

Leila Chapter M

Allie spent the first week stripping her new office.

She didn't mind the beams and the wooden windows sloping up to the roof - she recognised those as a product of their time. Having pulled at the wallpaper and removed the curtains, she was left with grey-brown streaked walls and a red tiled floor. She looked around and felt a calmness that had not been there when she had first walked in. The second week was spent painting. He'd lent her a pair of what he referred to as 'agricultural' dungarees, and although the denim was rough and itchy, they were at least five sizes too big for her so there was plenty of room and she didn't feel restricted. After nearly two weeks she had the setup she needed. Soothing walls in a light green tint. Plenty of display space. Two free-standing lights over her desk.

He'd managed to source a large drawing board from a friend of his in the village, which sat on top of the oak desk. It was tatty but it suited her. The board was easily A0 size in itself and would comfortably fit her sketch pads and the A3 or A2 she would use for the final designs.

My studio! Can't believe it.

He'd even offered to put a bed in there. Although she'd taken a room at the *Jolly Sailor*, they both knew she would prefer her own company in her own place. The studio had at one time been a holiday let, so it had the essentials.

She wanted to get started right away - he'd said something about meeting the publishers *in the next week or so*. But first, time to check out the farm. She slipped on her favoured tatty red dress and the Docs, laced half way, before strolling out into the farmyard.

Leila stood calmly at the doorway and looked around. Although she hadn't produced anything yet, she had a brief for what she needed to do, at least for the next year or so. And a target for the next week. They had asked her to produce a base drawing of *Leila*. Easy. More or less a self-portrait.

She closed the front door behind her and walked down the narrow passageway towards the yard. She could stand at the corner and see the comings and goings. But not a lot went on. His Range Rover came and went, and she'd already noticed a light on in one of the farmhouse windows from a very early hour. She remembered him saying that he generally worked during the mornings, and in his very British way he'd apologised for that, despite it not bothering her, or anyone else except perhaps his family.

Family? Does he have anyone else there?

If he was married he'd not introduced his wife. She'd read somewhere that he had been married and had a daughter. How old would she be? Had he mentioned a brother? Maybe.

She walked across the yard and paused at a wooden gate. Five-barred, traditional. She bent forward and leaned against the top bar. The whole of Sussex seemed to be spread out before her, and she found herself almost screaming at the beauty of the myriad hedgerows, the patchwork of colours, and the majesty of the trees laid out before her. At that time of the evening the air was still.

To her right was a huge field, neatly planted with something green growing in perfect rows. She knew that he didn't work this land himself. Perhaps it was rented to someone, or perhaps she was looking at a neighbour's plot. It was all tourist-poster pretty though. She thought of going back for a sketchbook to

try to capture it, but instead just tried to take it all in, ready to draw next time. Perhaps it could form a backdrop to some of the pen portraits or chapter headings?

She turned at the end of the track, and headed left up a small lane that led back to the farmhouse. She could see her little flat in the distance with the light she'd left on, welcoming her home. It actually felt like home. She was alone enough, but there were people around if she needed them. She had control over her life, her house. She was away from cities, from traffic, from noise. There was a bus she could get into town if she needed groceries, or he'd said he could take her during the afternoons.

Staring at a wispy line of smoke rising in the distance, for the first time in a long time, she felt calm.

And happy.