesson.'

'Yes. That's right. I'm Dan.'

'I know that. You sit behind me in almost every lesson.'

Leila wasn't making it easy for Dan, who had just turned fifteen.

'Do you prefer the swings or the ropes? I like the swings. Relaxing, y'know.'

'No, I don't really know. What do you mean?'

'Well, it's just that, y'know, I wondered if you, er, like films and stuff?'

'Yeah I've watched films.'

Dan cleared his throat. Quite a few times. He shuffled from foot to foot.

'Oh right, see, I just was thinking that you might, er, want to go to the cinema some time? You know. Er. With me.'

'No thank you, I wouldn't,' she replied. She was aware of her face reddening slightly, 'and I've seen that film already.' She didn't look up once.

Dan shuffled around a bit on the bench they were sitting on. He hadn't mentioned any specific movie. He was tall, so he had to unfold himself a little and walk away towards the others. Leila was left sitting alone.

What a creep! What did he want? Why did he ask me those questions? Why would I want to go anywhere with him? Who is he anyway? Oh yeah, that boy who sits behind me. So what? Was he the

one I used to think was cute?

Her mind was racing as she arrived home, just before nightfall. Lil and Evie had walked the other way, with Dan and his friend.

Leila lay back on her bed and didn't give Dan a second thought.

She just thought about Duke.

Whenever she did, her mind took on an extraordinary clarity. Straight lines. The road ahead.

She crossed her feet to get comfortable and settled her body into the softness of the mattress, arms across her chest. She watched as a graceful spider tiptoed its way across the ceiling. She closed her eyes and tried to bring him into focus. Why did she keep going back?

She ran through some of the last few weeks in her mind.

But her mind kept coming back to that voice!

It feels wrong, and yet it feels so right. He's the only one who listens to me. The only one who seems to understand what goes on in my head. But I shouldn't be bothering him. He wants to be alone. That's why he lives there. Why would he want me going back there all the time? Yet he seems to like seeing me. Is he weird? Is he dangerous even? He's like a stranger, but one who feels so familiar. Did he say he had a plan or something? Did he say he needed my help?

Leila rolled off the bed and took the two steps she needed to reach the window. It was not a large room. Her eyes roved over the garden to the forest beyond.

The smoke was rising.

It had been a while.

Time for another visit.