

Leila Chapter 52

A FEW MONTHS LATER

Inevitably, Leila had reached the end of the line at school.

She'd been called to a meeting - just the latest invitation that her dad had not managed to attend. She was there on her own.

She sat in the chair that had been offered to her. It was a low chair in the corner of the room, as far away from his desk as was possible. The room was decorated with the usual range of student work and meaningless certificates. Leila waited, and waited. Nothing happened. She scanned the wall. The school was still a dump.

Thank you for organising your Sponsored Silence for Comic Relief

Your donation of £67.86 will go to support homeless families throughout the UK

She remembered that one. She'd called out right in the middle of it. *Sixty-eight quid! From 1200 students. Pathetic.*

Congratulations to

Mr J.F. Walsingham MA, Eco-Head of the Year 2006

Eco-head? What the hell does that mean? What's wrong with him? Bonehead more like.

'Can we get started then?' asked Leila, from behind her phone. It was a fair question. She'd been there for ten minutes and no-one had said anything. She glanced up and noticed that Walsingham looked nervous. He shuffled a few papers in front of him.

'Of course, I'm just waiting for Mrs Robinson to join us.'

'Why? Don't you know what to say?'

She glanced up at him and thought how pathetic he looked.

Waiting for Mrs Robinson? Just get on with it! Or can't you do it by yourself?

It was another ten minutes before the Deputy Head arrived. She had, as usual, been doing several other things. She sat down next to Leila and was her usual sympathetic self. Although they'd had many run-ins in the past, she'd been one of the more understanding and supportive ones.

'I hope you are well today Leila.'

'I'm OK. Thanks.'

‘Good. Has Mr Walsingham explained why you are here?’

‘Of course not.’

JF had arrived at school that morning in nervous dread of the meeting. No staff member enjoyed difficult conversations with students, and ultimately it was the Head’s responsibility to do it. It didn’t make him very good at it, or confident that he would do it well. He had been thrown into the role and had proudly erected the sign outside, but he’d never been comfortable. The promotion was based on his availability at the time. At heart, he loved his RE teaching, but that was gone. He shuffled again.

‘Leila, is your father able to attend?’

‘He said he would try, but he’s busy.’

Leila was continually embarrassed by this. Although he was a loser, and she was better off without him, she still hated it when he did not support her. She could tell this was an important one and that he should be there.

‘Well, we’d better start. Leila, this meeting is to arrange a managed move. I’m afraid your disciplinary record now means that we have to invoke the transfer clause in the Home-School Agreement.’

‘What’s that in English?’

‘You’re going to go to another school, Leila.’

‘So you’re chucking me out?’ Leila knew exactly what was happening, but she liked the sound of the language she was using, and she knew it would make him feel uncomfortable. She stared directly at him.

‘In consultation with yourself, and your parents or guardians, we will seek an immediate transfer to a suitable alternative provision,’ he droned, staring at his bits of paper, ‘unfortunately you have reached the threshold of exclusions and Pupil Referral Unit attendances and we have no options left.’

‘Well, you’ve always had the option to support me properly.’

‘I’m not sure I know what you mean.’

‘You definitely don’t know what I mean. You never have. You haven’t even tried. But I’ve read your stupid documents too. You can’t do this.’

She knew that they could, and that they probably would, but she wasn’t going to go down without a fight. He bristled and shuffled his papers some more. Leila carried on.

‘Check your brochure and your website.’ She’d done her research. ‘It says that you will ‘treat every child as an individual’. You are not supposed to shove me, or anyone else, into one of your ridiculous little boxes. Just because you can’t label me ‘sporty’ or ‘academic’ or ‘scientific’ means that you label me ‘difficult’. And that is like a death knell in this place. Your school is like a prison to people like me. A life sentence.’

She felt like reaching into her bag for one of her pictures to show them what she could do, or even

drawing something there and then to show them how ridiculous they looked.

‘Well, if you don’t follow the rules, you deserve to be punished.’ He was struggling to make any sense. She got up.

‘Look, I don’t need your stupid school. Tell my dad you’ve permanently excluded me. You’ll be hearing from him. Expect a surprise visit.’

The threat implied by these words was not one she expected her father to carry through, but again she liked the way it sounded. The Head’s ruddy features seemed to go slightly white at the thought. The Deputy did her best.

‘So Leila, I will do everything I can to help you find somewhere more appropriate. Please come with me to my office.’

Leila crossed the room towards the door, with the thought of giving the Headteacher one more mouthful, but she thought better of it and calmly followed Mrs Robinson through the door. The urge to throw something, or to spit on the ground as she left, was one she managed to resist.

As she slumped down in a chair in the next-door room, she let out a couple of heavy sobs. Sheila Robinson handed her a tissue.

‘I’m sorry Leila, I really am.’

‘I know you are Miss, so am I.’

They sat for a few moments in silence. Mrs Robinson tapped away on her computer, and did not turn round.

‘I’m going to miss you, Leila.’

‘Thank you, Miss,’ Leila managed to squeeze out, quietly.

‘And I think you’re going to make it big one day.’

Leila stopped snivelling, and sat up, looking at the woman’s back. Mrs Robinson seemed reluctant to look her in the eye.

‘What do you mean?’

Mrs Robinson smiled and brought her hands together, linking her fingers.

‘Well, I mean what I say. Once all this is out of the way, I can see you going far.’

‘All this, Miss?’

‘School, I mean.’ She turned and unlocked her fingers, spreading her arms wide, and gestured at the walls around her. In Leila’s head they seemed to open up in front of her, ‘Once you’re done with school. A new start. I think you’re going to make it. I really hope so.’

‘You’re right Miss. One day I’m going to make it. Not today,’ she said as she looked up, ‘but one day I’m gonna make it really big!’