

Leila Chapter A

I remember this girl.

I must have been fourteen or fifteen at the time. I can still see her face, nearly forty years later. She was good-looking, in a troubled sort of way. Face all scrunched and cross most of the time, like an angry cartoon. Warm smile, if she tried. I tried, but failed. To be honest, she scared me a bit. She used to just get up out of her seat and leave the class. They seemed to let her get away with that. Not us. There would have been trouble. But she was special. Special treatment.

I don't actually remember her name. That's bad. We treated her bad.

We used to chase her. Always wore a red dress. She would just curl up into a ball. And we'd surround her. She'd just quietly whisper all this stuff and wave her hands in front of her face.

'Boom boom boom, I'm going to explode...'

She'd stare up at us through her hair. Never saw her eyes, but she could see us.

Poor girl. She had issues. We didn't really know that. It was like sport to us. We got in trouble of course. And after a while she just wasn't there. What happened to her?

So I'm trying to write a novel.

I thought it would be easy, but it really isn't.

I read a lot, so I thought writing would be kind of the opposite. And I liked writing at school.

I remember Mrs Somersby, at primary school. You know the type. One minute she'd be telling us to focus on the plot.

'Build your story mountain!'

The next minute it would be a setting.

'Think of your happy place!'

And then, people.

'Characterisation is key! Draw your characters first. The rest will follow!'

She was the kind of woman who spoke in exclamation marks! High-pitched. Heart definitely in the right place though. I loved all my teachers back then.

It was Mrs Miklosevic at St. Columba's who really got me into writing though. She made me think I was actually good! I remember her comments in the margins. Elegant, artistic handwriting in bright green pen.

We were fifteen. Struggling through secondary school. Hormones all over the place. I really liked her. Can still see her now. She wore long boots - well, it was the seventies! But she was the sort of teacher

whose lessons you actually looked forward to. There weren't many of those. But she was different. She just encouraged us to pour our ideas onto the paper. She even tried to get us to write poetry.

'From the heart, boys. Forget everything I've taught you about grammar and punctuation, and structure. Just pour it out. Your feelings. Tell your life story!'

Life story? Feelings? We were only fifteen! No life, and definitely no feelings. We knew nothing. But she did get us to do some good stuff. I've still got a couple of the things we did for her. One of those poems - it reads like I was writing it just for her! Probably was.

And forget about grammar and punctuation?

Great!

Kayla!

That's it. Her name. Sorry. Just thinking. She was called Kayla. That girl. I remember us yelling *Kayla* all the time, and running after her.

I feel ashamed now. I wish I could make it up to her. If she walked in now, today, I'd apologise to her. I'm not really that kind of person. We made her life hell. I hope she's OK.

Anyway, they say that characters in fiction are usually based on fact. Usually a mixture of people you know, people you've met, people you've read about. Perhaps family members. So that's where I'm going with this. Let's see what happens. I'm going to begin with what I remember of her. Which isn't that much. Troubled teen. Let's throw her into the mix and see where she takes me.

I need to make a start.

I'd better change the name. Libel or slander or something if you use some living (or perhaps dead) person's name.

Let's call her *Leila*.

Here goes.

And in case you're wondering, I've looked up the word *genre*. It's French.

It's going to be (I hope): *Young Adult. Fiction. Mystery. Feel-good. Coming-of-age*. Based on facts, if I can remember them.

Let's do it.

Enjoy.

Leila.