

Leila Chapter 33

Duke was surprised to see her approach the shack the very next day. She usually left it two or three days between visits. But something was up. He sat and watched her slow and deliberate walk as she made her way down the open pathway to the front door. She touched the trees in turn as usual, but this morning she stumbled and wavered, hesitant. It had rained overnight, and she slipped a little on the uncertain surface.

As she approached, he could see that she had been crying. The eyelids sagged, and the edges were swollen red.

‘How are you, my dear? You were such a superstar yesterday!’

His words cleared her head for her.

‘I’m...OK...thanks.’

She didn’t look up, and shuffled nervously from one foot to the other, scuffing the ground as she leaned against the door.

She doesn’t look right, doesn’t sound right. Is she really OK?

He’d been on his own for so long now that the likelihood of him picking up on anything to do with appearance or fashion, especially in a young woman, was remote. But as he looked at her now, he could see that she’d not taken a great deal of time getting ready. Normally she was so neat. Her standard outfit was close-fitting - often jeans and a t-shirt topped with what he took to be her favourite white denim jacket.

Today was different. She had on a pair of joggers which had seen better days. They hung around her like a sack, and she wore them high on the waist, so that her body shape was hidden and undefined. Her shirt, which was awkwardly buttoned up to the neck, with no adornment or decoration, looked tight and uncomfortable. She wore a thick black coat despite the relative mildness of the day.

‘It is lovely to see you Leila. Such a nice surprise after yesterday. Are you cold?’

She pulled the coat tighter around her. It wasn’t that cold.

‘Is there anything I can help you with Leila? Look, I just want to apologise for yest...’

‘Don’t apologise. You told me true friendship means that you don’t have to. Anyway I don’t want to talk about it. I did what I had to. How long you got?’

‘You did Leila. You certainly did. Thank you. I have maybe four or five months. Would you like some tea?’

‘Oh yeah, please. Don’t worry, I’m OK. Tough morning again, that’s all.’

‘OK, tea coming right up.’ He was almost relieved to be able to do something, rather than actually talk about what might be eating at her. He disappeared into the house and she sat outside, pulling at her nails. Occasionally biting them.

‘Here we are,’ he said, handing her the mug, ‘the cup that cheers, as they say!’

‘Thanks. I think my granny used to call it that.’

‘Yes she did. I guess we’re about the same vintage!’

‘So how old are you, exactly?’

‘You can’t ask a gentleman that!’ he laughed and added, ‘OK, so how old are you?’

‘You can’t ask a lady that!’ she said with a smile, ‘I’m nearly fifteen,’ she added, without the smile.

‘A teenager? Oh no! I’m scared of teenagers!’ They both laughed. He took his chance.

‘I’m a bit worried Leila,’ he said carefully, ‘you don’t look yourself today. School alright?’

‘Like I said, I’m OK.’

He didn’t seek to break the awkward silence.

‘I had a row with Dad. He kicked me out. After yesterday you know.’

‘Erm, yesterday? You didn’t tell him what happened did you?’

‘No, not exactly, but I yelled that I’d be better off living in the forest, than living with him. He said something like, ‘Fine! Go to the forest!’, so I did. And here I am.’

His relief at this explanation was tinged with worry at the possible implications.

‘Well, I’m sure he didn’t kick you out. If you go back soon I’m sure he will have seen sense. Adults can get very stressed by life, you know. Raising children is hard.’

‘Well he shouldn’t have had me then.’ she whispered.

‘I’m sure your dad loves you very much, Leila. But he has some challenges, like we all do, and at times he finds it difficult to deal with them. It’s not your fault. Be patient. Be mature.’

‘It is my fault. I swore at him, and his stupid girlfriend.’

‘It is easy for me to say this, Leila, and hard for you to understand. Sometimes adults find it hard to be adults. Sometimes children are wiser.’

‘Wiser?’

‘I mean that, the way you talk to me, you are a sensible and mature person, Leila. Wise. Someone with wisdom, despite your age.’

‘You think I could have more wisdom than an adult?’

‘I know it. You have more wisdom in your little finger than some adults I know! And I think your dad

kind of resents that. He can see his little girl growing up. That is difficult. It represents a loss of control.'

'But he should want me to grow up!'

'And he will. But right now he feels he is losing his little daughter. Instead of feeling pride in your progress, he feels his authority is waning.'

'Why do you always use big words?'

'Sorry, I didn't realise. I'll try not to use them so much. Habits, you know. It means he is slowly losing his influence over you. Like the sea going out at low tide. Some parents, especially dads, find that difficult and react. Try to hold on to it. I think his love for you is so strong that he wants to bottle you up for ever!'

'Yuk! What a horrible thought!'

'Find me a better one then.'

She looked out towards the forest and the estate beyond.

'I think he knows he can't live with me, but at the same time, he can't live without me.'

'You've always been so smart haven't you Leils?...sorry, I mean Leila.'

Her cheeks started to redden but she ignored the rhetorical question. She pulled the backpack off her back. She'd been sitting against it for balance on the uneven log-seat. She scrambled around for a few seconds in the backpack, not really knowing what to do. Her brain started to tangle.

She pulled something out of the bag twice, and then thought better of it.

'Are you OK? Can I give you a hand?'

'No!' She snapped at him for no reason. She slumped down on top of the case, and started to redo the clasps.

'Oh OK, no problem.' He went inside to potter about. He knew that he always had to give her time and space.

She fiddled around again, and with him gone for the moment, she removed the picture from its roll, and took another look. She was not often proud of anything, let alone something she'd done, but she knew that this was a good one. She held it up towards the open window, comparing it to the single picture hanging above his fireplace. She nodded quietly to herself, then sat with it on her lap.

To her slight annoyance, when he returned, he didn't draw attention to it, or even mention it. She fixed her eyes to the floor.

'Here, this is for you. I thought it might brighten up the house. I like drawing.'

She shoved the rolled up picture towards him. He extended his hand and took it. Then he sat with it on

his lap. A few minutes passed.

‘Well, aren’t you going to open it?’

‘Do you want me to?’ This man could definitely read her mind.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know what you’ll think. Maybe not. Maybe I’ll have it back.’

He started to hand it back to her, although he already knew that she did not want him to.

‘Let me tell you something Leila, and then you can tell me if you want me to take a look at it. Imagine your family. A family’s love should be unconditional. No matter what happens. Do you know the story of the Prodigal Son?’

She didn’t.

‘Oh well, never mind. What I mean is that the very fact that you are giving me something, that you have thought of me, means that I will like it. Not because of what it is, but because of who gave it to me.’

He unrolled it like it was a priceless parchment.

He stared at it intently for a few seconds, running his fingers precisely over the fine crayon.

Then he started to cry.