

Leila Chapter F

So you won't believe this!

I can't actually believe it either.

I'm sitting in the lobby of an office on the 33rd floor of a tower block in, wait for it, New York City! This is like the realisation of a distant dream.

Of course, it is not all plain sailing from here, but this office is home to one of the biggest publishing houses in the USA. And therefore the world. I am sitting on a plush low sofa, about to meet Chica Delaney. Chica is a top publisher who specialises in children's stories. I've never met her before, but her reputation precedes her like a suit of armour. She's tough. She's mean. But she wants a piece of me!

It is rare enough to get to this stage, but Susan submitted a summary of the first three chapters and made a couple of phone calls, after which Chica and her team were interested enough to call me over for a meeting. In one short weekend I've sorted a visa, booked flights and organised a hotel.

To be honest, I've been talking to myself all weekend. At home, in the taxi, at the airport, on the plane. I've been trying to practise for the few short minutes (maybe half an hour) I'll get with Chica.

The velour of the sofa clings to the wool of my suit as I shift nervously in anticipation. My watch suggests she is late. Well, she's a top publisher, so I suppose she's allowed to be late. I'm going to breathe deeply and try not to get stressed, even if lateness is one of the traits in others that I truly despise!

Anyway. Put that out of your mind. This is big. The huge oak double doors are opening.

'Earl! What a pleasure! I love the book!'

No introductions. No handshakes. But this was already going well. Chica was smaller than I expected, although her shoulders were well padded and her suit was well expensive. Without thinking, I held myself a little higher and smoothed down my Marks and Sparks jacket.

'Pleased to meet you. And thank you. I'm glad you liked it.'

'I'd like to get your views on how the finished version will play out in the marketplace.'

This seemed like a bit of a trick question. Surely she was the one who should have the marketing ideas? Perhaps it was a bit of a test.

'Well it is designed to appeal to late elementary and early middle school kids. Eleven to thirteen year olds really.'

'Don't underestimate the importance of the themes to older children. Fifteen-year-olds love a story with a message. And you have a powerful message here.'

'Thank you. Neurodiversity is currently quite big in the news.' I'd learnt a new word.

‘It’s more than that, Earl. You’ve got vulnerability, loneliness, a coming-of-age story. We very rarely go for anything new. Teenagers like to know what they’ll read. But this has a few twists too. And lots of kids will identify with Leila. That is very important. What’s your social media like?’

I was actually dreading that question. What appeals to a publisher is when an established author can boast millions of followers on Instagram or Twitter so that the book can almost sell itself without investments in conventional marketing or promotion. My social media profile is pathetic! I don’t even have friends in real life, let alone pretend friends on Facebook! So that is a bit of a non-starter.

‘Well, I’m developing my presence across a number of channels,’ I lied, clearly not convincing her.

‘*We’ll need you to put some effort into that.*’ It wasn’t a topic for discussion. Her next statement brought it home to me.

‘Clearly we’ll need to take that into account with our advance. It sounds like we’ll have plenty of investment to make.’

Even to an amateur like me, this sounded like a bargaining ploy already. Because I wouldn’t be helping sales much myself, they would reduce the amount they could pay me up front so that they could spend money on marketing.

‘So I understand that you are trying to decide on a level of advance,’ I said, stupidly.

‘My people will get onto money later, Earl. As I said, there is less investment available these days. But we like your work, and we like you.’

I looked around the room. There was no-one else there. She must have been talking about me.

‘So this is how it needs to go. We’ll do some basic press here over the next couple of days to signpost a launch. Then we’ll need you to respond to a few edits so that we get a final draft to our marketing team by the end of the month. Then you’ll be back in Europe with our local sales teams. It’s a long slog, but you’re up to it.’

‘Long slog?’ I asked.

‘Well, we have to get you out there, Earl. That’s what we do.’

I momentarily thought of friends who had self-published their books. They had all spoken of the difficulties getting it marketed, and in fact only one was prepared to say that she’d made any money out of it. But for someone like me, who doesn’t like crowds or wide open spaces, this was beginning to sound like a nightmare. On the other hand, here I was, in New York City, talking with one of the world’s most renowned publishing houses.

And they loved *Leila*.

‘I need you to read carefully through this Earl. You might want your attorney to take a look too. It includes a section at the end on film rights. Although it is just part of our standard contract, we think this thing has legs Earl.’

I could have made some quip about the legs and the lame metaphor, but I thought better of it.

'Yes, Hollywood loves these kind of feel-good stories. You could be onto a screenplay next. We're gonna push for that. Water?'

I wasn't really aware that I had written a feel-good story! What do you think? I guess he made her feel good, until he disappeared, but ultimately he left her, or got arrested or fled the country or whatever, so she can't feel completely good about that. I suppose her reactions to the environment - especially the forest - show that it is a good, calming influence.

I took the bottle of water she held out in front of me, even if by then she was taking a phone call with the other hand. In my head the drink tasted of money and power, no doubt a flavour carried through many of the rooms and buildings of the city.

'Yep, just listen to me. You can blather on all you want. Ultimately it's your call. Take it or leave it.'

Chica. Doing a deal whilst doing a deal.

'Sorry. My daughter. She gotta pull herself together. No drive. No ambition. Teens eh?'

I nodded dumbly and felt a bit sorry for her daughter.

She turned back to me, holding the door open and handing me a sheaf of papers. The entire meeting had been less than twenty minutes.

'Have a good look. Let me know any issues you have. Well done - we look forward to working with you. Tomorrow 7.00am. The breakfast shows. You'll have sixty seconds max, so prepare it well and make it snappy.'

She was now telling me how to talk on a radio show. Rude. Anyway the paperwork seemed to contain quite large numbers. Good numbers. Numbers that would keep me going for another year at least. Maybe on the sequel to *Leila*.

I stumbled out of the elevator on the ground floor in a bit of a daze. It was like I'd been in a dark room and suddenly hit sunshine. Although the autumn evening was not bright, I felt like I had been touched by sunlight in there. A publishing deal! It was all I'd ever dreamed of.

I spilled myself out onto the street. I'd only been to New York once before, but it almost felt familiar, such was the ubiquity of the city in films and music. But what the heck! I was still a tourist at heart. I headed for a diner on West 48th Street to take stock of where we were.

I settled into one of the booths and picked up the menu. *Philly Cheese Omelet*, or *All Day Breakfast Sandwich*? The choices were bewildering. As the waitress came over I decided on something called the *Texas Prairie Dog Wrap*. Honestly, I didn't care what was in it. As I waited I imagined some supermodel or celebrity gangster inserting themselves into my booth. Right opposite, like they do in the movies. In fact it turned out not to be that kind of diner, and a mixed cast of local business and tourist characters popped in and out of my eyeline. I felt I could sit there watching them all day.

When the food arrived I paid the bill directly and added a healthy tip. Bewildered as I was, I had not lost sight of the fact that I had just snagged myself a deal to publish my little book!

There's an industry standard saying relating to the characters in works of fiction.

As an author, you have probably spent several months, and sometimes years, of your life developing this work, and it becomes very personal to you. In fact I just did a little double take as a tall woman in a red dress walked past the booth. Even the music on the jukebox seemed to fit in. Elvis's tasty vibrato on *Alison*.

To be honest I'd like Leila to have seen all this and been part of it. It is ridiculous of course, but it's apparently a common feeling. I suppose most characters in books are bound to be derived from the author's own experience, but the feeling that you'd like your characters to be with you is a strange one. Not one I've ever had before. But I can't help but feel that young Leila, who you've read all about, would be happy. She wouldn't like the city, and it might freak her out a little, but if she was here, sitting opposite me in this cheap diner, I think she would smile.

Stupid.

Talking about a fictional character like that. But I feel I know her, and if I've done a good job you should feel you know her too. She's responsible for all this, so keeping her in my thoughts, just at this moment, cannot be a bad thing.

Actually, I hope she would be proud.