

Leila Chapter 21

Knitting.

She'd taken it up on the suggestion of one of the many *professionals* who visited her at school. A legion of these worthies came to visit, and watch, and report. They'd start by sitting in class: a lurking presence. *Observation* they called it. Leila knew they were watching her. Depending on her mood, she'd act normal - not saying much, paying attention to the teacher - after which the professional would leave, never to return.

Or more often, she'd act up: play the part. She would give it ten, perhaps fifteen minutes, then launch. She'd call out answers to the teacher's prompting, or interrupt the flow with her own quirky questions. Each time, the teacher would ask her to raise her hand before speaking. Each time, Leila just butted in. To irritate the teacher still further, most times her answers were right; her questions were pertinent.

No-one ever said she was stupid. The observer would soon scribble something in their notebook: *high-functioning*, that sort of thing.

When she was fed up with interrupting, Leila would start rocking in her chair, or tapping her pencil between the spaces in her fingers. To her it was just something rhythmic, calming. To everyone else it was just Leila, as per usual. To the teacher it was infuriating. To the observer it was *evidence*. More writing in the notebook.

None of the interventions came to much. The school got recommendations, most of which they already knew. Her dad got a report, most of which he ignored. Leila got nothing, apart from this one suggestion. *Take up a hobby to channel your energies*, they had said. Hobbies?

Not really my thing, hobbies. A bit of drawing perhaps? I already do that. Sport? No thanks. Stupid idea.

But they had given her a free knitting set - a pair of needles, several balls of different coloured wool, and some videos to watch. She'd watched them.

Over the next few weeks, Leila had obsessed over her knitting. She enjoyed the repetitiveness, and it had become a metaphor for what went on in her head.

Except she didn't do metaphors!

She sat on the floor of her room, enjoying the rhythmic click of the needles as they did their work.

When it went well, she was proud of the little creations she made. Knitted squares of coloured fabric to start with. Then something a bit more ambitious. She'd made herself a little hat, *kippah* style, which she'd taken to wearing around the house.

If she had got in trouble, or had fallen out with someone, she might knit to calm down, but it would be furious work, and inaccurate. Multiple balls of different coloured wool! Every time she looked down at what she was doing, the mess was more intertwined and more desperate, and every time she pulled at a strand to straighten it out, it seemed to grasp at another and they would knot themselves together, never

to be separated. The colours would all bleed into one another, her attempts uneven and desperate, and the results were unusable. She would almost always end up discarding these creations, often shedding tears of frustration at the hours of work. That was her head sometimes - multicoloured tangles of wool all fighting for space. The more they fought the more jumbled they became. The more she strove to marshal her thoughts, the more confused they were. The clusters of wool, like wires, all grating against each other, adding a frightful noise to the mix.

But on calmer days, when it went well, the knitting was measured in clear rectangles of perfectly joined fabric, where the single strands were barely visible, such was the fineness and elegance of the stitch.

On those days her thoughts, too, were clear. She felt positive and calm. She thought up amazing ideas for her drawings or craftwork. She could look forward. She could plan.

She'd planned to make the jumper in time for Christmas. She'd drawn out detailed diagrams herself on paper, and sketched the central feature - a mighty stag emerging from a snowy forest. It was the most ambitious thing she'd ever done, and the combination of colours - the whites and greens for the forest, and the brown shades of the animal - tested her new-found knitting skills.

But Leila was on a mission, and her missions were usually successful.

It was nearly three in the morning when she finished it.