

Leila Chapter 38

Leila set off unusually early the next morning. There was no school that Tuesday, at least not for her. She had been excluded for the day due to an incident the previous morning. A few things, culminating in her calling Walsingham an *idiot*. Never a great idea.

She approached the shack nervously, wondering whether he would even talk to her after what had happened. Instead, as she moved slowly down the path, touching every fifth tree just above the collection of ticks, he came half way out to greet her. He looked a little agitated, and was clutching the bag she'd seen him packing a week or so earlier. He tossed it aside as she approached.

'Good morning, Leila. It is good to see you.'

He spoke deliberately, and his voice gave nothing away. He did not seem either too bothered about what had happened, or especially pleased to see her. His voice was a little monotone, but still had that silky sonorous quality to it. She turned her face to the ground as she got closer.

'I'm surprised to see you. Isn't it a school day?'

Was he going to judge her too? She stopped a few metres from the deck.

'Come now, please do sit down.' He already sounded warmer. He extended a tanned hand in greeting and motioned to the tree stump. She accepted. Face still downturned.

Isn't it a school day? Why is he asking that? He's gonna judge me. Just like all the rest. He thinks I've been excluded again.

She knew, deep down, he was not like all the rest.

Well, I had a bit of a bad day yesterday,' she muttered.

'Yes, I do remember that!' he said, his forgiveness peeking through.

Even quieter she muttered, 'Oh that. Sorry. I shouldn't have said what I said.'

'True friendships mean you don't need to say sorry. I understand Leila.'

Imperceptibly, she forced out a *thank you*.

'In fact, it is me who should be apologising. I shouldn't have said what I said. It was too personal. Sorry. Let me get you a cup of tea.'

'True friendships mean you don't need to say sorry,' she parroted back gently.

He shuffled inside without waiting for a reply. She started sobbing silently again.

Can he just forgive and forget? Just like that? It was horrible, what I said. He shouldn't let me off. But I hope he does.

To her own surprise, she didn't let the subject drop. She turned slightly away from his seat, as he returned and served the usual variety of super-strong tea.

'What did you say about my eyes?'

Her question caught him off guard.

'I don't remember. Honestly. I was so annoyed at what I had said and the effect it had on you. I spent most of the night angry at myself. It was a throwaway comment.'

'A throwaway comment? You threw it at me?'

'It's just a phrase, Leila.'

'I don't do phrases.'

'No you don't do you?' He smiled. She turned to look at him. His own eyes were still the darkest brown, almost black. They gave nothing away. He looked back at her and she held his gaze.

'I remember what I said now,' he said nervously.

'You said my eyes were stunning. I spent half the night looking at them in the mirror, and the other half wondering whether I could actually stun you with them!'

He turned away as embarrassed laughter caught hold of his body. She smiled too, and took another glance at him.

'You probably could! You have power, my dear!'

This time, his use of the term of endearment seemed to pull all her strands together. She was heading straight again. The trials of the previous seventy-two hours seemed to melt away. She looked up at him. He held his mug out to her and they clinked. She took a deep draught of the warm tea. *Disgusting.*

'This tea is disgusting!'

'It is isn't it?' They clinked again, 'Let's drink to that! Now, why were you excluded today?'

If anyone else had asked this, thought Leila, it would upset her. But somehow, the way Duke put it made it seem so easy and clear.

'Lil was being an idiot. So I hit her. This time Mrs Robinson was standing right there. Almost waiting for me to do it. That's what they do. She was giving me some of the usual 'blah blah blah' and it made it worse. It was like they wanted me to do something so that they could get rid of me for the day.'

He seemed to take this in slowly. He scratched his scruffy, ill-formed beard.

'You do realise that special people like you are hard work for your teachers, don't you?'

'They're teachers. They're meant to work hard. That's their job.'

‘That’s true. But they have thirty kids to look after. You could be a full-time job on your own!’

It was the first time she'd been made to think of it that way.

‘Yes, but that doesn’t mean they have to chuck me out.’

‘Think of it as a time out Leila. A time out for you, and a reset for them. Tomorrow will be a better day. And if you had not been excluded, you would not be here.’

This time she actually stared into his eyes. Their darkness gave little away, but she felt she was giving him the opportunity to look inside her again. He seemed to stare for just a little too long, so she turned away again. It was almost as if she had to force herself. Not to look at him, but to let him look at her. She could see that he wanted to say something.

‘Your friend? Lil was it? Why were you angry at her?’

‘Well, that’s just it, I wasn’t really. It was just that there were lots of people about, it was noisy, I couldn’t concentrate, I didn’t know which way to go, the teacher was giving me her high-pitched whine, then Lil said something I don’t even know what, and then I just lashed out at whatever was nearest. She wasn’t hurt. Nobody ever gets hurt.’

‘You do.’

‘What?’

‘You get hurt. Every time. You’ve told me about all these things that happen and it seems to me that the only person who really suffers is you Leila.’

Spoken clearly and calmly, that irritating wisdom. She glanced up through the terrace window and saw that he'd tacked her picture up next to the photograph above the fireplace. It was a decent match. She got up for a closer look. As she stood, the open window swung in the breeze, towards her head. She felt something on the back of her head as he stood to protect her from hurting herself. He cupped her head gently in his hand and guided it away from the sharp edge of the window. The hand fell away.

The effect on Leila was not what she'd predicted. She'd always said to herself that he touched her she would scream and run. *Run and scream!* But the effect on her was quite the opposite.

She wanted him to cradle her head, to protect her from that sharp window frame, for ever. When had anyone last touched her? Her dad could barely manage a hug, even though she knew he was fine with hugging other people.

But he didn’t hug her.

What the hell?

She didn’t even like being touched. But somehow he had healing hands. His touch was able to super-smooth the path ahead. Her brain cleared completely. He'd steered her away from the danger. She sat back down.

‘I tried to draw what you said.’

‘What do you mean?’

She fished inside her backpack. Leila was proud of her drawing. So much so, she had wrapped it in cardboard before stuffing it into the bag. The cartridge paper itself gave it a certain rigidity too. It was pristine as she pulled it out. The air was still, so without any support, she was able to perch it on the window sill. It stood there looking out over the forest.

He rose and moved directly in front of the picture.

He stared at it intently for a few seconds.

Seconds turned into minutes. His eyes moved, but his body did not.

Minutes turned into nearly a quarter of an hour.

He could not move.

Stunned.

The only movement was a single tear escaping from his left eye, and a splash as it joined a puddle on the deck.

Eventually he spoke.

‘You have a singular talent, my dear. Please do not ever waste it. I just know you will go far!’

He made as if to hug her, but thought better of it.

He hugged her with his eyes.

She hugged him back.

With hers.