

Leila Chapter 37

She felt like she had a plan. The road was clear, so she started to draw.

Her dad had once bought her a large pad of cartridge paper, the kind artists use. He'd said something dismissive like, 'See if you can do anything with that,' but in fact it had been one of the kindest things he'd ever done for her. She spread it out on the floor of her room and lay on her stomach.

Beside her was a faded wooden box. She undid the brass clasps carefully and lifted the lid.

'Your mother left that behind,' her Dad had grunted when he'd fetched it down from the attic on her tenth birthday, 'said you might want it some day.' Leila had seen it as one of the last links to her mother, with the faded initials *EPP* or perhaps *DDP* inscribed on the front of it, and its vast range of pencils and crayons inside. Leila took some solace in what she could produce with what had been left behind.

She started with long thick pencil lines, in flowing shapes. Mostly straight but then with occasional curved flourishes. An outside observer looking down would see a tangle of fibres, a randomness. A mess. But to her, it was all logical. Leila could see what she wanted to draw, and she could see how she would draw it.

After three or four hours, the drawing had taken shape. She got up and slowly unfolded her body from so long in the same position. She had not noticed. She looked down at what had emerged onto the paper. A girl's head and shoulders, framed by wavy hair, every strand seemingly individually drawn. The ears, slightly protruding, peeked out from behind the hair, with close-drawn contours giving the impression of light and dark, of brightness and of shadow. The mouth was full, with healthy teeth peeking out through strong shapely lips. She'd not exactly drawn out the nose, but it looked perfect - small and petite, its form highlighted in wispy shading.

Leila looked down at what she'd created and went over to the mirror. The next bit would have to wait, or she would have to work all night.

She decided to wait.

She slept fitfully, her mind clear, focused. *Stunning. Attractive.* How could she make that happen? She'd seen pictures in a gallery once and the stupid guide had said something about the eyes following you around the room. She'd run from one end of the gallery to the other but nothing had happened. No eyes followed her. Eventually she'd screamed at the top of her voice. *Follow me! Follow me!*

And had been asked to leave the gallery. A teacher had had to take her out. That would be embarrassing for most people.

She got up early and looked at the creation on the floor.

A face with no eyes. She shuddered.

This time she brought the picture up onto her desk. It wasn't really a desk but something her dad had spent a couple of minutes rigging up between two trestles. It worked for her though, and it was under

the window so it would reflect and refract the low late-February sunlight.

She started in pencil with the left eye.

The pupil was easy enough. Lots of soft 3B pencil there, with little streaks across it, and a white area which would later form the reflection of the light from outside. Then some broader strokes with a harder pencil to give the outline of the eye itself. She worked to get this right, rubbing out bits she didn't like and then, when the outline was secure, smudging it with a brush or her thumb to soften the edges. Next she started to create the shadows under the eyes and the crease at the top where the eyelid sits. Then back to the iris, shades of grey radiating out from the middle, and then thin wispy lines into the white of the eye. She gently shaded over the white to give it some depth. The next stage was the eyelashes, which swept elegantly up from the top of the eye, and down almost reflectively from the bottom. She managed to capture a small eyelash reflection in the pool of light featured in the top of the lens.

Two hours had passed.

She stood up. *Good enough.* She moved around the room a little, smiling to herself when she thought that the eye should be following her. To her it was, at least as much as those dull old masters in the gallery.

She had a plan for the right eye.

She'd never done it before, but she wanted the right eye to cry.

Whether this was something to do with her state of mind, or was just a random thought, she didn't know. She thought now about why she was doing it. About the emotion it was supposed to portray. *Ah, emotions!* She didn't really understand all that stuff, but she'd cried twice recently. That was not like her.

She sat back down in front of her canvas. The girl in the picture looked strange with her one cartoonish eye set amongst the other features. Time to draw the other.

She started with faint outlines to make sure that the two images lined up, and started on the right one. When drawing the lower lid, she tried to picture a tear-shaped outline, as if a droplet was just emerging from a tear duct. The trick would be get some light shining in it, like the light that shone in the eye itself.

When she'd finished, she looked at her creation. She had drawn the eyes larger in proportion to the rest of the face. A caricature, but the care she'd taken meant that each individual feature was perfect, even if they were not in complete harmony. The viewer would be drawn to the eyes, of that there was no doubt. Even she was drawn in to her own creation.

She decided on a final touch. It was the only colour on the piece, but she tried to accentuate some of the depth of the eyes with two shades of deep brown, starting with a relatively light touch on the outside, and moving deeper and darker towards the middle.

She walked back to the end of the room and stood there, transfixed.

The eyes were stunning.