

Leila Chapter 29

It was deep February before Duke had finalised his plan. Leila had visited just a couple of times since New Year. Seemed, from what she said, that things were going better at school.

He missed seeing her. Did she only visit when things in class were bad? He needed her. Time was running out.

He stared out into the forest, marvelling at the seasons unfolding once again. Snowdrops carpeted the clearings in plucky little miracles of nature. The early-blossoming trees were starting to bud, and it lent the forest a sense of action, of renewal. It would soon be time for him to start coppicing, piling up the logs, stacking them into their piles, and building the new kilns for the summer season.

If he had time.

He was delighted to see a little figure jogging across the path, touching the trees in her very specific order.

‘Didn’t you say you wanted to ask me a favour?’

‘Good morning. I’m amazed you remember that, Leila!’

‘I remember everything.’ She emphasised the word *everything*.

‘Why didn’t you mention it last time?’

‘Well, it is a little delicate, really. And you weren’t in the best of moods. I had to work hard that day!’ He said it happily, although it had been a very one-sided visit. He’d just had to listen. There was no time for his problems that day.

‘Oh yeah, I remember,’ she said as she sat down.

Today she was full of beans. Not literally.

‘Can we try the four-minute challenge again?’ she laughed, ‘I’ve been practising!’

‘Practising! That’s not fair! Who have you been practising with?’

Part of him hoped she’d made a new friend, although he was not surprised, or disappointed, at her response.

‘Oh just me! In the mirror. We’re pretty good at it!’ She laughed happily.

OK, let’s do it. If you can do four minutes, then you can walk away. If you can’t, then you have to help me. Deal?’

‘Help you with what?’

‘You’ll find out. Let’s play!’

Leila took off her jacket and sat down. It was cold but the air was dry. She needed to concentrate.

‘They say it gets easier!’

‘I just want to do better than sixteen seconds!’

‘Yes, that’s all you managed last time!’

‘OK I’m aiming for a minute.’

‘Let’s do it!’ They both pulled their logs a little closer and sat back down.

This time, she tried to focus properly on his eyes. She found herself trying to concentrate on the skin surrounding them. The deeply ingrained lines either side - the crow’s feet and the life lines. The different shades of brown surrounding them - creases enhanced by stress and worry, baked in by the outside world he'd lived in, and the sun he worked under.

She tried to look directly into the pupils. They were jet black, and the irises which enveloped them were of the darkest brown. The irises seemed unnaturally large, and if she looked hard enough she could see the shadows of the woods reflected against the near-black surface. She saw him flinch slightly, but he remained resolute.

She managed about thirty seconds, powered by her determination to succeed in the attempt, but was soon overcome by what she imagined lay behind the eyes. She thought of his wife, his daughter, the baby. Perhaps the eyes really did reveal something about someone. She started to panic when she realised what she thought she could see reflected there. She looked away and stood up.

‘Sorry!’ she squealed, rubbing her own eyes, ‘how long was that?’

‘You did well. That was just over a minute!’

‘How come you didn’t flinch? Why was it me?’

‘I don’t know, I’m just looking. I’m used to just looking. Do it for hours out here. Practice, that’s what I have. Oh, and I guess I won.’

‘As usual, I don’t know what you’re talking about!’ She laughed. He laughed too, a little nervously. She was secretly proud that she'd got beyond a minute. A crow squawked from a nearby tree, then took flight in pursuit of some unseen prey. He took a deep breath.

‘So I’ve got this plan to win us a little more time, you see. I definitely can’t move out before the summer. I need your help.’

‘Sure, I can help.’

‘Well it’s a bit delicate, Leila.’

‘What do you mean *delicate*?’

‘I mean it is something that is difficult to talk about.’

She started to sense a rare unease about him, which quickly transferred to her. She shifted slightly on her stool, wondering whether this was going to turn difficult. She hoped not.

‘Well go ahead. Tell me. What do I need to do?’

‘Leila, this is very difficult for me to discuss with you, and I don’t know if you would understand. But I think I would be able to stay here longer if I have dependent family members.’

‘What does that mean? You said you have no family.’

‘The key word is ‘dependent’. It means people who depend on you.’

Leila quickly saw the way that this was going.

‘You wouldn’t have to do anything Leila. It would be easy. I would just have to pretend, for a while, that you were related to me. I might have to fill in a form or something. You might need to meet the official people, you know, just to prove...’

She was already up off her seat.

‘What I need you to do is pretend you are my...’

She was already half-way gone.

‘No way! I’m not pretending anything!’ she yelled back down the path.

Running.

She didn’t even touch the trees on the way out.

Duke sat slumped on his chair, head in hands, watching her slip away through his fingers.

He’d blown it.