

Leila Chapter 36

Lying on her bed that evening, Leila sobbed quietly to herself.

She didn't often cry.

The bare walls of the room stared down at her. A small figure curled up almost into a ball. The single picture on the wall, of a deep green forest, seemed to have shrunk so that it was almost invisible.

She always did this to herself.

She'd found someone who understood her. Someone who seemed to have that sixth sense. Someone who made her feel relaxed. Someone who helped to unravel the knitting and arrange it neatly in single rows, all heading in the same direction.

She lay there, trying to imagine his voice at that moment.

What would he do? What would he say?

He would say he was sorry, but everyone always said that. It was just that most people didn't actually mean it. She often felt that she was the only one who ever said *sorry* and actually meant it. She meant everything she said, and didn't mean what she didn't say. She could not tell someone what she felt just by looking at them, so she didn't look at them. It seemed obvious to her.

And why look at people when they always seemed to interpret your look in the wrong ways? And why play that stupid game?

So what had she actually done? She'd played his game. And she'd won! But what had he said? He had said that her eyes were *stunning*. What did that even mean? Was he saying she could stun people with her eyes? Maybe she had a special power?

She thought for a moment, and stopped crying. She rubbed her eyes with the sheet and got up to go to the small mirror which hung on the back of her door. She looked back at herself and stared deeply into her own eyes. She didn't feel stunned. Maybe you couldn't stun yourself? What she saw were a normal, if very tired, pair of eyes. Brown, almost black, in colour.

She sat back down on the bed and reached underneath it for the dictionary she always kept there. When people used stupid words and phrases like, '*It could be worse*' or '*It may never happen!*', she tried to remember to look them up. She liked learning new words and phrases and liked using them.

Stunning. *Stun. To knock unconscious or into a dazed or semi-conscious state.* She knew that one.

Stunning. *Extremely impressive or attractive.*

She thought about what he might have meant. He'd said, *What stunning eyes you have!*

He meant they were impressive or attractive, didn't he?

She'd called him a creep. She'd wished him dead.

She went back to the mirror to look more closely. What stared back at her surprised her.

She saw eyes of the deepest brown, like his. They rippled slightly as the light from the window caught them. They seemed to smile back at her. *Impressive or attractive?* No-one had ever commented on how she looked before. Her dad might have done once, but not recently. He was more interested in the appearance of his latest. She tried to stare at herself in the mirror. The eyes stared back.

The eyes are the windows to the soul? Who had said that? She'd read it somewhere and thought how stupid it sounded. Shakespeare was it? He always said crazy things that nobody understood.

Eyes? A window? Sorry, they are not. They are lenses designed to reflect light onto a sensitising surface which the brain converts into images.

Leila loved science!

She looked again and tried to see her soul beyond. How would she even know what it looked like? As she stared at herself, she started to look around at the rest of the mirror. On the top, hair scrunched messily, but framing her face in a symmetrical tangle. Full eyebrows. Those eyes. A perfectly straight and moderately-proportioned nose. Full lips and white teeth. A round face, with clear skin and high cheekbones.

Did she like what she saw?

Not really.

No-one ever gave her compliments on her looks. Not like some of the other girls at school who always seemed to be fishing for admiration, especially from boys. The ones who wore make-up in primary school. Whose skirts were always a bit shorter than regulation? She didn't do all that. Didn't see the point. And rules were rules, after all.

She thought back to the afternoon. Maybe he'd actually paid her a compliment?

Stunning. Attractive. Impressive.

Any one of those words could mark him out as some kind of creepy predator. But she didn't think so. He'd never done anything to suggest that, despite what she'd said to him. He was just a sad old man who enjoyed her company. Or perhaps any company, although she'd never seen anyone else there, apart from the planning guy. He'd never asked her into his house or anything like that. He'd always let her go when she wanted.

She decided to go back.

She would ask him what he meant. Did he mean she was able to stun people with one look? Or did he think her eyes looked impressive? She had to find out. Then she would decide what she thought of him. She actually hoped that his compliment gave her the ability to kill people! What a superpower! All she had to do to all the people who were bugging her was to fix them with a piercing stare and they would fall to the ground - stunned. Or dead!

She often wished people dead, without thinking of the implications. Maybe stunned was better. Just let them lie there for a while. Maybe conscious, so that they knew what had happened to them, but unable

to move or speak. Aware of their surroundings. Aware of their own helplessness.

What had she said to him? Maybe she should have wished him stunned? Instead she had said something stupid like *Have a nice life, whatever is left of it*. How old was he? Hadn't he told her he was in his fifties? Well, many people live into their nineties. He could have thirty or forty years left. That was cruel. She regretted saying it, not at the time, but she definitely did now. Maybe her superpowers would come true, and she'd go back to find a little old dead body wrapped in its long black coat, out there on the stoop.

I've killed him!

The thoughts started to overwhelm her. Although it was already dark, she decided to go back then and there.

Then she reconsidered.

She'd go back first thing in the morning.