

Leila Chapter 58

FOUR YEARS LATER

Leila hesitated before struggling her way through the revolving door.

She'd taken the train into London. There were people. Everywhere. She'd struggled not to turn back more than once. But this was the first interview she'd had, and she was determined to steer a straight path towards a job that seemed made for her. They had told her to take a taxi from the station. She paid the driver the exact amount on the meter, in cash, which she counted out carefully in front of him.

He scowled and drove off without comment.

It was one of those offices styled for creatives. Lots of grey glass, a central atrium. Multiple sweeping staircases, and lots of open plan. It was nestled just south of the river, about half way between Charing Cross and London Bridge, and looked as if it had once been a warehouse or barn, with wooden beams and brickwork left tastefully exposed in all the right places. Split into pods, or distinct work areas, it housed five or six separate small businesses.

'Oh hi there, I'm Candace, welcome to Hotfoot Productions.' Her drawl was mid-Atlantic.

The woman could not have been much older than Leila. Twenty at most, with the tightest of tight black jeans, and no shoes. She made to air kiss Leila's cheek. Leila was having none of it.

'Er, OK I'll go and get you some water,' Candace said coolly, without asking whether Leila would like any, 'please sign in just here, take a seat and make yourself comfortable. Nick will be along in a minute. You can use the guest wifi. No password.'

Leila looked down at her old Nokia, not even knowing whether it could access wifi or why she would want it to. She'd dressed in a way that she thought seemed appropriate, although over the preceding year or two she'd experimented with her hair, a range of body art, and piercings. She assumed those things were normal, and even encouraged, in such creative spaces, although as she looked around at some of the pods where people seemed to be working, she didn't see anything quite like her own half-dyed hair, intertwined with brightly-coloured woollen braids. She shuffled in her seat and tried to pull her sleeves down over the tattoos. Especially the one on her forearm that showed a wild she-wolf. It was her favourite. Her calling card.

But she felt a bit out of place.

'You must be Leila,' said a man, looking around the otherwise empty space for his interviewee.

Fortyish, she thought, *and rich-looking*. She couldn't quite put her finger on such things, but the cut of his jeans, the crispness of his white shirt, and the elegance of his jacket seemed to spell success, and money.

'Thank you for coming. I'm Nick.' He extended a hand, which Leila ignored.

'I've got my portfolio here, would you like to take a look? You look rich.' Leila started fiddling with her case.

Nick smiled.

'No, no, not here. We'll use one of the meeting rooms.' The water had not arrived, and Candace had disappeared. It was just the two of them.

'So, did you have a good journey? How far have you come?'

'I came about the job. They said I could have an interview.'

The nerves were almost visibly pouring out of her, like sweat, and his attempts at small talk fell on deaf, anxious ears.

He abandoned his attempts at conversation, and got down to business.

'Well, I must, say, Leila is it? I must say Leila that we have been interviewing a few candidates today, so I don't want to get your hopes up unrealistically.'

'My hopes of what?'

'Well, of getting this job.'

'What job?'

'Ah yes, the job. Of course.' He seemed nervous in turn. This was not going quite how the others had gone. The two others he had seen that morning had asked earnest questions about working hours, and holiday pay and pensions.

'We had a look at your portfolio, Leila. You have a real talent there. We liked a lot of it.'

'A lot of it? What didn't you like?'

'No, no I didn't mean that, not at all. It's just that some of the themes...'

'Well your colleague told me to send a range of different styles as examples of what I can do.'

'And that you certainly did. Thanks.'

Leila had submitted ten pencil drawings, mostly of human faces and woodland scenes. She'd been practising recently on crime stories she'd read in the paper, trying to picture what was reported. There had been a couple of robberies and even an attempted murder. She had drawn what she'd read, bodies and all.

'We're looking for a children's illustrator, Leila. As I think you were told, one of our main products here is the *Bailey the Bullfrog* series. We need someone who has a track record of animal drawings.'

'Track record? What do you mean?'

‘Look, Leila, you may have misunderstood. We are offering a short-term contract for someone to illustrate for *Bailey the Bullfrog* and *Terry the Tortoise*.’

Leila looked at this grown man with a degree of contempt. Although she’d heard that the two series had been successful, she wasn’t sure that she wanted to spend a year drawing for them, or even why he was bothered.

‘I can draw animals,’ she said.

‘OK, can we see a few examples please.’

Leila reached inside the case, and pulled out a blank sheet of cartridge paper, and started putting together a picture. Nick Jones went to the door.

‘Er, I’ll just go and fetch a colleague. Be back in a tick!’

Leila drew for perhaps five or six minutes. Jones came back in, with a severe-looking woman. Her hair was pulled super-tight into a bun, dragging her ears and chin backwards and her skin into an unattractive tautness.

‘This is Lola. Lola, Leila. Lola is our lawyer.’

Leila meets Lola the lawyer. *Lame*, thought Leila without looking up, pushing the drawing across the big table to where the pair sat down. She got up.

‘Look, I’m not sure this is for me. Sorry if I’ve wasted your time. I need to get home.’

Nick looked at the picture. He was temporarily stunned. In six minutes, she’d drawn the two animals in perfect proportion to each other, the tortoise side on and behind it the frog, its exaggerated cartoonish features including two enormous animated eyes which jumped out of the picture and seemed to follow them both as they moved.

‘This is extraordinary, Leila. Did you really do that when I went out to call Lola?’

‘I don’t know what you went out to do.’

‘Well, when I went out and came back with...oh never mind. That’s amazing. Lola will just draw up some terms and conditions and we can take a look at them. But let me take you for a tour of the office.’

‘Is this the office, then?’ She looked at the busy figures, each one in their little booth, beavering away on their important *Bailey the Bullfrog* duties.

‘Yes, everyone works here, unless they are travelling or at clients.’

‘At clients? Travelling?’

‘Yes, they are here about half the time, out and about the rest. Ah, here we are. This would be your pod.’

They stopped at an empty desk, with some blank panelling to about waist height, and a jumble of

computer cables. Levi, a thirty-something man with a prominent name badge, tired eyes and a well-tended beard, smiled from across the adjoining desk and then went back to his spreadsheet.

Leila sat down on the chair, which swivelled as she moved. She pulled it up to the desk and looked around. Despite the dividers, she could see at least twenty other people from the hot desk. Her mind multiplied them until there were forty, or sixty, all dressed in garish colours. And the noise! Work? *Really? It's like school again, just with adults. Even noisier.* At least at school everyone dressed the same.

Leila had made up her mind that she could stay one or perhaps two minutes more without losing her cool. She made towards the atrium.

'Look, er, thanks for the interview. Good luck..with your er... rodents. I-I-I, I'm sorry, but I couldn't work here. I'm not good with noise, or colours, or travelling. Sorry. Or clients. What are clients?'

'They're the people we work for, of course.' His tone was no longer affable, 'that's how we make our money.'

'Well, you'll have to make it without me.'

Lola the lawyer strode out of the corner office with her sums.

'We can offer you a competitive starting...'

'Please don't offer me anything. I need to go. Bye.'

Leila almost ran towards the fire exit door which swung towards her automatically as she approached. She flung herself through it and across the wide London pavement. Breathing heavily, she sat on a bench on the far side with her elbows on her knees, and checked the time of the first train home.

'You look like you've just escaped from somewhere!' said an elderly man who occupied the other half of the seat. Leila looked up at him and smiled.

'Yes, I think I probably have,' she replied, staring across at the display of human mice in the glass-walled office, each on their own little treadmill of life.

She went home.

It had been her first trip to London.

And it turned out to be her last.