

## Leila Chapter 18

‘But you seem to be the only one who really understands!’

Leila's voice was cracking as she spoke. She'd gone back that evening after a desperate day. In trouble for being out with Noah and being late for school, she'd got home to find her father on a phone call with the Head. When he'd tried to confront her about it she'd stormed upstairs, locked her door, and sat with her legs dangling out over the open window sill. As her father was getting into the car to go out, he'd threatened to call the police if she didn't come down.

‘No-one else, not anyone, understands me.’

‘So what is it that you want me to understand exactly? Speak to me Leila.’

Duke's voice sung like warm milk around the side of a bowl. Soothing and settling.

‘It's just that I'm y'know, different. I don't see things like other people.’

‘So how do you see things?’

‘I can't say. I don't know what other people see.’

She tried to settle, but the log-seat she was sitting on wobbled underneath her.

‘OK, so let's play a little game,’ he said after a few seconds pause for calm.

‘I don't even like games. Everyone likes games! But I don't. Why not?’

Her confusion was making her physically shrink away from him.

‘Listen to me, my dear. We are going to play a little game. I am going to ask you to help me imagine something. Something I very much need to understand. I want you to tell me something from deep within you.’

‘Deep within? Imagination? What are you, some kind of shrink?’

‘Please don't be rude Leila. I am trying my best to help you.’

‘Yes. Sorry.’

She didn't say *sorry* very often.

‘Imagine that I have the power of x-ray. You know what an x-ray is?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘So I have the power of x-ray. I focus my x-rays on your head. I can see right inside your skull. I can see right inside your brain, right through to the centre of your mind. What do I see?’

He leaned back in astonishment and stared at her as she spoke. She started, very calmly, head bowed, as

if she really was reaching inside and helping him see what was going on.

‘Most of the time, nothing is organised. Nothing is ordered. Imagine a bookshop where all the shelves have collapsed. All the books have fallen on top of each other in random piles, and every piece of information inside every one of those books has got mixed up. Millions of bits of information, in thousands of books. And to get my mind to do anything, it has to fight to find the pieces of a puzzle amidst all that chaos. When the puzzle is together, I can function. When it is not, I cannot. And my response to that mess? I fight! I cannot order the information. All is confusion. And the noise! Those books crashing down on top of each other! A continuous low rumble that is always getting louder, always threatening to burst through. And when it does, CRASH! I blow. Like a volcano smashing through the surface of the earth. An unstoppable power. I feel the power, even though I know I have lost all control.’

‘So, when you are in class, for example. How do the crashing books happen there?’

‘It’s just the same, but it is like every book now has a voice. A high-pitched human whine. A million different tones, one attached to each of the falling books. Each emitting its whine as it falls, like fireworks splashing to the ground. The million whines are like an unbearable white noise. Earth-shattering.’

‘Can anyone else hear them?’

‘Of course not, they’re in my head.’

‘Can you hear the teacher?’

‘I can hear the calm ones.’

‘How is that possible? You’ve got that going on all the time, right? How can you hear anything else?’

‘The calm ones. I can hear them. I can hear their bodies.’

He sat up slowly, straight in his chair. He smoothed down the creases on the thighs of his trousers, and gently brought his hands to his knees. Head tilted.

‘You can hear their bodies?’

‘Yes. The calm ones show me respect with their body.’

‘So, like, body language.’

‘Yeah I guess so. Posture. Sympathy. The bad ones? They rage and roar round the room like human thunderstorms. The good ones? They move so easily, all I can think of is sunlight. I can tell they want to help me. You’re doing it now. Your posture is listening to me.’

‘My posture helps?’

‘Yeah. Look. You’re bent forwards just a little. Not too much, like an old person. Not too little, when you’d look hard and uncaring. Not too close. You care about me because you incline to listen. I like that. It cuts down the chaos. The books become more organised. Straightened out on the shelves. And

your hands.'

He looked down at his hands with a smile. Forest hands. Cutters of a thousand trees.

'Your hands are open. Facing me. You talk with them.'

It was true, he had an animated way of talking, his eyes and hands in gentle movement. She addressed that next.

'And your eyes. They are kind eyes. And calm ones.'

She looked at him momentarily, but then averted her own eyes.

'And all that reduces the mess inside?'

'Yes, it goes quieter. It's like my route through the forest carves a path through the mess. And when I get here, you're respectful to me. Good teachers do that. Calm ones. They cut through the noise.'

'I would love to have had you in my class! You're interesting. A class of thirty perfect, clever kids might seem like a dream, but really, how dull! Give me a feisty class any day!'

'I'm not feisty!' she said, somewhat feistily.

'No, but you are special!' he laughed. 'One of the special ones. I hope you'll come and visit again some day soon. I'm always here if you need anything.'

'So I can come here again?'

'Of course, my dear. I enjoy your visits. Come again. Soon. Leave Noah at school!'

His voice both cleared her way back through the forest, and told her that, at last, someone cared.

'Actually, I need the toilet.'

'Well you could go inside. I'll wait here. It's a bit basic, I'm afraid.'

He knew she would not have the courage, and indeed would see the good sense to not go inside the house. She'd not been in, and he didn't want her to. It was his private space, he was more than a little ashamed of it, and it would look and feel wrong.

'On the other hand, you could just have a wild wee on the way home.'

He said it with a calmness and a frankness that surprised her.

'A wha...what? Oh never mind.' She got up to leave. She'd barely ever been anywhere, and other people's toilets disgusted her. But the thought of peeing in the bushes was even more ridiculous and revolting to her. And probably dangerous. *Who knows what might be out there?* She certainly wasn't going to hang around to discuss it with him.

It was the early evening, and darkness fell quite quickly at this time of year, but that did not stop her

little tap on each fifth tree as she exited. She even did little decimal calculations, working out that she was 0.2 of the way between the groups of five trees that she'd determined from the way they lined the path. One fifth of this section.

She even knew how ridiculous it would sound to anyone, but she also realised how important it had become to her. Even the three little ticks on each trunk.

And on the fourth tree out of five, she dipped into the bushes, well out of sight.

*A wild wee!*

Her first ever.

She actually skipped a little on the way home, like she used to.