

SYNOPSIS

Let's suppose you are a heartbroken woman trying to get over the pain of a failed relationship. You've always wanted to see the world. What do you do? Perhaps you would do what Sarah does: travel alone to Dublin and leave your worries behind. She wants to start from scratch, to forget about it all; to enjoy the lush green countryside, the Celtic music, the famous pubs. However, her life turns upside down when she finds herself living under the same roof as Daniel, a handsome yet stubborn Irishman.

Both Daniel and Sarah have their reasons for not falling in love, but love has other plans.

Things become more complicated because love affairs are prohibited between housemates. This is an unbreakable rule that also applies to the three other residents: a shameless womanizer, an absent-minded musician and a new female best friend, intrusive and meddling. It's a fun and exciting intercultural household for Sarah to adapt to! And as if that wasn't enough, she also has to deal with Daniel's heated misunderstandings, with an insistent ex-boyfriend and some compromising situations with a very sexy Frenchman.

This is a new life in Dublin and there is certainly a lot to love!

CHAPTER 1

"Welcome to Dublin."

The welcome came over the loudspeakers as soon as the plane landed, and Sara unfastened her seatbelt with impatient fingers. She breathed out, filled with a mixture of apprehension, weariness and sadness. Barely past her mid-twenties, she was going to step onto European soil for the first time. She was finally going to become acquainted with the ancient continent she had fantasized so much about in the novels she devoured. What she wanted most was to repair her broken heart after what had happened with Antonio, to start over again surrounded by the greenery of Ireland.

"Greenery?" she wondered, disillusioned, as soon as she had left the airport and caught a glimpse of the bleak surroundings. "More like grayness." The sunset, weighed down by black clouds, frigid gusts of wind and an incessant rainfall that spread in all directions, wasn't exactly the cordial welcome Sara had hoped for. But, truth be told, nothing about the past forty-eight hours had been cordial. She never imagined she would hurriedly leave Chile. She had only long enough to say good-bye to her parents, whose worried faces reflected their opinion, repeating a thousand times that her going off to Ireland was a huge mistake.

Sara replayed in her mind the whole argument with Antonio, and as she rolled her luggage toward the taxi stand, her eyes filled with tears. She felt so alone! And the worst part was that now she really was alone. She didn't know anyone in Dublin, neither family nor friends. All she had was the hope of a new beginning and a piece of paper with an address written on it, which she clung to for dear life.

The arrival of an empty taxi made her swallow her tears. She held out the address to the taxi driver and, twenty minutes later, found herself in the front yard of a narrow red house with a pointed roof while the darkness surrounded her and rain mercilessly pelted her and her luggage. As fast as she could, she rolled the suitcase to the front door and rang the bell.

No answer. She rubbed her hands together and blew on them to heat them up. She rang a second time. Nothing. Her teeth chattering, she peered through the stained glass windows of the front door. She couldn't make out anyone, but a light was on, so someone must be there. Lord, at least she hoped there was; if not, she didn't know where else to go.

She knocked and, after a minute that seemed like an eternity, the door finally opened.

"Hello?" said a beautiful brunette of about her age, half greeting her and half inquiring.

"*Hola*, I mean, hello. I'm Sara and. . ."

"You speak my language," the young woman interrupted, switching to Spanish with a Central American accent. "Are you looking for one of the boys, Sara? Because no one is here; they all went out."

"No, actually, I came about the room for rent. I reserved it a few days ago."

The young woman shook her head in unequivocal negation.

"That's impossible; there must be some error. The ad clearly says we rent only to men. Better luck next time," she said, starting to shut the door.

Sara's stomach tied up in knots as she imagined herself looking for a place to stay somewhere else, in an unknown city, in the middle of the rain and darkness.

"Stephen Brennan gave me the address!" said Sara hurriedly. "He told me to come here."

The young woman opened the door again and studied her, frowning.

"Stephen? He told you to come? Are you sure?"

"Yes, he gave me the address. I came straight from the airport."

The young woman looked at Sara's luggage, which was collecting water, forming an enormous pool. When she saw that its owner didn't seem to be in much better shape than the luggage, her expression softened.

“Come in while we clear up this misunderstanding.” She opened the door and gestured to a spot near the entrance. “If you like, you can leave your things there. I’m Fran, by the way.”

“Thanks, Fran.” Sara obeyed, taking off her coat. She suddenly sneezed several times.

“You’re drenched. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

She followed Fran to a spacious wooden kitchen. She didn’t much care for coffee; still, she was willing to swallow anything that might raise her body temperature by a couple of degrees.

Her hostess put on water to boil.

“How do you know Stephen, Sara?”

“Actually, I don’t know him, at least not personally. I’m going to teach at the same university he does, Spanish classes, and he was my contact for arranging all the paperwork. He was very kind in recommending somewhere to live; he did not need to do it.”

“Yes, he’s kind when he wants to be; at least when he can make the effort to listen. I’ve told him a thousand times that the room isn’t available to women. Sometimes what I tell him goes in one ear and right out the other. Men!”

“Are you his girlfriend?” Sara guessed, from the annoyance and familiarity she heard in Fran’s voice.

“Yes. Let me call him and see what we can do.” Fran dialed a number and started speaking in English. “Stephen, it’s me. Sara, the girl you gave this address to, is here. Yes, but I told you we would rent the room only to a man. What? But I told you a thousand times!. What? No, it has to be right now! At least speak to her! What do I care if you’re in a meeting? No, Stephen. . . don’t you dare hang up on m. . . Hello? Hello?”

Fran suddenly slammed the phone down on the table. Sara didn’t dare breathe; she didn’t know what to say.

“Always the same thing!” complained Fran, exhaling a weary sigh. “I’m sorry, Sara, but you can’t stay here. I’d be very happy to rent you the room, but it isn’t up to me. It’s up to the boys.”

“But maybe I could speak to them, somehow convince them,” said Sara, feeling her throat close up.

“Don’t waste your time. You wouldn’t be the first one to try it and fail. I’m sorry, Sara, I wish I could help you, but I’m afraid you’re going to have to go someplace else.”

Sara agreed quietly, feeling her eyes fill with tears. "I understand," she said in a hoarse voice. "It's just that I don't know where to go. I don't know anyone in this city. Stephen was the only contact I had."

"You can go to a hotel," suggested Fran, observing Sara sympathetically.

"Yes, of course, that's what I'll do. . ." Her voice was about to break. "It's just that, well, I didn't feel like being alone today. . ." She remembered how alone she was. She thought of Antonio, of her uncertain future, and she couldn't hold back a pair of silent tears. "Fran, excuse me, you barely know me and here I am crying in front of you. It's just that the past two days have been the worst of my life, and all I want is a warm bed, a place to sleep and to forget about everything for a while."

Fran gave her a sad look.

"Don't tell me, problems of the heart, right?" When she saw Sara agree, Fran went on. "I'll bet some man cheated on you and broke your heart."

It hadn't happened quite like that, but, yes, her heart was broken, so Sara just replied. "Something like that."

"Well, what woman hasn't been in that situation? You can't imagine what a state I was in the first day I arrived in this city, and all because of a wretched man. . ." Fran seemed lost in thought a few minutes, lost in her memories; then she looked up with a kind expression. "Look, Sara, out of female solidarity, I don't have the heart to tell you to leave right now. If you want, you can stay in the room for tonight, but you'll have to leave tomorrow."

"Really?" Sara asked, filled with gratitude.

"Yes, but just for tonight. Daniel isn't here, so there won't be any problem with him, and I doubt the others will be back today."

Sara felt like hugging her. She accepted the marvelous offer without any hesitation and began to feel a little better.

Now feeling a bit more like herself, she sat at the table drinking coffee. Sara learned that four people lived in the house: Armando, from Italy; Fran herself, from Venezuela; and Colin and Daniel, from Ireland.

"This house is marvelous," Sara observed, gazing around her.

"It is. Spacious, well located and in one of the best neighborhoods in Dublin, but you can't imagine how expensive it is. To tell you the truth, everything in this city is quite expensive, but especially around here. That's why we need to rent the open room right away; otherwise, the four of us will have to make up the difference out of our own pockets."

"Then why aren't you willing to accept women?"

Fran sighed.

“It’s all Armando’s fault. He got himself into a mess with the last renter and it poisoned the atmosphere. Finally the girl left, though it was his fault, since he’ll sleep with anything that moves. That’s why, no more women, to avoid risks. It’s strictly forbidden to get involved with anyone else in the house.”

Sara smiled sadly.

“I doubt very much there would be any risk with me. Believe me, Fran, the last thing I want now is more romantic problems.”

“Do you feel like talking about it? You can tell me about it, if you want.”

“Thanks, but I’m not ready to discuss it yet. So, how long have you been in Dublin?”

“Almost eight months. I had originally planned to stay for three, but I fell in love,” Fran said enthusiastically.

“With Stephen, right?”

Fran blinked. “Yes, of course, with him too, but especially with the city. It has some lovely places and is filled with greenery everywhere.”

Fran told Sara that when she first arrived in Dublin, things hadn’t exactly been easy. She couldn’t find any work in her profession as an accountant, so she waited tables in a restaurant. She missed everything about Venezuela, especially her mother and girlfriends, but fortunately she had found a new family in her housemates.

“Sometimes they drive me crazy with their jokes, it’s true,” said Fran, “but Armando, Daniel and Colin are fantastic, and I adore living with them.”

Fran described the domestic routine as a whirlwind of laughter, recitals and group outings, which made Sara wish all the more that she could be accepted into the house. The building itself was lovely, the available room was inexpensive and cozy, and the relationship among the housemates was fantastic, according to Fran. And Fran herself was the most charming and outgoing person Sara had ever met. Yes, this house was the perfect place for a new beginning. . . if she could only stay.

The next morning, to thank Fran for her hospitality, Sara invited her to breakfast at a nearby restaurant.

“I adore this place!” said Fran, taking the last sip of her coffee. “I hadn’t been here in a long time. The last time was with Armando and Daniel, before going to a recital of Colin’s.”

“Colin is the musician, right?”

“Yes, the musician. Stephen doesn’t really like me to go out with them,” she added in a confidential tone. “I imagine he doesn’t like his girlfriend being the only woman in a house with three men.”

“That explains why Stephen told me the room was available for me.”

Fran tilted her head. “You know what? After thinking through this more, I think it’s a good idea for you to live with us; after all, we need to rent the room right away. And I think you’d fit right into the house dynamics. Also, I don’t know about you, but I sometimes feel the need to talk to another woman. So much testosterone around can be overwhelming.”

Sara smiled hopefully. “I would love to stay, but what about the others? Do you think they’ll agree?”

“Colin and Armando won’t mind in the least. The real problem is Daniel. Don’t misunderstand me; he’s charming, but he’s also as stubborn as a mule. When he gets something into his head, there’s no way anyone can change his mind.”

“Then I don’t see any sense in talking to him.”

“Hmmm. . . no, I guess not, talking with him wouldn’t accomplish anything, but if we take another approach. ” Fran sat pensive, then a mischievous smile flitted across her face. “Even Daniel, as stubborn as he is, has his weaknesses. I’ve thought of something we can do.”

“Are you sure, Fran?” Sara asked dubiously.

Fran smiled, unconcerned. “Of course, leave it all to me. You just worry about making yourself beautiful tonight when we go out partying.”

Illuminated by the filtered sunlight flooding through the windows, Sara found the house even more beautiful than it had been the night before. It had two stories; on the upper floor were all the bedrooms, while downstairs were the living room and kitchen. The living room had soft armchairs perfect for cuddling in front of the fireplace on rainy days. The kitchen was luminous and made entirely of wood, with a spacious window looking out over a beautiful interior garden. The best part wasn’t that the house was so close to the university that you could walk there; no, the best part was that she had found a friend in Fran. They had spent the night chatting and Sara already felt as if she had known Fran all her life. And how she needed a friend, right now! She hoped she could convince this so-called Daniel; she hoped it with all of her soul.

At eight that evening, she came downstairs and went into the living room, where Fran waited, sheathed in a short dress and stiletto heels. Sara worried at once that her simple jeans and coat would not be up to the occasion.

“I’m ready,” she said insecurely.

Fran’s critical look confirmed her fears. “It will have to do. Incidentally, Colin has arrived, so no more Spanish for us. When the boys are here we speak only English, so we can all understand each other.”

“No problem, I can get by in English.”

“Great! Then I’ll call Colin right now.” Fran switched languages. “Colin! Colin! Come meet Sara!”

The lazy footsteps of someone descending the staircase preceded the arrival of Colin, who sauntered into the room. He was wearing worn jeans and a big shirt, which made him look even thinner than he was. He didn’t seem much taller than Sara; she calculated that he must be about 5’9”.

“Colin, this is Sara,” said Fran. “She’s going to be our new housemate.”

Colin held out his hand. “Hi. Fran tells me you’re a Spanish professor.”

“That’s right, I’ll be teaching at the UCD. You’re a musician, aren’t you?”

“Yes, well, I can’t make a living at it yet, so in the meantime I also work in publicity. Did you just arrive from Dublin?”

“Yes, just yesterday. I came here straight from the airport. I didn’t realize there would be any problem with renting the room.”

“And there isn’t any. If Fran says she can convince Daniel, it means she can. Anyway, this house could use another girl and some more money, too, to be frank. Just the other day Armando and I were talking about it, so welcome. That reminds me, he and Daniel will be meeting us directly at the bar, so we’d better get going.”

The three of them left the house, headed for one of the downtown bars. The pub was spacious, built of wood, with a long bar where beer flowed endlessly. People of all nationalities were laughing and chatting in a variety of accents and languages while Celtic music and the smell of beer floated through the air.

The group was lucky enough to find a table right away, and Colin, following Fran’s instructions, went looking for Armando. A few minutes later, the Italian arrived: tall, slender and smiling. He was tanned, with thick, chestnut-colored hair and dark eyes. Something in the way he carried himself and in his confident way of moving led women’s gazes to linger on him a little longer.

“Hi, Fran.” Armando greeted her with a prolonged kiss on each cheek. “As lovely as ever. Colin tells me that you have a plan for sweet-talking Daniel.”

She crossed her arms. “I very much doubt our dear Colin used the word ‘sweet-talk,’ so don’t stretch the truth. Anyway, no one will be sweet-talking anyone; it makes perfect sense for the girl to rent the room and you know it. One more man and I would go insane; I have my hands full with the three of you. By the way, let me introduce Sara.”

Armando smiled at Sara appreciatively before also greeting her with two kisses. “Well, you have my approval. I’d have to be crazy to refuse to live with a woman as beautiful as you,” said Armando.

“Tha. . . thanks,” was all Sara managed to respond, a bit taken aback.

Fran looked at him sternly. “Must you always think with your lower head? Sara is going to be our housemate, houuuse-maaate, is that clear? You can’t get involved with her.”

Armando messed her hair playfully. “Take it easy, Fran. No need to get jealous. It was just a joke.”

“As if I could be jealous of you, you two-bit Don Juan! I have a boyfriend, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“I haven’t forgotten, but I can make you forget.” He curved his lips naughtily.

Fran burst out laughing. “I give up. As you can see, Sara, you’re moving into a madhouse.”

Sara smiled. She loved the camaraderie among the roommates.

“I don’t know how you plan to convince Daniel to let Sara stay,” Armando told Fran. “You know how pigheaded he is. Just the other day I asked if we could rent the room to one of the girls from work, and he straight out refused. He didn’t even care that if we don’t find someone, the rest of us will have to shell out the rest of the rent.”

“After that business of yours with Inga and the fuss she raised, Daniel doesn’t want the same problem again, but he will agree to let Sara stay if you promise not to come on to her,” Fran said.

“I can promise a thousand times, but I don’t think it will help much.”

“How about if I speak with him?” intervened Sara. “Maybe if he meets me, he’ll realize there isn’t the slightest risk of my getting involved with you, Armando. Not in a million years.”

Armando burst out laughing. “I think that’s the most radical snub I’ve ever had.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say it that way,” Sara apologized, blushing. “It’s just that I can’t even think about having a relationship with anyone at the moment. . .”

“She has a broken heart,” Fran explained. “Her boyfriend cheated on her.”

Sara thought it best to clarify immediately that things hadn’t exactly happened that way, but Armando spoke up before she could.

“Wow, I’m so sorry to hear it, but maybe if you tell Daniel about that, it will soften him. He always wants to help the whole world. He might seem rough on the outside, but in fact he has the heart of a grandmother.”

Fran agreed enthusiastically. “That’s an excellent idea, Sara. Just strike up a casual conversation with him, and then mention in passing what has happened to you, and that you’d like to live in the house. He won’t be able to say no.”

Sara was dubious because the plan verged on manipulation, if it wasn't that directly, but her desire to stay outweighed her qualms. "And how can I approach him without being too obvious?"

Armando smiled. "Just leave it to me. You go to the bar and I will arrange a 'casual' encounter between you two."

Fran looked at him dubiously. "Daniel never goes up to an unknown woman at a bar. If that's what you have in mind, I can tell you right now it won't work."

"Want to bet, my dear Fran? But if I win, you have to give me something in exchange."

"Ask whatever you like," she said confidently. "You're going to lose anyway."

Armando smiled wolfishly. "That's what I was hoping you'd say. Just watch a professional and take a lesson." The Italian walked away from the girls, making his way amid the people in the bar, toward the table where Daniel was sitting.

"I thought you were coming with Fran and Colin," Daniel commented when he arrived. "Did you find them?"

"I don't see them anywhere," said Armando, looking away. "I don't think they've arrived yet. Don't worry, they must be on their way. In the meantime we can always kill time with those two." He gestured with his beer glass toward two blondes a couple of meters away.

Daniel shook his head wearily. "Not again, man. You know I don't come to bars for that. When are you going to stop bugging me to pick up chicks with you?"

"OK, OK. I don't see why you're so closed to the subject. Even when women come up to you, you give them all the brush off. Hey, how long's it been since you got laid?"

"That's none of your business. Let me remind you that I'm not interested in getting involved with anyone at the moment. I'll be leaving for Australia in a couple of months, and the last thing I need is to complicate things by starting a relationship."

"Oh, man, you're talking like a teenage girl. Who said anything about a relationship? I'm just talking about getting laid. You're not choosing the mother of your children, you know. Getting laid is just sex. It's nothing more than that."

"Maybe for you it is, but I'm not like you."

Armando looked at him mischievously, like someone who has just discovered a juicy secret. "Well, well. I never would have pegged you for a romantic. So that's why you don't want to meet anyone. You're scared to death that a woman might break your heart."

“Stop talking nonsense.” Daniel calmly took a sip of his beer. “I’d just rather be alone, that’s all. And if you want to change my mind, you might at least pick a woman who’s really attractive.”

Armando smiled to himself. His friend had just offered him, on a silver platter, the opportunity to put his plan in motion. “What can you tell me about her?” He gestured toward Sara. “That woman who’s talking to the barman.”

Daniel looked at her, thinking that, for once in his life, Armando was indicating good taste. He guessed, from her dark brown hair and dark eyes, that she must be a foreigner. Young, not too tall, with a smiling face and curves in all the right places—the sort of natural beauty he liked so much. Lovely, yes, she was lovely.

Armando’s voice interrupted his reverie. “Well, are you going to talk to her or just stand here looking at her like a fool?”

“No, I’m not going to talk to her.”

“And why not? Isn’t she attractive enough for your majesty?”

“Absolutely. She has a great body and an angelic face.” Daniel turned to look at her again. “And lovely, dreamy eyes.”

Armando looked at him mockingly. “Dreamy eyes? Come on, Romeo! If that’s what you notice in a woman, no wonder it’s been so long since you got laid. If you think she’s so attractive, why the hell don’t you go up to her?”

Daniel rotated the glass with the last remnants of his beer. “What for? As I said, I’m not interested in meeting anyone. I don’t want any woman interfering with my trip to Australia.”

“Man, you aren’t going to marry her. Just buy her a beer.”

“I don’t see the point of starting something I can’t finish, so no.”

Faced with this staunch refusal, Armando looked at him defiantly. “I don’t suppose you’re worried she’ll reject you, are you?”

“It isn’t that.”

“Yes, it’s not that, so go talk to her. Or are you chicken? Cluck, cluck, cluck.” Armando started clucking in his face.

“I’ve already told you that isn’t the case.”

“Cluck, cluck, cluck. . .”

“You can make a fool of yourself all night,” said Daniel, somewhat miffed. “I’m still not going to do it.”

Armando fell silent and studied him closely. Finally he proposed gravely. “If you buy that girl a beer, I’ll stop insisting you pick up chicks with me.”

Daniel lifted his head, interested. “Are you serious? No more pressure?”

“Dead serious. I’ll leave you in peace to devote yourself to celibacy from now until you leave for Australia, if that’s what you want.”

“Really? Just one beer with her and you’ll leave me in peace?” Daniel narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Hmmm. That’s too good to be true. It doesn’t sound like you.”

Armando responded with a calmness unusual for him. “Well, even if you are my best friend, you’re the worst sidekick in the world for picking up chicks, so what’s the point of insisting? One beer with her and you’re free. Agreed?”

Daniel hesitated a moment. “Agreed,” he said at last.

He thought he saw Armando repress an expression of victory, but he let it slide. Then he took a last drink of his beer and confidently headed over to meet Sara.

CHAPTER 2

“Is this seat taken?”

At the voice behind her, Sara turned and found herself inches away from some deep blue eyes. “Daniel.”

Armando had succeeded in getting him to approach her after all. Her stomach churned, but she managed to respond calmly. “Yes, the seat is free, please sit down.”

He nodded briefly and sat next to her on the tall, dark wooden bench. The seat was too small for a man of his large size and weight, so he settled in by stretching out his legs. He was wearing blue jeans and a flannel shirt that tensed up at the shoulders, hinting at a strong, wide back. His short blond hair, gently waved, accented his Irish air, as did the friendly expression on his face.

“I’m Daniel,” he smiled, apparently aware of the poorly disguised feminine inspection.

“Sara.”

She smiled to herself instead of speaking again, since she was nervous and the words didn’t come out. Luckily she saw that Daniel was willing to carry on the conversation.

“You’re a foreigner, aren’t you?”

“Yes, from Chile.”

“That’s a long ways away. Are you visiting Dublin?”

“Not exactly visiting, since I’ll be staying in the city for five months.”

“That’s quite a while. Did you come here to study?”

“Actually, to work; I’m a Spanish professor,” she explained. “I’m also here to see as much as I can; it’s the first time I’ve visited Europe.”

“Then you won’t have any lack of things to see; the continent is full of interesting places. Did you have any place special in mind?”

“Paris,” she blurted out. “And then we’ll see.”

Daniel smiled and looked at Sara’s glass, which was nearly empty.

“I lived in Paris for a while. If you’d like, I’ll buy you another beer and fill you in on seeing the city.”

Sara smiled back at him, even more nervous than before. Was Daniel flirting with her? Was that Armando’s plan? She wet her lips and responded, a bit self-conscious. “A beer sounds good, thanks.”

Daniel ordered two pints and they started talking about the City of Lights. He described to her places that didn’t show up in Lonely Planet, but were tucked away down narrow cobblestone streets. Sara, hanging on every word, began to relax as they chatted. Such an interesting and charming man couldn’t be as stubborn as they said!

“It sounds like you made the most out of your exchange semester in Paris,” she commented. “Did you choose to live in that city for any particular reason?”

Daniel took a sip of his beer before responding. “Yes, I chose Paris because of my career; I’m an architect. You can learn a lot there. And also because of the French, so I could get used to living among a different language.”

Sara nodded. “I understand perfectly. That’s one of the reasons I chose to come here. It was between Dublin and London, but I finally decided on Dublin.”

“Smart girl.” Daniel smiled again, sending shivers down Sara’s spine, which surprised her, since she no longer felt nervous. “Did you take into account that it might be better to go to the United States, since it’s closer?”

She immediately shook her head. “I always wanted to come to Europe. I was dying to start seeing this part of the world.”

“I take it, then, that you like to travel?”

“I love it! I’ve traveled all over Latin America, but always for short stays; this is my first long trip.”

“I’ve never been to America; I’d love to go. Where have you traveled?”

Daniel studied her discreetly while Sara spoke about some of her trips through Latin America. He was riveted by the exotic scenery she described with such enthusiasm, but he was even more intrigued by the way the girl’s face lit up when she described them. She really was lovely, he thought, as he watched her laughing and drawing the edge of a pyramid in the air.

“In less than a year, I’ll be leaving for Australia,” Daniel told her, as he remembered it himself. “I’m planning to travel around the country for eight months.”

“Wow! Eight months! That’s a long trip.”

“It is, but it’s not my first long trip. I spent ten months traveling around Southeast Asia.”

Sara leaned toward him, intrigued. “And how do you manage to travel so much? Are you a millionaire or something?”

Daniel laughed at the notion. “I wish. Actually the trip to Southeast Asia is much cheaper than people think. The airfare is expensive, but being there is very cheap. That’s why all I do is work, so I can save up enough money, and then I’m off.” He breathed in deeply. “There’s nothing like packing your backpack and taking off to see the world.”

Sara looked down and he had the feeling she had suddenly grown sad.

“Excuse me, did I say something wrong? You’re very quiet.”

She flashed him an imperceptible smile. “No, you didn’t say anything wrong. It’s just that not everyone thinks like you. Some people don’t understand the longing some of us have to travel, and they’re always trying to clip our wings, to keep us in a cage. It’s as if, for those people, the only sensible thing to do is follow the traditional path.”

“The traditional path?” he repeated, not understanding. It was obvious he had brushed up against some open wound in Sara’s life.

“You know, what everyone does,” she answered in a monotone. “Study, work, get married and always live in the same place, in the same city, in the same country. Buy thousands of things, mortgage your freedom to pay for it all. That path isn’t for everyone. At least it’s not for me.”

“Each of us can choose the path we want, don’t you think?”

“It’s not so simple. Sometimes the people around you pressure you to go in a certain direction, and it’s exhausting to go against the tide. You end up all alone,” she added, lowering her voice. “But it also isn’t right to do something you’re not convinced of. What worries me is that, if you do the same thing as everyone else just to be like them, you might waste your whole life, and your existence might be reduced to working and paying the bills. And no one cares if you ignore important questions about whether all of that’s for you, and if it is, when and with whom you want it. . . or questions about whether there might be other possibilities. . .”

“What other possibilities?”

Sara looked up dreamily. “Who knows? To travel, see the world, fall madly in love, take the time to look for and find what you really want out of life. Didn’t you ever

feel like you had an emptiness inside? As if something were missing? Sometimes I feel like, for a long time, I was living the life others expected of me. . .” She looked at Daniel’s serious face and added. “I’m sorry, I must be boring you. Why don’t we talk about something else?” She bit her lip and breathed deeply to get the courage to bring up the issue that was troubling her. “In fact, there’s something I wanted to ask. . .”

“Please don’t apologize,” Daniel interrupted. “No need to change the subject, and I’m not at all bored. On the contrary, it’s been a long time since I’ve had a real conversation. I was just reflecting on what you said, and I think I know what you’re talking about. I had that feeling of emptiness before I left for Asia. I had a great job, was earning a lot of money, and I was what you might call comfortable in life, but I wasn’t happy. I sometimes thought about traveling, but then I told myself it would be foolish to leave a job that paid so well.”

“So how did you make up your mind to leave?”

He tilted his head, remembering. “It was after my boss assigned me to a project with a new client. It was a very important commercial building, which would bring me lots of responsibilities, at least for the first two years. Both the salary and benefits I would have at the firm would improve quite a bit over time. Everyone told me how happy I should be.”

“But you weren’t happy, were you?”

“Not at all,” he acknowledged. “I imagined myself working like crazy, with no personal life and feeling frustrated. And then I realized that if I didn’t travel once and for all, I was never going to do it. Do you understand?”

“More than you can imagine,” Sara said in an enigmatic tone.

Daniel sensed there was some reason she wasn’t telling him everything, so he didn’t want to push her. Instead he just said. “To make a long story short, I quit, went to Asia, and discovered that roaming the world with my backpack was the best decision I could have made. I had never before felt so. . .”

“Alive,” she completed his thought, smiling.

“Yes, that’s how I felt.” He opened his eyes wide, impressed that she could guess what he was going to say. “Exactly like that.”

He looked at her with renewed interest. When had he felt so connected to a woman this soon after meeting her? As a matter of fact, never. Sara was lovely and captivating, and the two of them had so much in common. What if he asked her out? One part of him was loudly ordering him to do it, while another part warned him that it would be dangerous to get involved with someone before his trip to Australia.

He hesitated a moment, then made up his mind. He had never met anyone like her. He had to see her again.

“Where are you staying?” he asked, trying to sound casual. “I could take you to see the interesting sites around here. There’s a lot to see in Dublin.”

He felt disappointed when he saw Sara blush and look away. Was she going to say no? He hadn’t seen her rejection coming at all. Had the invitation been too fast? Should he have waited a little longer?

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “I can’t do this. You see, there’s something I haven’t told you, something I should have told you in the first place.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, frowning.

“Please don’t be offended; I just wanted to meet you first, and then ask you. . .” Sara fell silent and bit her lower lip, which just increased his anxiety.

“Ask me what? What are you talking about?”

“About the house; you see, I. . .”

The untimely arrival of Fran, accompanied by Armando, cut short Sara’s reply.

“Daniel O’Brien! I can’t believe you could be so damn pigheaded!” his housemate let loose angrily. “You told Sara no, didn’t you? Money doesn’t grow on trees, in case you haven’t noticed! We don’t all earn as much as you do.”

It was nothing new for Fran to unleash her explosive Latin character. What was new was her scolding him for something he knew absolutely nothing about. He looked gravely at Fran and asked. “So you already know Sara?”

“Didn’t she tell you? But. . . but. . . you looked annoyed, so I thought. . .” she stammered. Fran sat there an instant, not knowing what to say, then turned to Sara in disbelief. “Didn’t you say anything to Daniel? You’ve been talking to him for nearly an hour and you didn’t bring up the subject? My Lord, you sure do take your time!”

Armando looked at Fran, shaking his head as if to say. “I told you so.”

“I warned you that you would ruin it, Fran. I asked you to wait and see what happened with Sara, but as usual, you ignored me.”

Ruin it? Daniel thought. What the devil were they talking about? And how the hell did Armando also know her name was Sara?

His face became rigid as he turned to them, guessing what was up. “Now, explain to me how it is you know my housemates.”

“I met Fran last night, after getting in from the airport,” Sara explained with woeful eyes that didn’t move him in the least. “Stephen gave me the address and told me there was a room to rent in the house. I didn’t know the room was only for men. Last night I was tired and didn’t know where else to go. Fran was kind enough to let me stay at the house and. . .”

Daniel could feel the fury growing inside him, and he spun around to face Fran. “What right did you have to let a perfect stranger use the room without consulting anyone?”

“She’s not a stranger,” retorted Fran, holding her head high. “She’s a colleague of Stephen’s. I wasn’t about to turn her out into the street at that hour of the night in the middle of the biblical flood. Sara was drenched and alone; she didn’t know anyone in this city and, to make things worse, right after she arrived, she burst into tears because her boyfriend had cheated on her. Come on, Daniel.” She softened her voice. “No one with a heart would have turned her away, least of all you.”

Daniel felt disappointed with himself because, despite his anger, part of him felt happy knowing that Sara was, in fact, single.

“All right, she spent the night, but now she’ll have to leave,” he responded with wounded pride. “If you thought this farce the three of you staged would change my mind, you were sadly mistaken. I’m no idiot.”

“No one thinks you’re an idiot,” said Fran, “but yes, you are very stubborn. We just wanted you to meet her before you refused to rent her the room.”

“Well, now I’ve met her and my answer is still no.” He shot an angry look at Sara. “We can’t rent the room to a girl.”

“I understand the reasons for that rule,” Sara answered, trying to pacify him. “They told me about the problem with the last tenant, but I promise you nothing like that would happen with me. I didn’t come here to get involved with anyone, much less with Armando. . .”

“Thanks again,” Armando quipped sarcastically.

“What I’m trying to say is that what I want most now is to be at peace,” she went on. “I want nothing to do with any man right now. I just want to enjoy Ireland and my work, and to live in a beautiful place with young, friendly people. That’s all. I promise that if you accept me, we might even become friends.”

He seriously doubted he could maintain a platonic relationship with a woman as captivating as she was, so the answer was still no. It would be risky having Sara under the same roof.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not going to change my mind.”

“If what worries you is MY behavior,” Armando intervened. “I swear I won’t try anything. You can trust me.”

“Yes, of course, why not? You said something similar when Inga asked to rent the room.”

“There was no rule about getting involved with housemates then,” Armando defended himself. “It’s different now.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes. "And if it's different now, why are you so interested in having Sara stay?"

"Because we need the money," responded Armando honestly. "I think it's crazy for us to pay all the rent ourselves, especially if there's someone who wants to rent it."

"I can barely meet my expenses," added Fran, "much less pay more. Anyway, I want Sara to be our new housemate because I'm tired of being the only woman in the house. It would be great because she speaks my language, and we've already started to become friends."

Sara smiled affectionately and Fran returned the smile.

"Please, Daniel, you're the only one still opposing it. Colin agrees with us too."

Now he did feel like a total idiot. Even Colin had known about the farce they had staged to introduce him to Sara. The most humiliating part was that he had fallen right into the trap.

He was between a rock and a hard place. He thought that if he told Colin, Armando, and Fran about what had really happened with Inga, they would side with him. But he could never reveal it to them without poisoning the atmosphere in the house. Still, the price for keeping his silence would be to accept Sara. It was impossible for him to keep saying no without looking even more like a stubborn egotist.

"It seems you have everyone on your side," he told Sara coldly. "There's not much more I can say that hasn't already been said. Since the rest of you are in agreement, you can stay as long as you promise me you'll respect the rules of the house."

Armando nodded, Fran clapped her hands, and Sara's face lit up with a big smile.

"Seriously, Daniel?" exclaimed Sara. "You can't imagine how grateful I am for this!"

"Don't thank me yet. First, there will be no bringing men home to sleep in the room. If you get involved with someone, you'll have to do it outside the house."

"I already told you I won't," she started to say.

"I'm not finished yet," Daniel cut her off. "Second, no romantic involvements with your housemates."

"Understood. You have my word. Anything else?"

"Yes. You should deposit your rent without fail by the fifth of each month. I'll send you the details about the owner's account. First thing tomorrow you should transfer two months' rent, including the first month and the deposit, into his account."

"Done! Don't worry; I'll do that. And thanks so much for changing your mind! Can I buy you a beer to thank you?"

"No," he responded. "I don't want to interfere with your celebrating the victory of your joint plan. I'm going home now."

Armando slapped him on the back. “Come on, man, don’t be mad at us; stick around for a while.”

“I’m not mad,” Daniel spit out in a tone that contradicted his words. “It’s just that I’m tired. Good evening.”

He nodded imperceptibly in farewell and left the bar hurriedly. He rushed into the street, reproaching himself for having given in. He felt sure that Sara’s arrival at the house would only bring problems. It was impossible to not give in to temptation, living under the same roof with such a beautiful and vivacious woman. And it wasn’t exactly Armando he was worried might fall for her.

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, Fran took Sara to the university for a meeting with Stephen. She guided Sara to her boyfriend’s tidy office, then walked away, leaving them alone.

Sara was surprised when she saw Stephen for the first time. His dark hair and beard were cut impeccably short and his serious face had an expression of self-sufficiency. He immediately reminded her of her ethics professor at school and she thought it odd that Fran, as lively as she was, would have fallen for a man like that. Maybe it was true, after all, that opposites attract.

“I understand you’ll be enrolling as a student in the advanced English class in the mornings,” said Stephen.

“That’s right; I mainly enrolled to meet the requirements of the work visa. Since I don’t have a nationality in the European Union. . .”

“Yes, I know how it works. Fran also had to get a student visa in order to work. Here.” Stephen handed her an envelope with her teaching schedule. “All the subjects you’ll be teaching are in the afternoon. If you need any office supplies, ask any of the secretaries for them directly.”

Stephen explained the evaluation system and the academic calendar before ending the meeting. Then they left the office and walked toward the main exit, where Fran was waiting for them.

She tried to give her boyfriend an effusive kiss, but he dodged her, stepping back.

“Fran, you know I don’t like this kind of public exhibition,” said Stephen.

“Oh, darling, it’s no big deal. Are you coming with us downtown?”

“Impossible. I’ve got a lot to do.”

“Are you sure you can’t take a few minutes?” insisted Fran. “We haven’t seen much of each other lately.”

“You know that nothing runs smoothly if I’m not here.” He told her goodbye with a peck on the cheek. “I’ll see you later, OK?”

The girls left the campus and, twenty minutes later, were strolling down Grafton Street, the most important pedestrian walkway in the city. Though it was still early, there was a lot of movement. Colorful flower stalls adorned the entrances to boutiques and souvenir shops, while street musicians flooded the air with famous melodies.

Sara enjoyed strolling with Fran, but at the same time she felt guilty for having let her believe something that wasn't true, about her broken heart. She found the right moment to clear things up when they sat down to enjoy the pale rays of sunshine in Saint Stephen's Green, the main park in downtown Dublin. The cold was intense, but the peace of the morning and the green that was peeking out from the melting snow made it a good place to talk.

"Fran, there's something I've wanted to confess to you since that first day," said Sara. "The thing is. . ." She paused uncertainly. "While it is true that I've had my heart broken by a man, he didn't cheat on me or anything like that. I am the problem; it was my fault."

Fran blinked.

"You mean you cheated on your boyfriend and he left you?"

"Lord, no! Nothing like that. I would never be unfaithful, much less to Antonio. That isn't the issue."

"Then why do you say you're the problem?"

Sara sighed sadly. "Ever since I was a little girl, I have dreamed of seeing the world. To speak another language, live in another country, spend some time in Europe. Four years ago, I met Antonio and we fell in love, but he didn't want to hear anything about my leaving Chile, not even for a while. At first that didn't bother me so much, but last year we got engaged, and from there everything went from bad to worse."

"You got engaged!" Fran opened her eyes wide. "Then what happened?"

"Antonio wanted to set the date for our wedding, but I didn't want to until I had fulfilled my dream of traveling. I felt like, if I didn't do it first, I was never going to do it. . ." She gazed, crestfallen, at the grass poking out in the middle of the white. "Without telling Antonio, I applied for a position in Dublin, just to see what would happen. I didn't get my hopes up, but a week ago I got a letter from UCD offering me a last-minute substitute teaching position; they needed someone who could start immediately. . ." She sighed, shaking her head. "I didn't know what to do and I told Antonio about the job offer. He got mad and told me I was crazy to even consider the idea of coming here. We had a huge fight and he gave me an ultimatum: either I stayed in Chile, or we would break up. I told him he was being unfair, he couldn't decide it like that. . ." Her eyes filled with tears. "He got furious and left my apartment, slamming the door behind him. He never spoke to me again."

“And you decided to come to Ireland?”

“Yes, but not right away. For several days I tried to make up with Antonio. I called him a thousand times, but he cut me off every time. When I understood that he wanted nothing more to do with me, I decided to come. I couldn’t tell him good-bye; I don’t even know if he realizes I’m here,” she said, her voice fading away. “I wanted to tell you everything, to be sincere with you, but now I’m terrified you’ll think badly of me, of my having let you believe a different story in order to stay in the house.”

Fran smiled at her reassuringly. “Don’t be silly. I jumped to conclusions, but I don’t think badly of you. Instead, I think your Antonio is an idiot.”

Sara breathed out sadly. “You’d be the first to think so. Everyone around me agrees that he’s the perfect man, attractive, wealthy, hard working. . .”

“If he were as perfect as they say, you wouldn’t have left him or come to Dublin.”

“That’s exactly why I feel like the real problem is me. . .” Sara swallowed to disguise the embarrassment her confession was causing her. “Maybe there’s something wrong with me. Shouldn’t I feel differently with him, a man everyone says is so fantastic?”

“And by differently, you mean. . .?” Fran left the question incomplete, inviting Sara to explain herself.

“I don’t know. Feel content, radiant, passionate, madly in love. Wanting to always be with him. Wanting to tear off his clothes and jump on top of him and have sex like in the movies, which, by the way, I have never had, not with him or anyone else.”

“Then why did you agree to marry him?”

Sara exhaled with regret. “I don’t know. To tell the truth, I didn’t question it much. It was simply the next step. You know how the moment comes when you start talking about the future of the relationship? All our friends were at that stage, where they either got married or broke up, and I never thought about breaking up with Antonio. I mean, who thinks about ending a relationship with someone who’s basically perfect? It didn’t make sense, so when he proposed, I said yes without really thinking. Now I see that I acted too quickly; I was foolish for not taking that decision seriously enough.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Sara. There’s no one in this world who always makes the right decisions when it comes to love. Have you heard anything from Antonio since you arrived in Dublin?”

“No. Not a word.”

“Then you’re still together.”

“No, that isn’t true. He left my house and stopped speaking to me.”

“Yes, for less than a week,” Fran interrupted her. “That’s not a break up, it’s a fight. I’ve had several of those with Stephen and I’ve never considered it breaking up.”

Sara’s blood froze. Could she have misinterpreted things to that extent? Were they still together after all?

Fran saw her turn pale. “From the expression on your face, I can see that the idea hadn’t even occurred to you. You should speak with him, Sara, and find out if you’re still together. The sooner, the better.”

Sara put Fran’s advice into practice as soon as she got home that afternoon. She logged into Skype and, her fingers trembling, keyed in Antonio’s number. Her heart raced as she heard the dial tone.

“Hello?”

To hear him at last, after so many days, tied her stomach in knots. She breathed in deeply to get up courage.

“Antonio, it’s me.”

“Sara! How could you have left, just like that? Without saying anything to me, for God’s sake! What the hell were you thinking?”

“I didn’t call you to fight.” She tried to speak calmly. “Please don’t react like that.”

“And how the hell do you want me to react? You left without saying a word to me, to the other goddamned side of the planet! You abandoned me like an idiot! Just imagine what everyone must be thinking!”

She began to feel indignant. “You’re forgetting it wasn’t me who made the scene that night. You were the one who left, slamming the door behind you. I called you a thousand times so we could talk it over. I tried to patch things up before even thinking about buying the airplane ticket. Not once did you bother to answer my calls.”

“Because I’m fed up! Fed up with you putting me off on the subject of marriage. It’s as if what I want doesn’t matter to you in the least.”

“I could say the same thing about you,” she accused him. “You always knew perfectly well that it was my dream to travel and live abroad for a while, but you’ve ignored it all this time. I even asked you to come with me, and you always said no.”

Antonio snorted. “And why the hell should I want to trade everything I have for complete uncertainty? My whole life is here, my family, my friends. Do you think you can get a job that pays as well as mine just anywhere? Of course you can’t. I offered to go abroad with you, on vacation, every year, and you were the one who refused.”

“But it’s not the same thing, Antonio! They’re completely different experiences. How can you compare the freedom of picking up your backpack and soaking in the world with going on a two-week tour once a year? That’s absurd!”

“To leave everything just so you can go traipsing after sheep in Ireland, that’s what’s really absurd. Here I am building a good future for both of us, with money and stability. Didn’t you even stop to think about that before taking off?”

“That’s the future you want for both of us. Have you ever asked me what I want? No, never! What if I don’t want money and stability at this point in my life? And what if I don’t want a nine-to-five job? And what if I want to travel the world, even if it means not having much money for now?”

“Then you would be demented,” concluded Antonio harshly. “No sane person thinks like that.”

It was absurd to keep insisting on the point with him, thought Sara, feeling defeated. Antonio would never be able to understand her eagerness to discover the world.

“In any case,” he went on. “I suppose the reason for this call is to say you’re sorry and tell me you’re coming home right away, isn’t it?”

Fran was right. Antonio had considered their separation just another fight. But now that she was finally in Ireland, living her dream, she couldn’t return. She didn’t want to return.

“I’m sorry, Antonio.” Her firm tone of voice left no room for doubt. “I thought you had broken up with me. I’m sorry I misinterpreted things and came here as I did, but now I can’t return. I accepted the job at the university, to teach classes for the semester; that means I’ll be staying here for at least five months.”

“Five months!” he exclaimed, furious. “Are you mad? And where does that leave us?”

“I know it’s hard, but we can adapt.” She tried to calm him down. “After all, it’s not that long.”

“Not seeing each other for five months doesn’t seem that long to you?” She could hear in his voice the mixture of anger and incredulity.

“Not necessarily. You haven’t taken your vacation yet; you could visit me in Dublin. It would be only about two more months before you could come.”

“You know I’m working my fingers to the bone to get my promotion. You can’t ask me to leave everything and visit you.”

Sara breathed out wearily. All Antonio did lately was work, to make more and more money. She wasn’t the least surprised by his response. “Antonio, I need to have this experience. Don’t ask me to give up on a dream that I don’t know if I’ll be able to pursue later. I doubt I’ll ever have another opportunity like this one.”

“And what about what I need? What I want is to be with you, in our country, to get married and start our life together.”

“And why is what you want more important than what I want?” she spurted out without stopping to think. She regretted it as soon as the words came out of her mouth. The prolonged silence on the other end of the line confirmed what she already knew: she had put her foot in her mouth. All the way.

“Antonio, I’m sorry,” she apologized at once. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

“It seems you’ve forgotten you agreed to marry me,” he said resentfully.

“Yes, I agreed, but my goal was always to live abroad for a while before doing it, and you knew that. You were the one who assumed I was going to change my mind.”

“Forgive me, then, for thinking that my fiancée would be living in the same country as me,” he said sarcastically. “I’m sorry if I took it for granted that getting engaged to someone meant that person was going to stay by your side instead of running off to the other side of the world.”

“That’s not fair! You’re always making me feel guilty and I’m fed up with it!”

“And I’m fed up with waiting!”

A tense silence stretched across the telephone line.

“Sara, this discussion is useless. I demand that you come home immediately, do you hear?”

She made an effort to not show the frustration his demand triggered in her. “I’ve already told you I won’t be coming home for five months,” she responded in a measured tone. “This is an experience I need to have.”

Antonio let out a curse before putting forward all the arguments that occurred to him, to demonstrate to Sara that what she was doing was nonsense. When it was clear she wasn’t going to give in, he said with great reluctance:

“All right. You say you need to live this out before getting married, that you really want to stay there for five months. OK, stay in Dublin for that long, but not a day longer.”

Sara felt hope reviving inside her. “Thank you, Antonio. You can’t imagine how impor. . .”

“I haven’t finished yet,” he interrupted her. “As soon as your five months are up, we’re getting married. The party doesn’t matter; we’ll leave that for later. But as soon as you step off the plane, we’re getting married at the courthouse.”

Sara felt all the air rush out of her body. “That’s not very long from now. You can’t be serious.”

“I’m very serious. I’ve already waited a year, and I’m not waiting any longer. There’s nothing more to discuss.”

She reflected in silence for a moment. “It’s a big step, Antonio. You can’t ask me to tell you right now whether I want to get married in five months. I’ll need some time to think it over.”

“Perfect.” His voice contradicted what he was saying. “You think about it. You have a month.”

“But that’s not very long!”

“A month and not one day longer.”

His final words were a warning, and Antonio cut off the communication without giving Sara time to say anything. She should feel relieved that he still wanted to be with her, shouldn’t she? But she didn’t feel relieved; instead, she felt an enormous pressure in her chest.

She sat, lost in worry, until anxiety and fatigue caught up with her in the form of a splitting headache. She decided not to give the matter any further thought for the moment. She went down to the kitchen to take her mind off things and have something to eat.

“Want some supper?” Colin asked her when he saw her come in. “I’m cooking a stew.”

“Thanks, Colin. What’s a stew?”

“It’s a typical Irish dish,” he said, holding out a spoonful of food. “Taste it and tell me if it needs more salt.”

Sara lifted it to her mouth and stood paralyzed, holding back an expression of disgust. She struggled to swallow, putting on her best poker face.

“And what do you think? Does it have enough salt?” asked Colin, smiling.

Sara thought the salt was perfect. The problem was everything else.

“Hmmm. Yes, I suppose it does. It’s the first time I’ve eaten stew, so I really couldn’t tell you if it tastes right. Anyway, I’m really not that hungry,” she lied. “So I’ll pass, thanks.”

Colin served himself a heaping plate, and she sat down next to him with a cup of tea, too disheartened to fix anything. A few minutes later, Armando came down. He made a face when he saw the food.

“Yuk, you made stew again. You’d have to pay me quite a few Euros to get me to eat that rubbish again. How was your day, Sara?”

“Exhausting. I saw the university, prepared my first classes, and had a meeting with Stephen.”

“Oh, so you’ll be working with Fran’s boyfriend.” Armando shook his head as if he were sorry for her. “My sincere condolences. They say any woman who spends time around Stephen dies of boredom.” He looked at Colin. “Have you seen Fran?”

“She won’t be home; she said she was staying at Stephen’s today. Sometimes we have trouble getting together for supper,” Colin explained to Sara. “There are lots of nights when we don’t see Fran, since she stays at her boyfriend’s place, Armando goes out looking for women, Daniel leaves for his hometown, and I sometimes spend the night with Shannon, my girlfriend.”

Sara noticed Armando’s sports outfit. “It doesn’t look like a night out on the town for you. Are you going to work out?”

“Yes, to play rugby with Daniel. We’re in a league, and we’re in the middle of a major championship.”

When she heard Daniel’s name, Sara’s stomach did a little somersault. Antonio wasn’t the only one she should talk to. She wanted to apologize to her housemate for not having been straightforward with the truth when she met him.

“Is he still upset?” she asked Armando.

“Not so much. He’ll get over it.”

Daniel’s firm footsteps coming down the stairs cut the conversation short. When he came into the kitchen, he coldly nodded to everyone by way of greeting.

“Hi,” Sara said nervously.

“Good evening,” he responded, barely looking at her. “Are you ready, Armando?”

“Ready.”

Colin gestured toward the pot. “Have time to eat before practice? I made lots of stew, enough for all of us.”

Daniel exchanged meaningful glances with Armando, then responded, “Thanks, Colin, but we’re already running late.”

Sara’s stomach growled with hunger, making the cook turn and look at her curiously. “That’s odd, Sara. When you tasted my stew, you said you weren’t hungry.”

“Yes, well. I’m not very hungry,” she responded, blushing.

Armando laughed loudly as he left the kitchen. Daniel, on the other hand, opened the refrigerator and took out a sandwich and an apple. He wrote something on a napkin, then put it all on a plate and handed it to Sara with a serious expression. He headed toward the front door.

Sara looked at the plate in astonishment and read what Daniel had written on the napkin: “Colin is a terrible cook, but I don’t want you to starve. If you need anything else, take whatever you like from the fridge.”

A sweet sensation warmed Sara's chest, and she jumped to catch up with Daniel before he left. She reached him as he was shutting the door. "Thanks." She flashed a shy smile at Daniel.

Her housemate's face remained impassive.

"You're welcome."

"I know you're going out now, but I was wondering when you might have some time. I'd like to speak with you."

He looked at her in prolonged silence. Sara felt sure he was going to refuse, but suddenly Daniel said, "Are you going to Colin's performance today?"

"Yes."

"Get there early. We'll talk then."

Without further adieu, Daniel left the house, leaving her with the feeling that she didn't understand him at all. What was Daniel really like? Cold and stubborn? Charming and generous? That man was a true mystery. Preoccupied as she was with her own problems, she didn't recognize the urge to decipher him that was growing inside of her.

CHAPTER 4

"So," Daniel spun the remains of his beer before looking directly at Sara, "are you finally going to tell me what you wanted to talk to me about?"

He had agreed to meet her at the bar shortly before the others arrived. He had seen her come in, scanning in all directions for him. He didn't fail to notice the admiring glances of some of the men around him, and the petulant smile of one who walked up to her. Goddamn vultures, it never failed. Fortunately, right at that moment she saw him, walked away from the guy, and headed toward him with a luminous smile that made his heart flip.

They ordered two beers and sat down to talk at one of the tables near the stage. Sara had run through several topics and didn't seem very determined to get to the point; that's why he had sprung the question on her. Now she was looking at him with her big, dark, sorrowful eyes.

"I'm sorry, Daniel." The apology caught him off guard, and she continued. "I should have told you from the beginning that I wanted to rent the room. I was going to, but then we started talking and then. . ." She fell silent, leaving the sentence suspended and shaking her head. "Forget it; you won't believe me."

"Then what?"

"Well, I don't know. I nearly forgot about the room." He sensed the honesty of her response. "I was too caught up in our conversation, in what you were telling me

about Paris, your life, the moment you decided to go traveling. It was. . . I don't know. . . special."

Daniel's stomach tied up in knots. "Special?" he asked, trying not to seem interested.

"Yes, special. As if, instead of talking to a stranger, I were talking to a lifelong friend."

"I see." The emotion that had sprung up inside him suddenly shut down. "A friend."

"Yes," she went on, not seeming to notice his disappointment. "That's why it's so important to me that you and I get along. Please forgive me if I wasn't honest from the beginning and if I made you feel uncomfortable. I'm really sorry."

Could he have remained angry when faced with her sweet, repentant gaze? Maybe others could keep from softening, but his heart wasn't as cold as he pretended it was.

"That's fine, don't worry about it," he responded. "I suppose you did it because you thought it was the only way to convince me. And maybe it was. All I wanted was to avoid further problems from bringing more girls into the house. But now it's done, so let's not keep rehashing it."

Sara's face took on a look of curiosity. "You know, from the way you talk, it sounds like you want to keep girls at a distance, and not only at the house. Have you been disappointed in love maybe?"

Disappointed? Ha, if she only knew! More like devastated. He had been cheated on and manipulated not once, but several times. The last woman he was with had been the worst of all. But there was no way she was getting him to reveal how foolish he had been, so he turned and looked at his beer.

"Maybe," he simply said before taking a drink. "Actually, my reason for being alone is the trip I'm planning to Australia. If you can't be in the same city as your girlfriend, it's better to be alone."

Sara cocked her head in a sign of disagreement.

"But you can have both things, can't you? I don't think it's incompatible to be with someone and also be able to travel. That's what long-distance relationships are for."

"That never works," he responded categorically. "Anyway, there's nothing more egotistical than asking your partner to wait while you're out running around the world. Don't you think it's unfair to the one left behind?"

"But if two people love each other, sometimes a long-distance relationship is the only way they can be together," she insisted, blushing. "So while they're separated, each of them can pursue their goals in life."

He frowned. "You just can't be so egotistical. Take you, for instance. You wouldn't have been able to travel to Dublin if you had a boyfriend, but you don't, do you?"

Sara looked down and suddenly seemed embarrassed.

“No, I don’t,” she whispered, turning even redder.

Daniel remembered Fran telling him that Sara’s ex-boyfriend had cheated on her, and he regretted having brought it up. If it made her so uncomfortable, then it clearly still upset her. He’d better not mention it again.

Fran, Colin and Armando arrived at that moment, and their arrival put an end to the discomfort. Fran gave Sara an affectionate embrace before sitting down at the table with the others.

“I didn’t realize you had gotten here earlier.” Fran turned toward Sara. “And? Did you finally resolve that business with Anto. . .”

“Fran,” Sara responded hurriedly, as if to silence her. “Daniel was just telling me he doesn’t have a girlfriend because he’ll be traveling to Australia for so long. He just told me he thinks only egotistical people carry on long-distance relationships.”

“Oh,” said Fran, and kept quiet.

“For Daniel, things are always black and white,” commented Armando. “That’s because he’s never fallen in love.”

Colin opened his eyes in surprise. “Really, Daniel? Never? You’re nearly thirty.”

Daniel shrugged his shoulders. “What can I say? I’ve never met a woman with whom I felt really connected.” At least not until this week, he added to himself. “Anyway, for me the most important thing has always been traveling and I haven’t wanted to complicate things. I don’t want to start something only to leave and make someone suffer. That’s not my style.”

Armando took a sip of his beer. “In any case, love is overrated,” he said. “All that drama and suffering. It’s much better to leave your options open.”

“And are yours ever open!” Daniel teased him.

“Much better than being devoted to celibacy, like you,” he retorted. “Or making a girlfriend suffer by not spending enough time with her, like Colin.”

“Hey!” the musician exclaimed. “What have I got to do with this?”

Fran nodded. “Armando’s right. You never have time for Shannon. You barely see her.”

“She understands me,” said Colin calmly. “She knows I’m focusing on my music and we’re fine as we are. I don’t make her suffer, Armando; the role of heartbreaker of the house isn’t exactly occupied by me.”

“I don’t make women suffer, either; they’re the ones who suffer all by themselves,” he defended himself. “I don’t raise any false illusions or commit myself to anything if I’m not in love.”

Fran let out a loud, ironic laugh. “Armando, you change women like you change shirts. What can a guy like you know about love?”

“More than you can imagine,” he answered enigmatically. “When you’re in love, you know it.”

Sara looked at Armando, showing interest in the conversation. “But how do you know if what you feel is really love?”

Armando smiled. “If you have to ask yourself that question, you’re not really in love,” he said with complete conviction. “Love, Sara, is like an orgasm. When you feel it, you recognize it, you know it. It’s as simple as that.”

Daniel burst out laughing. “What a comparison! I didn’t know that, in addition to being a financial analyst, you were an expert in the subject of love.”

“More than you are, at least,” Armando answered, smiling.

Colin got up from the table. “I hate to miss this round, but I have to set up for the performance. See you later.”

The rest of the group kept talking until the lights dimmed and Colin and his band appeared on stage. He started singing “With or Without You” by U2, with strength and feeling. He looked nothing like the calm, deliberate man he usually was.

“He’s really quite good,” commented Sara, visibly impressed.

Daniel nodded. “And you haven’t even heard the songs he composes with his band. They’re excellent.”

Sara waited for Colin to finish the show so that she could congratulate him and say good-bye before heading home. Her housemates urged her to stay a little longer, but Sara refused, saying she was exhausted.

Then Daniel rose and picked up his jacket. “I’ll go with you,” he offered.

“That’s not necessary. I have no problem going home alone.”

“I’m tired, too. Come on, I’ll go with you.”

They said good-bye to the group and went outside. The full moon was suspended majestically in the sky, and it made the snow around them glow with delicate silver sparkles. The cold air brought out the color in Sara’s cheeks, and Daniel thought she was lovelier than ever.

“It’s a beautiful night,” she breathed out deeply, delighting in the fragrance the rain had left behind. “Do you know this is one of the few times since I arrived in Dublin that I’ve gone outside and it hasn’t been raining?”

“That’s possible; it rains a lot here.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed. Between the university and the rain, I’ve barely had a chance to see the city.

“Seriously? If you aren’t too cold, we can walk home. It’s not that far, and that way you can get acquainted with the neighborhood.”

“That sounds good. It isn’t dangerous to walk at this hour, is it?”

He shook his head. “No, not in this neighborhood. Anyway, if anything happened, I would protect you; I’m used to knocking down men.”

Sara opened her eyes wide. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for the violent type,” she said worriedly, making Daniel burst into laughter. “What? What did I say?”

“When I said knocking men down, I was referring to rugby; I’ve been playing for several years.”

“Oh, that explains everything!” she spurted out, looking at his torso.

“Explains what?”

“Well, you know, that great body you’ve got.” Daniel lifted an eyebrow and Sara hurried to explain herself, red as a tomato. “No, wait, I didn’t mean to say that. it’s just obvious that you have muscular arms. It’s not like I was looking at your arms or anything; it’s that, when we were at the bar, you rolled up your sleeves, and then it was obvious and I thought. . . What?”

Sara stopped short before Daniel, who could barely control his laughter.

“You’re laughing at me,” she accused him.

“It’s hard not to,” he said, amused. “Are you in the habit of saying the first thing that goes through your head?”

“Almost always, unfortunately,” she sighed. “People say it’s one of my most irritating traits.”

“I think it’s charming,” he said, smiling at her gently.

Sara didn’t respond. She just returned his smile while the blush moved up her cheeks.

Daniel kept walking beside her, filled with a strange happiness. From Sara’s comments and reactions, she didn’t seem indifferent to him. He was almost sure he wasn’t the only one who had felt attraction when they met. Either that, or he didn’t know anything about women.

It wouldn’t be breaking any rules to find out how Sara felt about him, would it? Just to clear things up; nothing beyond satisfying his curiosity, which wouldn’t hurt anyone. He glanced at her, determined to spend as much time as possible at her side until he discovered how Sara felt about him.

CHAPTER 5

By the time the first two weeks of class ended, Sara had become completely integrated into the household. She had become close friends with Fran, though they didn't see much of each other because of their different schedules and because Fran often spent the night at Stephen's. Sara more often saw Armando, who always made her laugh with his pretend flirting, which the Italian kept on doing despite the withering looks he got from Daniel.

She barely saw Colin because he was always composing and practicing with his group. On the other hand, she spent a lot of time with Daniel, and they often chatted at night. He helped her with her English, correcting the papers she had to turn in to the University, or holding dinner for her, and he was always warm and attentive. Still, she didn't suspect any ulterior motives, not only because of the prohibition against getting involved with housemates, but also because, when Daniel spoke to her about his trip to Australia, he was very emphatic about wanting to be alone. That's why she interpreted all the time he devoted to her as a sign of friendship.

The dark side of those two weeks was Antonio. Every time Sara thought about him, she remembered Armando's words. "If you have to ask yourself whether you're really in love, it's because you aren't." Could that be the problem with her relationship with Antonio? Is that why she felt so afraid of getting married? Or was it just the normal nerves any fiancée feels? That explanation didn't seem sufficient. The shameful charade she had starred in that afternoon, at Fran's urging, made her feel more anxious.

It had all started hours before, when she was in the university cafeteria with Fran and Stephen. A very handsome man had approached the group. He was tall, with dark brown hair, the beginnings of a beard, and a seductive air.

"Stephen, do you have a minute?" asked the newcomer. "I wanted to ask you what time the meeting is this afternoon."

"At four, in the professors' lounge."

"Perfect, thanks." The man noticed Sara, who was watching him without blinking, and a smile emerged on his face, making him even more attractive. "Stephen, aren't you going to introduce me to your friends?"

"Of course. This is Fran, my girlfriend. Fran, Pierre is one of my colleagues, the new professor of French in the College."

Fran held out her hand. "How do you do?"

"And this is Sara," went on Stephen. "The new professor of Spanish."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Pierre," Sara responded.

He smiled. "The pleasure is mine."

“We were just about to have a cup of coffee,” said Stephen. “Would you like to join us?”

Pierre nodded and settled into one of the chairs, while Fran cast a poorly disguised look at Sara that said ‘this guy is hot.’

“Did you arrive in Dublin recently, Pierre?” Sara asked.

“Yes, just a week ago, but from the little I’ve seen of this city, I really like it. It’s very different from Paris, which is all chaos and noise. Here, everything is smaller and calmer, but I still have a lot left to see.”

“Sara got here recently, too; maybe you could see Dublin together,” said Fran nonchalantly.

“Sure, why not?” responded Pierre.

The color rose in Sara’s cheeks. Was Fran playing matchmaker? She preferred to change the subject.

“Are you in the Literature Department with Stephen, Pierre?”

“No, the Language Department, so we’ll be seeing a lot of each other. Have you ordered yet?”

“No, we’ve been waiting quite a while for someone to take our order,” said Stephen, rather annoyed. “Come with me and let’s order at the counter.”

As soon as the men left, Fran let out a theatrical sigh. “Pierre is really hot! He looks like one of those magazine models. Can you imagine being in his class? Monsieur professeur, I’ve been a very naughty girl,” she added in a syrupy voice, batting her eyelashes.

Sara chuckled. “Fran! Stephen can hear you!”

“Come on, don’t play innocent! I wasn’t the only one who couldn’t tear my eyes off him. You were practically eating him alive with your eyes.” She looked at the Frenchman again. “Oh, lá, lá, what a lovely rearguard he has.”

Sara glanced over at him and confirmed that Fran was right. To her mortification, just at that moment, Pierre turned around, caught her watching him, and smiled at her. She lowered her eyes at once, red as a tomato.

When the men returned, the topic of conversation revolved around classes at the university. Sara enjoyed it until a glance at the hour warned her that she had to leave for a meeting. She stood up from the table and asked, “Do you know where the dean’s office is, Stephen?”

“Of course. I’ll take you, if you like.”

Fran took her boyfriend’s hand. “No, Stephen,” she said. “You stay here with me, and let’s let Pierre take her. You don’t mind, do you, Pierre? That way the two of you can get better acquainted.”

Sara stared at the floor, embarrassed by her friend's obvious attempt to get her alone with the Frenchman.

"Of course I don't mind," smiled Pierre. "Shall we go?"

She nodded and they walked amid the hustle and bustle of the university. There were young people sitting in groups all around, studying or laughing. Sara and Pierre passed in front of the buildings of the different colleges, surrounded by gardens and lakes.

"This is a very modern university," Sara commented. "The place where I studied wasn't like this."

"Mine wasn't either. It was very old and made entirely of cement. I prefer this one, although studying in Paris does have its advantages."

"I'll bet!" she sighed. "It must be a beautiful city; I've always wanted to see it."

Pierre shook his head. "It has its good points, but it's too large for my taste. If you're not near downtown, it takes you a long time to get from one place to another."

"Are you from Paris?"

"Yes, but from the suburbs. I live in a more or less peaceful neighborhood, near my family."

"Do you live with anyone?" The question sounded as if she were trying to find out if he had a girlfriend, and she turned red.

Pierre's lips formed a smile. "No, I live alone there. Here, on the other hand, I share an apartment with a Spanish friend of Stephen's, and it's turned out very well. So far I'm very happy with my decision to come to Dublin, though I thought I was going to have less work. My class is full."

"I'll bet it's full of women!" exclaimed Sara without thinking.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, just look at you; you look like a mod. . ." She interrupted herself and turned red with shame when she realized what she had been about to say. She cleared her throat, before going on. "Wha. . . what I mean. . . is that French is such a sexy language. No, I mean, an. . . important language. I mean. . . we women like French."

Pierre watched her with an amused look while she stumbled over her words. Luckily for Sara, their arrival at the office brought an end to that awkward moment.

"Here it is." Pierre gestured to a white door. "If you follow this hallway, you'll come straight to the professors' lounge. You'll be staying all semester, won't you?"

"Yes, the same as you."

“Actually, I’m leaving open the option of applying to stay for the next academic semester,” said Pierre. “It all depends on whether I feel comfortable here, or if I find it interesting.”

“And do you like the idea of staying another semester? Does it seem interesting to you?”

Pierre’s smiled spread slowly as he looked at her. “So far I’d say that it seems very interesting,” he said in a low voice that sounded more like a whisper.

Sara was taken aback. “I . . . yes. . . well, here in Dublin there are lots of interesting things, but I’ll be staying only this semester because of Antonio.” She saw the question on Pierre’s face and explained. “Antonio is my boyfriend; actually, he’s my fiancé. That’s why I’m here only for the semester.”

“Of course, a woman as pretty as you wouldn’t be alone.”

Her jaw dropped. Pretty? Monsieur professeur had just called her pretty?

“Well. . . uh. . . thanks for coming with me, Pierre. I’ll be seeing you around.”

“Of course you’ll be seeing me,” he said, kissing her good-bye on both cheeks. “Au revoir!”

She watched him walk away, surprised that such a handsome man had flirted with her. But of course, it was all Fran’s fault; she had practically thrown Sara into his arms. That’s why, when Sara came home and found her friend sitting at the kitchen table, she wasted no time clearing things up.

“How could you be so obvious this afternoon with Pierre?”

Fran opened her eyes wide with feigned innocence. “Who? Me?”

“Yes, you. God, how embarrassing! Do I have it written on my forehead, ‘Single and Desperate’? I’m not single, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“That’s not what you told Daniel and the others,” Fran reminded her.

Sara shook her head, embarrassed. “I know. I didn’t want to tell him about Antonio so Daniel wouldn’t think badly of me again. Did you notice how he stressed how egotistical it was for someone to carry on a long-distance relationship? No thanks. He’s already mad enough because of how we met without me giving him another reason to dislike me. And we’re not talking about Daniel here, but about Pierre. Why did you play matchmaker with him?”

Fran looked at her very seriously. “Because I don’t believe you’re in love with your fiancé,” she suddenly spurted out. “I saw you looking starry eyed at Pierre, and I wanted to get you together with him so you would realize it.”

“Why do you say I’m not in love with Antonio?”

“Please!” responded Fran, as if it was obvious. “You hardly ever mention him and on the rare occasions when you do, you always sound annoyed.”

“That’s only because things haven’t exactly been easy between us lately. It doesn’t mean I don’t love him.”

“If you say so. but tell me, how many times have you spoken with him since you got here? Two? Three times?”

It had been twice, and the second call had ended in a fight. Sara didn’t want to acknowledge this to Fran, so she changed the subject. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Fran shrugged her shoulders. “All I’m saying is, if you were so in love with him, even if you were upset, you would want to hug him, to know what he’s up to, to hear his voice. You know, the typical things you do when you’re in love.”

“We don’t all love so intensely,” Sara defended herself, irritated. “You’re insinuating that the problem is me, that I’m boring.”

Fran ignored her friend’s irritation. “Or maybe the problem is that you don’t listen. I’m telling you I don’t believe Antonio is the man for you. It’s as simple as that.” She stood and walked toward the door, then turned and looked at Sara with a worried expression. “Promise me you’re going to think about it, OK?”

Sara sat in the kitchen alone, overcome with worry. Could Fran’s intuition be correct? Well, her friend wasn’t exactly an expert on the subject, judging from her relationship with Stephen, but even so, she had hit the nail on the head when she said that Sara didn’t act like the typical woman in love. Actually, she had never done that. She never felt butterflies in her stomach with Antonio, nor fireworks, nor an urge to tear off his shirt. She probably would have gone on ignoring the fact that there was something missing in their relationship if he hadn’t started pressuring her about the wedding. Or maybe there were people who never, in their whole lives, fell passionately in love, and maybe she was one of those people. The idea depressed her.

Daniel’s arrival put an end to her reflections.

“Hello,” she greeted him with reluctance. “Are you on your way to play rugby?”

“Yes. We have an important game.” He noticed her worried expression. “Are you all right? You look pensive.”

Sara sighed. “I was thinking about love, about how hard it all can be.”

Daniel’s expression turned serious as he listened to her; he sat down beside her. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s terrible when you feel something for someone, but you’re not sure what. And it’s even worse when everything around you is complicated, when you want to do something, but you can’t.”

“As if something forbids you to do it?” asked Daniel, his eyes shining.

“Yes, something like that.”

He looked at her even more intensely. Then he heard Armando’s voice calling him from outside and said, “I can’t stay a minute longer now, but maybe we could talk this over someplace else. . .”

Sara narrowed her eyes, not understanding what he meant. “Someplace else?”

“Yes, away from the house,” he mumbled. “Maybe tomorrow we could go to a bar, the Porterhouse, maybe, and talk more calmly.”

“Yes, sure, that sounds good.”

“Brilliant.”

Sara imagined nothing odd behind the radiant smile he shot her before he left the house. Nor did she associate the name of the pub with its reputation as one of the most romantic in the city.