

Leila Chapter O

They have tried their best, but they look really out of place!

There's me, today sporting a faded denim look! I know it doesn't really suit me, but this is my place, and I can wear what I want. I'm certainly not going overboard on the smartness today. I want to put across an image of cool and casual creativity! Susan is, well, just Susan. She can't help being smart but she's also got a pretty nifty style thing going on, so she looks OK.

Then there's Allie!

'What have you done?'

I couldn't help it.

'What do you mean, done? I've just worked on my hair a bit!'

She'd certainly worked on her hair. It was yellow! And not a gentle shade either. It was a vivid yellow colour, weaved in and out with purple and green braided cotton which hung down in great plaits at the side. I don't know how to describe what she was wearing - perhaps she'd just topped off her usual leggings and t-shirt with a flowing red dress? Chiffon or something? I don't know. She looked great. Out of this world!

The publishing dudes had done their best. I even saw a couple of them dragging off their ties as they got out of the SUV! They had pulled out all the stops, and had even brought the MD and the finance director with them. Whether that was because we were about to make a ton more money, or whether they just fancied a trip out to the Shires, I didn't ask.

There was endless small talk as we sat around the table waiting for something to happen. Allie took no part in it. She'd inevitably brought a small sketchbook to the table with her and was apparently starting to draw the scene in front of her. The oak meeting table, six executives trying to make themselves feel comfortable, herself, Susan, and me.

I remember the MD turning to me and whispering, none too softly,

'What's she doing?'

'She's drawing. That's what she does.'

As no-one seemed to be in charge of the meeting, and it was their meeting after all, just on our turf, I waited for the MD to take charge. Eventually he did.

'Well, good morning everyone. We should get started. Has everyone got water?'

It was like having water was the most important part of the whole meeting. A couple of the execs sucked on their bottles like newborns, as if it was the right thing to do.

'Good. Well as you know we are here to go through some of the final drafts for the second editions. We have already worked on *The Goodnight Trilogy*, but we are also anxious to press ahead with *Garden of Eden* and especially with *Leila*. But perhaps we should start with some introductions.'

I always loathed this part. The junior executives there (a couple of creative guys, two finance people, and two from marketing or sales - I never did know the difference) always tried to be witty or clever. *We just need your names!* I was first in line, so I tried to set the tone.

‘Hi I’m Earl. I write books.’

‘I’m Tristan. MD of ManCave Publishing.’

The introductions passed in a *blah-blah* blur, and I realised that I had forgotten most of the names almost before I’d been told them. I have to confess it is a big failing and it sometimes bothers me. I know it doesn’t sound good, but I can’t help it. It certainly isn’t anything to do with memory - I could meet the same person ten years later (in a calm environment) and instantly recall their name!

The *blah blah* continued until we reached Allie.

Predictably she didn’t introduce herself. She just carried on scribbling. When she did look up, she looked towards me. I gestured towards her.

‘This is Allie. She has been with us for a couple of months now. She is our illustrator.’

Without a word, Allie launched into what she does best.

‘I’ve got some ideas for Leila,’ she said, waving her hand at a flipchart set up behind her.

‘We’re all products of our own environment. The uncaring adult world. The succour of the forest. The certainty and comfort of the shack.’

A couple of the young turks looked at each other uncertainly.

‘For example, this meeting. We are all, to some extent, in an alien world.’

She turned her sketch pad over to reveal a rough drawing of eight people, in suits, sitting around a table surrounded by trees and bushes. So far so weird. But the trees were like giants, almost human in form, bending over the table with branches outstretched, threatening the tiny figures seated at the table.

‘We can picture ourselves at the centre of an endless struggle against the odds. Leila, for example, needs stability, needs comfort, needs someone.’

There was visible discomfort around the table at what she was saying, and what she'd drawn. But no-one could deny that, in ten minutes, she'd captured an essence of the scene in the room.

‘Your readers need to feel the character.’ She drew out the word *feel*, stretching out her hands to the centre of the table and drawing them slowly back towards her chest, ending with a fist bump on her heart.

‘You have the words in front of you, and you can conjure up your own images. I’m just giving you a helping hand. Imagine a filmmaker, with all those resources and people and dollars at her disposal. I can see this book as a film. But for now, I have a pencil. This is what I do.’

She stood up. No-one at the meeting had said a word, bar introducing themselves. She gently pulled up

the cover page of the flipchart, revealing a complex pencil drawing of Leila seated on the stump on the deck of the shack. Characteristic flowing lines marking out her form, and exquisite detail of the surrounding scene. Knots in the wood of the walls. Trunks, branches, even individual twigs and leaves of the surrounding natural environment.

Two of the boys actually clapped.

‘That’s extraordinary!’ exclaimed the top man. ‘Allie, is it?’

‘Yeah...Allie,’ replied Allie uncertainly, ‘do you like it?’

‘Like I said, it is extraordinary.’

‘But do you like it?’ she almost shouted the words, ‘Extraordinary? That means out of the ordinary. Are you saying it is not ordinary?’

‘We love it Allie.’ One of the junior creatives, a woman perhaps two years older than Allie herself, spoke up. ‘Where did you study?’

‘In my bedroom,’ Allie replied, matter of factly, ‘bit of *YouTube*. Lots of practice.’

‘Amazing,’ muttered another from the far side of the table.

‘So where were we?’ said Tristan.

I think I stepped in next.

‘Well, as you can see, we were anxious to show you our proposals for the new editions. If you are properly relaunching, we think we need new covers, new frontispieces, chapter headers and so on. I hired Allie to make a start on just that. What do you think?’

‘I think the meeting is over!’ Tristan replied, with a giggle, ‘we can definitely use this, right Michaela?’

There was a smile and a nod from the other side of the table.

‘And even if we go colour on the front covers, black and white pencil drawings won’t change production costs. Am I right?’

He turned to Paul who was the only one not to have removed his tie. There was a note of triumph in Tristan’s voice, and a general hum of agreement from round the room. Allie picked out an apple from the bowl in front of her with her left hand, and carried on sketching with her right.

I was secretly delighted with the way things had gone. These meetings in my experience were often doomed to disappoint, because each person tended to feel they had a viewpoint and had to speak. Allie had totally hijacked that process! Although I need these people to turn my random jottings into money, I also resent them for their disinterest in the reality of what I am doing. I am pouring my heart out on a daily basis! This is not a job! It is my life. And now it is Allie’s life too. *What a hire! What a girl!* Or should that be *What a woman!* I don’t know any more. I looked out after her as she almost ran off towards the studio. She had something in her head.

Let her get on with it!

There followed another half hour or so of discussion. Important things like deadlines and publishing schedules. There was actually no pressure on me. I'm on the first stages of my twenty-second novel. It's set in a country town and deals with a struggling author and an autistic teenager who come together to produce extraordinary things. Just a few ideas at the moment, but I'm optimistic.

I actually love this stage of a project, when I just sit down each day not knowing what will emerge onto the page. A thousand words, that's all. I can often do that in half an hour and then I wonder what to do for the rest of the day! A walk. Some fixing around the farmyard perhaps. I love tending to the lawns - I have a wonderful ride-on mower that keeps me busy for hours. The walks often throw up ideas. Anyway, right now, no pressure on me. The focus is on getting the drawings done.

I don't even know if Allie feels pressure. She just seems to feel passion. For the project. For the characters. I know she will work to her own deadlines. I just hope that hers match ours. I know to my cost that to push her would not be useful. I once told her that I wanted to show my brother one of her sketches and wondered if she might have it finished by the next day. Oh my word! She started scribbling onto it right in front of me, and before I knew it she'd ripped it into several pieces and flung it on the floor!

Best not to push her.

As the meeting drew to a close, Allie returned and sat down, starting to draw feverishly on the next page in her pad. One of the young executives sidled up to her and sat down. She noted his presence, but did not acknowledge it.

'That's amazing Allie. You're unbelievably talented.'

'Thanks,' she said without looking up.

'I'm Lee. Boyfriend?'

Maybe this was London-speak or something, but I saw her shudder in response. I had the feeling it might not end well.

'Or girlfriend, maybe?' He giggled slightly and gurned at one of his young colleagues as he politically-corrected himself.

Allie continued to do the two things she was best at. Not looking up was one. Drawing was the other. As he spoke, she turned over to a new page, and started sketching. She glanced up at him two or three times. He was still sitting there, stupidly expecting an answer from her, but he clearly didn't know how to progress his enquiry any further. Like a puppy expecting a treat or to be taken for a walk, he sat there whilst she drew, somewhat open-mouthed.

She grunted something and shoved the paper over towards him.

He studied it for two or three seconds, then got up sheepishly and almost ran from the room, squeaking slightly as he left.

On the paper was unmistakably his face, on top of a body that had been mangled, almost every bone

bent and broken tortuously out of shape, blood forming a huge pool around it.

The face contorted in the most unspoken, silent, terror and agony.