

## Leila Chapter 25

She was crying. He'd never seen her cry before.

'Oh my goodness! What's up? Are you alright?'

'I'm OK. Another bad day. I always struggle at that place. I wish you could be there.'

'Too old, Leila! That was a long time ago. I couldn't do it now.'

'Well, you're only as old as you feel, I guess.'

'That's another cliché, my dear!' he said, with a smile, 'Where did you get that from?'

She laughed nervously, and rocked back on her stool, banging her head on the shelf behind her.

'Ow! My dad always says things like that. I remember it. I can't remember the longer stuff, like maths or literacy, but I like the little things.'

'Is your head OK?'

He reached over as if to touch the wound, and then thought better of it. She inclined her head a little towards him. She rubbed the spot vigorously and examined her hand.

'Do you mind taking a look?'

'Yeah sure. I can do that.'

He gently parted her hair where the shelf had made contact and peered at her scalp. He gave it a little rub with his first and second fingers and could feel a slight bump. She squeaked a little as he caressed it, but then he rubbed at the sides of the wound, soothing it, and straightened her hair. She felt as if someone cared.

'Sorry, that's sore. But you'll live!' he said jauntily as he sat back down, 'nothing much to see!'

She thanked him and did a little self-conscious straightening of her hair herself. She felt her cheeks redden with the pain and perhaps a bit of embarrassment. But she felt better.

'Sorry but I had another bad day today. Ended up in the PRU.'

'The PRU?'

'Yeah, everyone calls it the Prison Unit. It stands for the Pupil Referral Unit. It is where the bad kids like me end up. Rows of little desks with high sides so you can't see anyone. I've been there loads of times. Sitting in silence.'

Leila paused for a moment. Silence. Then her frustration got the better of her.

'But it's so unfair! I didn't do anything!'

His sympathy tone smiled back at her.

'Well, you didn't end up there for nothing Leila, did you?'

'I only called her a cow.'

Now the smile was in Leila's voice as she turned her head down and away from his gaze. She knew it wasn't funny and she was kind of embarrassed, although telling it to someone else actually made her smile. And guess what?

He grinned back.

'Oh Leila. No wonder they referred you. Just one day, or are you back in there tomorrow?'

'No I'll be in for something else tomorrow. It's just not fair. She is one of those ones who think we should all sit perfectly still for an hour, while she drones on about adjectives and adverbs. It's just not going to happen. I wanted to go out and hang out with Evie and Lil, but when I started to talk to them about what we could do, she had this massive hissy fit and said that I should be more focused. That I should think about words ending in -ly because they are usually adverbs. When she asked me to think of two adverbs I came up with 'horribly' and 'badly' and when she told me to put those in a sentence, I wrote something like, 'The teacher smells horribly and teaches us badly.' Or something like that.'

'My dear!'

Her heart began to soar again.

'My dear, that is inspired! And the thing is, you have used two adverbs perfectly - exactly as she asked for! That is hilarious.'

'Well it wasn't really. I refused to leave the room when she sent me out so she dispatched someone to fetch the Head and I was hauled out. The others were still smiling as I left, but it was humiliating, and I really hate it when they touch me.'

'They pulled you out physically?'

'Yes.'

He paused for thought for a moment. She realised he considered that wrong.

'If I'm having a bad one, they grab me and take me to this special room near the PRU. Usually two of them. I try to stop them, but they hold me so tight.'

'Would you go with them if they didn't take you?'

'Yes I would. I always know if I have done something wrong, and I usually apologise. But it takes time. If you grab me when I'm super-high it will only make matters worse. Those noises in my head become deafening. I am accountable to no-one for my actions, least of all myself. Give me a bit of time and I'll follow you to your stupid unit, but if you try to take me, I'm gonna resist. I bit one of them

once.'

'Woah! Biting is taking it a bit far Leila.'

'You're right. I was suspended for that one. Probably fair enough.'

His next question caught her off-guard.

'Do you think you're a bad person Leila?'

Her response surprised him in turn.

'Actually, I think I'm great. It's like I have these superpowers that sometimes become so strong that I just cannot control them. But I wouldn't want not to have them! I can see things that other people can't see. I can focus on things for hours where others get bored. And I can hear things - sounds and pitches. No-one else knows what they are. Like your little *E-minor* thing! It's part of me and it drives me to do things. Even like coming here. I wouldn't be here if I was normal.'

'You are perfectly normal Leila. Just a bit special. And people need to realise that. Even celebrate it.'

'Ha! They wouldn't celebrate me! They even cancelled my birthday once.'

'Cancelled it?'

'Well it was my fault actually! The teacher was someone I really liked. She'd iced a little cake for me, but I didn't like the colour. I threw it on the ground. I know it was wrong. But then they wouldn't sing for me or anything. I hated her after that.'

She smiled at the memory, then frowned at the shame of it.