

## Leila Chapter I

The farmyard, dominated by a huge raised flower border in the centre, is open to fields on one side. My house takes up most of one of the other sides, and there are two small cottages on the western corner, with the stables behind them. I must get those done up some time!

We're working to get the outbuildings spruced up. They're going to be great as offices or for storage. Even holiday lets. Renovation takes time though, and money. I quite like doing it. Some woodwork, mostly just planing and sanding. A bit of painting here and there. I've built some little beds, bordered with my own brickwork. They're just about holding up! Nasturtiums, Bizzy Lizzies, some shrubs from Lipton's Nursery in the village. Never finished, but I can imagine how it will look when it is.

And there is someone - she lives in the second cottage down.

It was initially a favour - a friend of a friend asked if I would rent out the space for a short time - but it has become more than that. Occasionally we will have dinner together, or watch a bit of TV. We've taken the odd weekend away too. She is a professional person, a solicitor, so she helps me with the business end of my life, but she is a bit more than that to me. She rides horses too.

I really must get those stables done up.

We are separate, but also together.

I wouldn't swap her for anyone.

There's just one other person on site, who lives in one of the houses further down the lane, where the grape vines are now developing nicely in the chalky south-facing soil.

There's a bit of a story to that.

Manuela, who comes in three times a week to keep the farmhouse and the cottages tidy, was on her own in the main house. I was on the train on the way back from a meeting, with ManCave Publishing in London, when I took the call.

'There's someone here who says he wants to meet you.'

Manuela was used to people occasionally dropping by the farmyard. It is on a couple of rambling routes, and although we could block them, we don't. Ramblers tend to be the most benign of trespassers, and we don't have livestock or anything else that would be bothered by them. They keep themselves to themselves, as do we. Sometimes someone will hail a far-off greeting.

This was different.

'He's quite insistent. I've tried to move him on. Said you aren't here.' Her latin inflections sounded clipped and urgent.

'What's he like? You don't know him?'

'No, I don't know him. He's kind of untidy. Although he looks familiar.'

'OK. I'll be back in ten minutes or so. Stay inside. Take care.'

I pulled into the drive.

Sat on the step, stooped over and peering at an ancient map or drawing, the outline was unmistakable.

He had a certain posture that could only have been inherited from our parents.

Our greeting was wordless. Just one long, lingering hug. How long had it been, exactly?

It was certainly before I started writing the book. We'd had that minor falling out about some money our grandmother had left us, but that should not have led to the estrangement that followed. I'd heard that he'd been living rough somewhere. That always played on my mind, and I'd sometimes had that sixth-sense twin feeling that he might've been in danger.

The reunion was nearly two years ago.

I was nervous at first. It had been ten years or more. I gave him one of the shacks down the lane, but he wasn't offering much more than to be around. Of course I enjoyed his company and we used to reminisce a bit. But he'd not had a job for many years and had no discernible skills. After a few months, I felt that I needed to formalise it a bit, even for my brother. So instead of me just looking after him, I suggested that he look after the farm buildings and the patchwork of small fields surrounding them, in return for some basic accommodation and a living wage.

I have to say it has been remarkably successful.

It turns out that he spent much of the last decade or so living out and learning a vast range of country skills. He can grow or otherwise source the most astonishing range of organic produce, he has transformed much of the grounds into either ornamental beds or productive horticulture, and he has introduced a set of activities to keep himself busy and which has really pushed me to take a proper interest in the little world that is literally in my backyard. So we have three beehives, making honey. We have chickens providing a regular supply of ultra-fresh eggs. We have a few pigs and sheep for meat when the time comes. We have small stands of peas and beans, corn and various brassicae. We have fish in the lake he has fashioned by diverting a local stream. We have everything we need, and he supplements the little income I give him by producing and selling charcoal, making it the traditional way with earth banks and wet grass, like we remembered as kids.

We are never in each other's pockets, but he has a deep wisdom - deeper than I remember really - and I seek out his advice on anything difficult.

And if ever I'm struggling to get something down on paper, I head on down the lane.

He's always there.

Calm. Wise.

It works well.