

## Leila Chapter K

As it turned out, we only had one applicant. I felt really let down by the lack of interest and I spoke with a friend, who runs an accounting business locally and is used to the hiring process, about whether we should re-advertise to try to attract someone from the London creative scene. She said that we should at least look at this candidate first. She offered to help with the interview.

Maybe we'd be lucky first time.

After all this writing, although I would now consider myself a creative person, I also feel that I am pretty normal. I'm nearly sixty, a bit grey around the temples and wider round the middle than I would like, but otherwise healthy and without any skeletons. I work hard. I support those around me. I give a bit to charity.

But when this character walked through the door, I realised just how square I really am!

She'd emailed over an application form of sorts. More a letter really. I was somehow impressed by the start of it. She'd written in an uncommonly formal style for a young, creative type, but it touched me.

*Dear Sir or Madam*

This seemed to be someone serious. She'd also enclosed some tiny pencil drawings, almost doodles in the corner of otherwise blank A4 sheets. I'd needed my full-strength reading glasses to see that they were actually exquisite, minute drawings of animals and people in quaint rural settings.

*Will you take a look?*

I'd hired a room up the road at the business park.

As she approached the door, she seemed to stop briefly, touching the sides of the door frame, and reaching up to tap the lintel above, almost like she was inspecting it for safety. She was certainly dressed for work, wearing a pair of the biggest Doc Martens you have ever seen. At least eighteen holes, maybe more. I didn't count, because moving up from the boots were a pair of combat trousers, a grubby red t-shirt, a multicoloured and extravagant scarf arrangement, and a topping of purple-tinted hair. Her skin was multi-pierced and mega-tattooed. I have to confess I was both a little overawed by her, and convinced that this would be a short interview and she would be on her way. A little scared even. Hopefully nothing would go missing.

She introduced herself.

'I'm Allie.'

She sat down and it was noticeable that her hair covered her bent head like a veil. She could see through it, but it was difficult for me to make eye contact. I did try, but maybe she liked it that way.

I explained as best I could what we were looking for.

'I can do that,' was all she said really, and I could not think of that much to ask her. She kept her eyes inclined downwards and didn't smile like I expected her to. She didn't seem really that bothered about the year's work that I might be offering her, nor the office and salary. I could tell Yvonne the

accountant was not impressed. There was an awkward silence.

‘I’ve been reading *Leila*,’ Allie said after a long pause, ‘I like it. The characters are good. Leila. The old man. It made me feel understood. Books can do that.’

I tried to regain the initiative.

‘Well, er, you said you would bring a portfolio.’

‘I did not. I said I would show you examples from my portfolio.’

I was unclear of the difference.

‘OK, well please could we see an example at least?’

She reached down into her small satchel and produced a single sheet of paper. She laid it on the table.

It was blank.

In her hand, she held a standard HB pencil. It slowly became clear that she was going to create the example there and then. She pulled nervously at her hair, which was adorned with a multitude of coloured plaits and odd accessories.

Then she paused.

‘The way I see it, Leila is a lost soul. Her face is that of an innocent teenager, but her eyes reveal a lifetime of pain and rejection. Her skin is almost perfect, but around the eyes are lines of anxiety, layered from years of screwing up her face in anguish. Her hair is usually well cared for, but she uses it as a veil and one day she will appal the old and delight the young with one of her styles.’

This monologue continued for several minutes as she rehearsed the character of Leila out loud in front of us. I must say that she seemed to nail my heroine almost completely. As she talked, she'd started sketching, almost explaining to herself in real time what to draw.

What started to emerge from the paper was just remarkable! Seemingly unrelated swirls of pencil seemed to magically assemble as if possessing a mind of their own. Facial features slowly gathered together, the few fronds of hair became a cartoon beehive. The mouth was full and almost sensuous.

And the eyes.

The eyes were endless, with repeating concentric circles of pencil adding to the depth.

And to the feeling that you could drown in them.