

## Leila Chapter G

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### TWO YEARS LATER

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So I've settled close to the little village of Berwick. Nothing much to it really. A satisfied English village with a small shop, a pub and a church. I occasionally nod to one of the locals if I'm out walking, but I'm not one of those people who can just strike up a conversation and immediately enjoy it. Actually I hate it. And I'm really bad at it!

Let's say there's a bit of a crisis. I'm your man. I can normally sort out minor medical emergencies, light engineering problems, and a modicum of DIY. Small stuff around the farm? No problem. And I know who to call if it is something more serious.

But to sit and chat about the weather, or the news or something. Nah! I'm hopeless at it. Fundamentally that is because I'm not interested. Take the weather. It is what it is. You can't do anything about it. If you have a job where your livelihood depends on it, like you are a farmer, or you sell ice-cream, then maybe you need to take a bit more interest. But for most of us, the weather just happens. Can't do anything about it, so no reason to talk about it!

The problem I have with Berwick is that everything that makes it what it is, is also everything I hate about it. Let me explain.

I'm very happy here. I have the most wonderful set-up on the farm. More of that later - there is quite a story!

I quite like the shop. It is kept by a Mrs Filkins. I don't know her first name. She is a lady of a certain age. She has three aisles, nice and straight, stocking some very basic items, and behind her, on eight shelves, she has exactly eighty glass jars of sweets. Ten per shelf. The old-fashioned types, which she will weigh out for you into a bag. It used to be *quarters* and *halves* but even Mrs F has gone modern, and will gladly sell you 200g of sherbet lemons, or 100g of aniseed balls. The prices always surprise me - we used to buy things like *penny chews* which actually did cost a penny. And a quarter of aniseed balls for a shilling. Those were the days!

Mrs Filkins understands me. We enjoy each other's company, but mostly in silence. There is a transaction to be done. She serves and I pay. I would do anything for her, but only if she needs it. She knows she can ask me anything. I once fixed a gushing leak under her sink. No problem. I had the tools, I knew more or less what to do, and it was done in a jiffy. Saved her eighty quid calling a plumber. I got a few extra bonbons for that!

There is a main street of sorts, just down from where we live. It gives me a headache. It wins awards for being *Britain's Best Kept Village*. I suppose it is pretty, but for me it's just a ramshackle collection of old cottages all thrown together along each side of the winding lane. Everyone does different things to their houses. Picket fences, privet hedges, high laurel. Wooden gates, wrought iron, or arches. Some painted white, some brick, brick and flint, even a green one! A million different kinds of plant growing up them. Pretty? Maybe. Not to me. Pretty is what you make of it.

I like houses in straight lines.

The pub seemed good at first, but I mostly drink at home now. Just to relax. We have started growing grape vines on a small scale, and our first batches from the lower field will be ready for drinking soon. I'm no connoisseur, but I know what I like when I like it.

I went to the *Jolly Sailor* a few times when we first moved down, but the problem loomed large as soon as I got there. Think about it. English village. Wealthy rural area. Not a lot to do.

I stood against the dark wooden bar with a Guinness, and talked with the young barman for a few minutes. In came an elderly gentleman who greeted the barman warmly.

'Ah Tristan! How good to see you young man! How on earth are you, I haven't seen you for ages!'

Even I could tell that this was a charade because the old guy came in at exactly the same time each day.

'Would you like a drink Ronald?'

'Well, what a splendid idea! Thank you so much. I'll have a G&T I think. Perhaps you would be so kind as to make it a triple?'

This was again the lamest kind of fake surprise. He always drank the same, triple fortified, and it was always his idea, not the bar staff's. And most days he seemed to have got himself started with a few at home, so that by the time he arrived at the pub, his puffed up purple hands needed the bar for support.

We chatted awhile, and although his stories of a life well-lived in the military kept the conversation flowing, the gin now seemed to have replaced all that. Each day he moaned about the weather, strikes on the railways (which he never used), and protested about political correctness.

Those first impressions of Ronald - a dull old soak - were corrected one day by Mrs Filkins. His wife Kate had died a year ago. Dreadful cancer that lingered and reduced her to a thin shadow. Ronald had doted on her. Love of his life. They were inseparable. After the funeral, he was lost. He couldn't face the evenings sober. Mrs F gives him a year or two at most, before he joins up with his Kate.

'Do you know at the doctor's they asked me what pronoun I would like to use?'

'Yes, it is a thing now, to cater for all, including the non-binary community.'

I knew my response would elicit a rant. He spluttered his gin and tonic all over the beer mat and picked up a towel from the bar to wipe himself down.

'Asked me if I wanted to be called 'she' for heaven's sake!'

He shook his head, turned back to his glass, and drained what remained in it.