

## Leila Chapter L

Allie pushed the drawing into the centre of the table, and returned the pencil to the pencil compartment in the fold of her satchel.

‘That’s amazing Allie! Welcome to our team!’

Allie hadn’t seen much of a team.

*Team? What team? He’s a writer. I’ve read his stuff. Surely you do that on your own?*

She was unable to let questions go unanswered. An unmet question made her feel physically sick and the traffic started to build. She didn’t hesitate.

‘What team? I thought you were a writer?’

‘OK Allie, look. You need to understand something.’

Allie began to understand that he was somewhat patronising.

‘Look, quit talking to me as if I’m some kind of kid. If you want pictures, I can help. Because I’m pretty good. If you just want someone young to add to your so-called team, you can get anyone. What is your team anyway?’

He began to warm to her. He knew that in his own way he was trying to impress her, and he was impressed that she was not impressed.

‘You...you’re right Allie. Writing is pretty solitary and I like it that way. But I also like the business side of publishing, and to do that right you need some people around you. Like editors and translators and proof-readers. Not to mention lawyers and accountants.’

‘And illustrators.’

‘You’re right. Illustrators. Look, we’ve got a little setup down at the farmhouse. You might like it. Would you like to walk down with us? It’s a mile or so down the road. We could do brunch.’

He was still being a bit of a jerk, at least in Allie’s eyes, but her sixth or seventh sense for these things had already marked his card as being a good person. He had that peculiar sense of Britishness that meant much of what he said was conditioned by upbringing and class. Most people would judge him favourably by his accent and sense of style. None of that impressed Allie, and she was intent on making him realise that. She was more interested in *what* he said, and in particular *how* he said it. She would have to work with him, after all. But she felt comfortable in his company, almost as if they shared a history.

The accountant gathered up her laptop, and the three of them left the glass-walled office into the lobby and out into the crispness of a late November morning. The sun had crept out from behind the clouds and although not delivering discernible warmth, it filtered the light, which flickered in shafts through the clouds and onto the trees.

*Pretty village, thought Allie, Berwick isn’t it? Sounds familiar.*

As they strolled past the back of the *Please drive carefully through our village* sign, the countryside opened out. It was quintessentially English. Rolling meadows and thick low hedges. Friesians and Herefords dotting the fields. Mighty oaks and ashes on each field boundary. A distant tractor. And now, four or five hundred metres down the lane, the entrance to a farmyard.

Allie had seen farms before. They were usually constant works in progress, with pretty houses and barns mixed with dilapidated ones, and immaculate new machinery cheek-by-jowl with rusted hulks.

*Unbelievable. Real farms aren't like this. Too shiny. Too new.*

The farm was perfect. She didn't see how it could be a working unit. A couple of Range Rovers - not unusual for a farming environment. But shiny and new? *Not a working farm!* A large house and various outbuildings. Lots of pretty flowerbeds. A beautiful well-groomed labrador bounding out to greet them? *Not a working farm!*

'Please follow me Allie. I usually write in the house. I have an office up in the attic, and another one out here. Sometimes, depending on what I am working on, I will walk around the estate or up to the top of the hill there. It is great exercise, and I get ideas.'

Allie looked around. It was almost too beautiful. Life was not like that. They would call it *picture postcard*, like a lot of the surrounding villages. Villages that won prizes. Villages which required a lot from their residents. Sensible behaviour. Trimmed hedges and lawns. Newly washed cars, and children who said please and thank you. Not really her scene at all.

He could see her looking around. Her face betrayed her sense of wonder.

'It's pretty nice, isn't it?' he smiled.

'Yeah, it's not how I imagined a farm to be like!' she laughed nervously.

'Well I don't really have time to work on it. My brother helps out. He keeps things tidy and looks after the chickens and pigs and so on.'

'But the yard is like something out of a film set!'

'I must admit it's looking good today. It's all recycled too! Beyond there, it's all being re-wilded to attract bees and butterflies, but where it needs to be neat, he keeps it neat. We share a lot of the same ideas. I can be writing for a few days and hardly come out, but when I do I'll often find something new - some new shrubs planted, or some little thing he's built - and I always like it. In places he's taken down dilapidated old structures and re-purposed them into something new.'

'I love all that design and upcycling stuff.'

'Well, you ought to meet him sometime. He keeps himself to himself. His cottage is round the back. I'll introduce you.'

They reached the other side of the yard and approached a small wood-framed building with a high arched roof. It was connected to a barn one side and was open to the countryside at the other. There was a small clock set in the tower above a little self-contained courtyard.

‘So we had someone trying to help us with illustration, but he didn’t last long. He seemed to spend more time putting his studio together than actually doing anything in it. He also couldn’t draw very well. Went off to work at some animation studio in the end. Where computers do the drawing instead. We want something more basic Allie. More genuine. Here, this will be your studio.’

Allie pushed against the heavy wooden door which creaked as she walked through it. The room was well lit by a big window overlooking the rolling fields beyond, and there was a good sized bench arrangement with a couple of high stools and a professional-looking slanted draughtsman’s desk.

‘OK, OK, what's this?’ she said, spinning wildly as her senses shot out of control, ‘I can’t work in here! I really can’t! I need to get out!’

The flocked wallpaper and the concertinaed Roman blinds were like something out of Allie’s worst nightmares.

She started pulling back from the doorway.

‘Er sorry, what’s the matter Allie? You don’t like the room? We can move you! We can redecorate!’

‘I need white! I need blank! I can’t work with all that going on.’

‘Well, if you want to reconsider?’

‘I don’t want to reconsider, I just want somewhere to work. Somewhere to produce my best work. If you’ll let me gut this place, I can have it just how I want it.’

‘Well I suppose Nigel did have a certain taste for the flowery and the aesthetic.’

‘It can’t be both. Aesthetic is plain. It is predictable angles. It is lines.’

‘Well, I suppose they say beauty is in the eye of...’

Allie gave him such a look that he knew not to continue. She pulled at a corner of one of the pieces of wallpaper just above the dado rail. It had a dado rail! The paper pulled upwards and skyward so that the whole strip came tumbling down on top of her. She looked, panting, at the plain walls behind.

‘OK. OK. Calm down Allie,’ she said almost to herself, her breathing approaching normal, ‘we can make this work.’

The temporary traffic jam started to ease, and she started to imagine herself in this strange place. Strange county. Strange village. Strange house. But if he was as good as his word, he was going to pay her for creating beautiful things for his books. She was going to get paid for doing something that she would probably have done anyway.

What could be better than that?’

‘We’ll get someone in to redecorate Allie. We like to use recycled materials here, so everything is always a bit old-fashioned I’m afraid. Is that OK?’

‘I’ll do it myself if it’s all the same to you. Recycled is good.’

‘Absolutely. No problem. All good with me.’

He looked slightly nervous, which made her smile inside. Whilst she was glowing with pride and excitement, she couldn’t help an inner smile.

*Does he really know what he’s just hired?*

She looked around the room for a second time and tried to imagine it plain. Brown perhaps on the walls, or something to match the oak beams. Something neutral and soothing. She walked over to the window, and looked out. She could see the farmyard, but it was far too clean and uncluttered to be working. Not many distractions there. She strolled over to the other window, which looked over rolling countryside. A single wisp of smoke rising in the distance.

She imagined her desk just in front of it, with her standing, pencils poised.

*Perfect.*