

## Leila Chapter 34

Leila had always loved to draw.

Her signature was drawings of fine detail. On a bad day they were rough: lines crossing, weaving in and out, messy. On better days the strokes lined up: finely drawn strands and fronds. Each strand a thought, each frond an insight. Yes, on good days, her head came together just as her lines did on the pad.

On the good days, she considered herself a genius. She would work for hours without stopping and her portfolio would grow and grow, such that she could see herself doing it for the rest of her life. On the really bad days, the portfolio would shrink again, as she ripped up half of them and screwed up the others. On those days, they were deemed too fancy, too detailed, and at the same time, not fancy enough and too rough. On those bad days, only the strong ones survived.

‘I think that is one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen, Leila.’

She loved it when he used her name, which he always did. Some of the people she knew seemed to just call her *You!* Or even *Oi!*. That’s what life felt like sometimes. Anonymous. Nameless. Without your name you were no-one. And sometimes it was the teachers who were the worst. You were reduced to a grunt or a number. No-one actually cared who you were.

He held the paper like a curator would hold a Ming vase in a museum. She watched his eyes scanning across the lines and the swirls of pencil and crayon.

‘How long did that take you?’

She averted her eyes and swept a line of hair away from her face.

‘Oh, that thing? Not too long.’

‘But there’s so much detail. So many lines.’

‘Sure. I always do that.’

‘It’s unique Leila. I have never seen that before. And I have looked at thousands of drawings! I love it. I really like the combination of pencil and colour. How did you remember so much detail?’

He glanced up towards the fireplace, gesturing towards the original that she must have occasionally glimpsed through the window and stored in her artist’s mind.

The framed photo above the mantelpiece was of an elderly lady, sitting side on to the paper with her head inclined to face the viewer. A posed picture, a bit like the Queen.

Leila’s version was a pencil portrait, but was adorned with colourful hair bands, bracelets and brooches. The colour was understated, but it drew the eye to those features, amidst the predominant grey pencil. The pencil drawing was all swirls and close-knit parallel lines, like exposed muscle fibres. Together they formed elegant clusters of finely drawn body parts. Neck muscles, cheekbones, eyes and ears. Each one perfectly proportioned. It was the eyes that drew him in. Deep blue irises set amongst the grey pencil outlines. Lots of lines and creases, each one perfectly shadowed.

Next to her, but in less detail, was a clean-shaven gentleman, perhaps her husband. His look was one of calm, of peace. Of pride.

On the lady's lap was a small child, of indeterminate gender, dressed in a thick yellow jumpsuit or romper suit, curled up and sucking its thumb.

'How long did it take you to do that?'

'Oh not long, couple of days maybe.' She said it dismissively, 'it helps me to relax. What they call *regulate*.'

'Long days I'm sure?'

'Oh I didn't sleep. And I barely ate. When I'm drawing, I don't think of anything else!'

'You worked on this for forty-eight hours straight?'

'I know right! Crazy!'

'Well I would never advise you to...'

'Let me stop you!' She held up her hand and smiled broadly. 'I don't want your advice. Can't you see? I just want your support. Your smile. Your voice.'

Duke paused.

*This kid actually does need me. But how can I help her? I'll be gone soon. What will she do then? Should I tell her the truth? Take her with me? No. Impossible.*

He turned back towards her, looking her up and down.

'I'm with you all the way, Leila,' was all he managed to get out.

*That's right. I need that too. Be with me. All the way.*

It was almost like she was already on some kind of journey, at least in her own head. And she wanted him there with her.

She got up to leave. He rose too, and bade her goodbye with a little gentlemanly bow.

'Can I call in next weekend?' she asked, turning to look over her shoulder.

'Sure. I'm not going anywhere. Be good this week.'

'Maybe!'

She was gone.