

Leila Chapter P

For the next week, Allie was productive in a way that she had never thought possible. The meeting had ended with an agreement that she would focus on the characters of Leila and Duke, getting their basic features in place, before attempting to locate them in particular backgrounds or settings.

She'd already drawn the character of Leila a thousand times, at least in her head.

Casting her mind back to some of the drawings she'd done as a teenager, she realised that she'd unconsciously developed a signature style that had never left her. She always drew intense, close-cropped lines giving both a flow to the drawing and an impression of muscle and power.

Standing at her desk, she was working on eyes. She'd practised them obsessively whenever she'd had the chance, and Leila's eyes were a source of fascination to her. She occasionally looked in the mirror to summon up the last details.

The word *stunning* was always foremost in her mind.

She looked around her office and smiled with a quiet pride to herself. On one wall was a series of developments of the Duke character. She'd started with him just sitting on his deck, looking out, as a default scene, but she'd also worked to show him inside the house, and him and Leila chatting on the stoop. There was even a scene where he towered over the weasel-like planning inspector. The wall was arranged so that the early drafts were high up - more numerous sketches - but they led to a smaller set of more intricate and detailed portraits. These were closer to being the final versions. On an adjacent wall the same pattern drove Leila from a rough sketch up high into an almost lifelike teenager, with the lines of her life etched into her face, and her eyes roaming the room in a Gorgon-like challenge to anyone who dared to look.

Allie had positioned the two most finely drawn portraits facing each other.

As if they were on the deck.

She needed a break, so she grabbed her sketchbook and decided to take a walk out to see if she could build some of the surroundings in which her characters should sit. She realised that she had always focused on people and faces, and that nature might require a little more research.

She set off.

The lane she was on was perhaps two hundred yards long, and off to its left was the line of smoke she'd seen on the day she arrived. *I'll find out where that is from too*, she thought to herself as she set out.

About three-quarters of the way down the lane she noticed a woody smell on the wind. She couldn't quite place it - it had been a long time since she'd last smelled it. She felt it as a sign of her childhood. She just couldn't decide which sign.

Benign or dangerous?

She tried to peer over the hedge and was just able to make out a smouldering pile of grass, or perhaps fresh manure, sitting in the field beyond. And beyond that, the thin plume of smoke rising almost straight into the clear winter sky.

The signs were there.

She just didn't realise.

She continued until the lane was diverted into two parts by a triangle of rough grass, out of which grew a regal oak tree. She approached the tree and touched it, the way she used to, almost begging it for direction. Under her fingers were two deeply gouged arrow marks. They pointed to the left. To the burning grass piles. To the rising smoke. To the music she now heard. Perhaps in her head. A violin perhaps. A chord sequence from long ago.

As she took the left lane, she saw a small house set back from the road. Calling it a house was overstating it. It was more like a one-storey cabin, with decking running round the front of it.

There were two stools set out on the deck.

Allie's mind was as clear as it had ever been. She had her job, which she adored, supporting this successful writer. She had somewhere to live away from the city and from her own troubled past. She could look forward to seeing her work in print all over the world, and her name in lights. And yet that afternoon, there was only one thing she wanted.

She peered in through the window of the cottage, rubbing at the sheen that had gathered on the small pane of glass. There was very little inside the room. A single armchair. A couple of pictures on the wall. She strained to see the one furthest from her. The head and shoulders of a girl, drawn precisely in pencil or crayon, perhaps by a younger, less experienced artist. With large staring eyes which seemed to be gazing straight back at her. Deep deep brown - even from a distance.

Next to it hung a picture of a small child. Seated on the lap of a middle-aged woman in a wheelchair. A man standing to the side. A happy picture. She stared at it intently for a few moments. Underneath the picture was written *Allie*.

She didn't even turn round when she heard the man's voice.

'That's my late wife and my granddaughter, a few years ago.'

'No. That's me,' she replied, still staring at little Allie sitting with her grandparents.

'That's right, Allie. That's you.'

Allie turned slowly, and looked straight at him. Straight into his eyes.

He looked different. Older. But somehow better than when she had last seen him. He had lost weight and had trimmed much of his facial hair back to a tame stubble. The lines on his leathery face were a little deeper. But the deep dark eyes, and the voice.

'It's just wonderful to finally see you again, my dear.'

Her heart sang.

She collapsed into his arms.

And sobbed tears of joy and relief.