

## Leila Chapter 27

‘You know that woman who used to come here? Were you two, y’know...?’

‘Oh no! Nothing like that! Like I said, being stuck out here in the middle of nowhere doesn’t make me the ideal catch. There aren’t many people on the lookout for a washed up old hermit making charcoal! And there was something about her that didn’t quite work for me.’

‘What the challenge thing?’

‘Well that was a part of it, I think we both got a bit freaked out. Still, it was fun while it lasted.’

‘What? The challenge was fun? You said you saw stuff you didn’t want to see.’

He smiled.

‘Of course, I didn’t really see anything. But they say you can tell everything about someone by looking into their eyes. Windows on the soul, they say. Maybe that’s what I saw.’

Leila squirmed slightly on her seat, as if making to leave, but she didn’t get up. *He’s going to suggest we do it, I know he is.* Part of her felt that he was going to try to cross a path that should not be crossed. Most of her did not like eye contact. But part of her was intrigued.

He took pleasure in the silence, safe in the knowledge that she would speak next.

‘You wouldn’t see much in me! If we did it, how would I know when four minutes is up?’

‘You won’t need to!’

‘How come?’

‘You won’t make it past twenty seconds!’

He laughed, but he knew he had laid down a challenge she would not be able to resist. He motioned to the stool again. She shuffled it closer.

‘So what do we do? You got a timer?’

‘Yes, I’ll keep the time.’ He didn’t actually have anything with which to keep the time. He bowed his head in front of hers. ‘Come on then, get ready.’

Leila thought of comfort zones, and where hers usually lay. *I can do this! I’ll show him. I’ll think of something else. It’s only four minutes!* She sat, slightly stooped, on the stool and stared at the ground.

‘After three then? One....two....three!’

‘I can’t do it!’ She continued staring at the ground.

‘Let’s try again. One, two, three!’

This time Leila looked up. His dark eyes were staring straight at her. She tried not to blink as she stared at his face. Even then she was trying to avoid the eyes, even though she was looking straight at them. She managed to count to fifteen.

‘I can’t do that! It’s horrible!’ She rubbed her eyes and looked anywhere but at him.

‘Told you it was hard!’ he laughed, ‘you managed about sixteen seconds. Let’s try again another time.’

‘No way! That was chilling, man!’

She almost ran as she left him laughing quietly to himself. He called after her.

‘I really need to ask you a favour Leila. I wonder if you can help me?’

But she was gone.

His words barely reached her, mangled by the frosty wind and the swaying forest.