

Leila Chapter 35

‘Imagine the worst kind of traffic jam.’

She'd headed back a few days later. Four tick marks on each tree now, each one a deliberate gouge revealing the flesh beneath the bark.

The week had not gone well.

‘In my imagination, I see a traffic island, perhaps with a monument built in the middle of it. What’s that famous one in Paris? Well the roundabout that goes round it has about six lanes of traffic and there are a dozen different entrances and exits. Cars seem to come from all directions. In my head, the cars come in, but never go out. The traffic just builds and builds like the exit roads are blocked. And the noise! Each car is revving its engine, and all the drivers are leaning on their horns. The pollution from all the exhausts is overwhelming. Mostly the traffic is stopped - it cannot go anywhere - so it is just revving and hooting. Drivers are shouting and swearing just trying to get out of that place. That’s me on a bad day.’

‘Wow, that’s quite a scene, Leila.’

He used her name again. Her heart soared. The road started to straighten out. She tried to imagine and describe what it was like.

‘When I left home, after another day at that school, the traffic was mad! All the cars hooting and revving. They were all close to each other. My way out seemed completely blocked. I fought through it, and it started to clear on the walk here. As I made the way up the path, touching my trees, it unblocked itself. Now all I can see is a clear road ahead.’

‘Going anywhere?’

Leila smiled.

‘Nah not really. But it’s clear and straight. With a dotted line down the middle and a good road surface. No traffic. I can walk on now. And anyway I don’t really need to go anywhere now, do I?’

She looked around the shack, without looking at him.

Without looking at him had become a theme. He had noticed. He'd become very familiar with the sheen of the hair on the top of her head, which was more often than not facing him. It was a brown-blond plaited mix reaching neatly down to the middle of her back.

She fiddled with a hair band holding it all together, re-pulling the hair through and sweeping it away from her face.

But she didn’t look at him.

When she wasn’t looking at the ground, she stared at the upper reaches of the woods or the makeshift wooden shingles on the roof. She looked around at the door or over towards the pathway out of the clearing.

But she didn't look at him.

'That's good. I don't want you to go. But I don't want you to be late home either. Do you want another quick go at the challenge?'

She smiled to herself. She felt clear. She would do it this time.

'Yes, I'm ready now!'

She laughed and he smiled back. He actually thought she might last the full four minutes this time. He wondered if he could too. He pulled up the seats, took a deep breath, and waited for her to get into position.

'Are we allowed to blink?'

'Of course. It would be hard not to.'

'What about smiling?'

'Well, yes, you can show your emotions. That's what it's for.'

'Oh, that makes it much easier! No problem!'

They got about a minute into the challenge when both of them almost got a fit of the giggles. But both managed to compose themselves and eventually straightened their faces for the final two minute stretch.

Leila saw deep into his eyes this time, and could see the depths of the ocean.

Was that a face she could see, being sucked deeper, deeper down? Was that him? Or was it her?

She momentarily thought of turning away to see if she was actually looking at herself reflected in his eye, but she resisted. She looked around the irises and thought she saw the remnants of his house in the sad little blood vessels that populated the whites of his eyes, and perhaps, just perhaps, the family that he'd lost. As the fourth minute approached, she just occasionally caught a glimpse of a gathering tear at the pain he'd suffered, and perhaps even a flash of light towards a brighter future. But mostly she saw shame and regret and embarrassment at what he'd become. Of brighter futures spurned and rendered dark. A longing for something they both knew he could not have.

He could see in her young eyes the culmination of all those scoldings and retributions. There was a hardness there, but inside he could read the vulnerability that she showed every time she visited him. The eyes flickered slightly, not blinking but staring uncertainly as if their place in the world was somehow in doubt. Was there danger there? An inadvisable risk? Was there even a sense of despair at what might happen to her? He examined the saucers of light and rings within the iris. Rays of hope perhaps? Within the sadness was there a little glint that suggested someone had a plan for something better and brighter? Although he was sure that she didn't know what she wanted to do or where she wanted to go at her age, he also saw in her eyes a ray of possibility. Some ambition even.

The last grain of sand in the timer slipped from top to bottom. Four minutes were up.

'Wow Leila, what stunning eyes you have!'

He immediately regretted saying it. Too personal. Too direct.

She got up off the stool and stared at him again. The eyes were blazing suddenly - deep fiery black like endless whirlpools, twitching at the corner. Perhaps heightened by the stress of the challenge. A small line of spittle gathered at the corners of her mouth.

‘What did you say? You can’t say that. Leave me alone! That’s weird! Look at you. Go away!’

‘Well, this is where I live now, Leila.’

‘Fine!’ she said abruptly, ‘I’m leaving. Have a nice life. Whatever is left of it.’

It was her turn to regret saying something now, even though the traffic in her head was at peak rush hour. Too busy for an apology. It was him who apologised.

‘I’m sorry, Leila, I shouldn’t have said that. I hope to see you again.’ The voice was still measured and warm.

‘Never. Not happening. Bye!’

She clomped off down the path and was gone.

He sat down, his head in his hands.

Shit! Why did I do that? Just listen! Empathise. Sympathise. And never ever get personal! I’ve lost her now.

He'd failed. The cardinal sin. A personal comment. Deeply personal at a time of great vulnerability. They say the eyes are the windows on the soul, and he'd broken that. Shattered the windows. Destroyed a friendship.

He was experienced enough to know that there was one tiny saving grace. She'd stomped off. She'd yelled at him and called him names. She had definitely felt insulted. Violated even. But despite all that, she'd said *goodbye*.

She'd be back.