

Leila Chapter 39

They had sat in silence for nearly twenty minutes, both looking deep into the eyes of the portrait.

‘What do you mean I will go far? Where am I going? How far?’

He smiled at her literalness.

‘It’s a figure of speech, Leila.’

‘I don’t do figures of...whatever you said!’ she laughed.

‘It means that you will be a success one day. Although I can’t help feeling you should get out of that school as soon as you can. Have you talked to your Dad about moving?’

‘Talked to him? I barely see him. Anyway what’s the point? They’re all the same aren’t they?’

‘Maybe. But you might just find someone somewhere who properly understands you.’

‘I have already.’

He ignored the comment and hurriedly got up. ‘More tea?’

She carried on talking. He waited in the doorway.

‘When I look at you I see myself.’

‘Well, steady on my dear! Look at me! I’m old, I’m fat, I’m hairy. My clothes are falling apart!’

‘No I don’t mean that, of course.’ She was serious.

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s hard to say. But when I look at you I see the me I want to be. When you talk to me, and I talk to you, I become myself. When I’m alone, I’m a hundred different people. Most of them shouting. Running around. Here, you make me, me.’

‘I do my best Leila. And I think I know what you mean, because now you say it, you do the same to me. I guess that is what friends are for.’

‘Yeah, maybe. But you’re a different kind of friend. I don’t really have any others.’

‘OK, so it is probably time for you to go now Leila. Please do come and visit me again. Can I keep the portrait please?’

Ordinarily she might have struggled with leaving, but she knew that he meant what he said. He always did. He’d never let her down. So long as she knew there could be another visit, she could leave with her heart held high.

‘Just one more question?’ she called through the window, standing with her elbows perched on the

frame.

‘Sure.’

‘Who is the lady in the photograph?’ She waved her hand at the photo hanging above the fire, with her own version beside it.

‘It was a Thursday, Leila. About midday. She closed her eyes, settled into her pillow. Her body gave a little shudder, and she was gone. I kissed her goodbye and sat with her for a few minutes. Then I called for the ambulance and she was taken from me. That was the last I saw of her. I tried to carry on living, but a piece of me had died with her. That picture? Well, it’s all I have left of her really. After I moved out, I just didn’t have room for more. It sailed the world with me! And finally made it here.’

‘Is there a picture of your daughter?’

‘Sorry. Got rid of all those. The rift was a deep one I’m afraid.’

‘What did she die of?’

‘It was cancer Leila. There was no cure, and there still isn’t.’ It was his turn to look down at the ground now.

‘My grandma died too. I don’t remember her. I think that was cancer. What is cancer?’

‘I don’t really know, and I don’t want to think about it. Something to do with cells in the body being rejected, or attacking other cells. It’s a slow killer, and yet it kills thousands each year. She knew she was going to die.’

‘My grandma was a nurse, and even that couldn’t save her. She left me this. I always carry it.’

Leila lifted up her sweatshirt from the bottom to reveal a sort of pocket watch hanging from the lapel of her shirt, the way a nurse’s watch would. It showed the correct time.

‘It’s very beautiful Leila, I can understand why you like it.’

‘I like to be on time,’ she smiled, ‘and although I barely even knew her, it reminds me of my grandma.’

‘I’m sure it does,’ he replied, shifting a little on his chair, ‘I hope to see you again soon, and do think about getting out of that school. It’s just not good for you.’