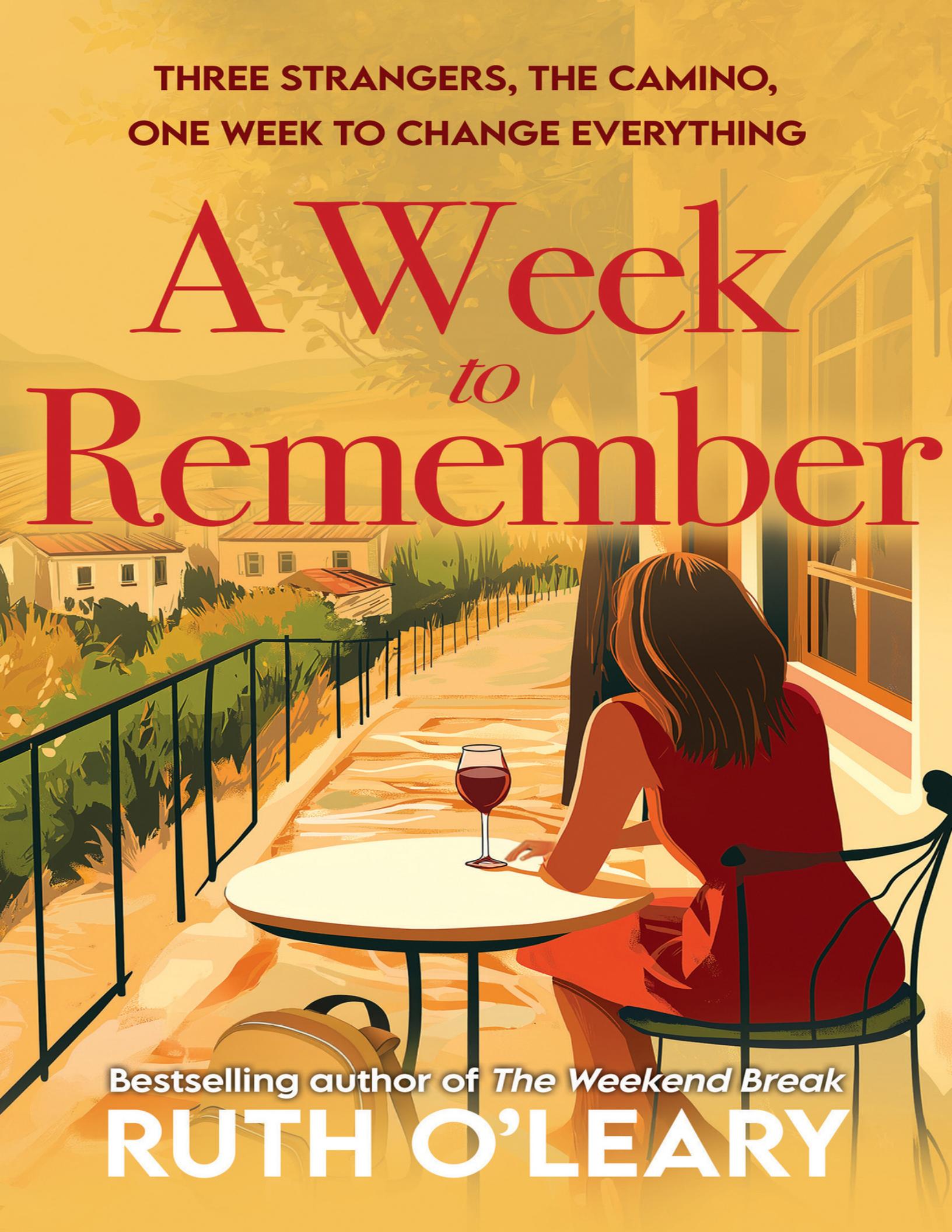


THREE STRANGERS, THE CAMINO,
ONE WEEK TO CHANGE EVERYTHING

A Week *to* Remember

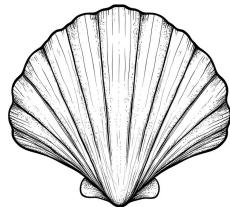


Bestselling author of *The Weekend Break*
RUTH O'LEARY

A Week to Remember

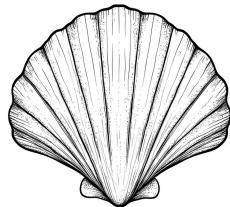
Ruth O'Leary

DEDICATION



To Camino Dreamers Everywhere:
Whether it takes days or weeks,
Remember
—Your Camino Your Way—
One step at a time.

CHAPTER 1



Friday 30 June 2023

Dublin Airport

Paula sat at Gate 302 in Dublin Airport, with loads of time to spare. She was three hours early. Having woken up nearly every hour throughout the night, she decided she might as well get up and hang around the airport – that way she couldn't back out. The kids had texted to wish her good luck and Kevin had sent a voice message from his hiking trip, but she'd felt so jumpy alone in the empty house that she couldn't wait to leave it.

You wanted to do this, she reminded herself, nervously fiddling with her new pixie haircut, you wanted adventure, sixty is the new forty and all that.

She did want adventure but, as she had left all the organising to her best friend Jill, she hardly knew where she was going and had no idea what to

expect.

This would have been Jill's third Camino trip but, just two days ago, they were exchanging texts on whether to bring conditioner or not when Jill's mother had a terrible fall. She lost her balance when her beloved Jack Russell jumped up to bark furiously at a political canvasser at the door. Ironically, she had trained him to do that, but this time she wasn't expecting it and fell over with the fright. She was taken to the hospital where, following an X-ray, they confirmed she had fractured her hip. So Jill had to back out of the trip to spend time at her mother's bedside.

Paula remembered how stressed she sounded when she rang her with the news. She became even more stressed when Paula said she too would cancel.

“You have to go!” Jill had pleaded.

“But I've hardly even looked at your emails! I had planned on just following your lead on this trip.”

“You'll be fine.”

“But will everyone else be in groups?”

“No, this is the one place where a lot of people travel solo and, besides, you're not completely on your own. *Follow the Camino* has booked all your accommodation, and a driver will collect you from the airport. He picks up your luggage every morning and delivers it to your next hotel. Trust me, all you have to do is walk. You'll be following the pack, and you'll meet so many people doing the same.”

Looking around now, Paula could see what she meant by “the pack”. As more people arrived, they were dressed just like she was, in outdoorsy hiking gear. Hiking trousers with multiple pockets (which Paula had to admit were very practical) and zip-up fleece tops very much like her own, seemed to be the uniform.

Most were around her age too. Except for one. A tall, stylish young woman turned a few heads when she walked through the busy airport, with a coffee in one hand, duty-free bag in the other, and her long red hair bouncing loosely down her back. Stopping near Paula, she checked her boarding card and, after a quick look around, plonked herself down a few seats away, letting out a loud sigh.

She must be at the wrong gate, thought Paula. Although she was wearing casual gear and had a small rucksack with her, she also had a full face of

make-up on and looked like she was about to go on location to model for a nature lovers' magazine.

As more people arrived at the gate, many seemed to be in groups with matching luggage labels. The downside of travelling solo now was that she had to figure things out for herself. Opening her carry-on backpack, she checked her documents for the twentieth time. Jill had booked them on the Camino Frances, a famous route of the Camino de Santiago that officially starts in France. However, they would begin their journey in Sarria, Spain, a popular choice for those with only a week to spare. Sarria, being 115 kilometres from Santiago's Cathedral, meant that walkers would cover the final 100 kilometres that qualifies pilgrims for the Compostela certificate, confirming you had walked the Camino. Since Sarria was a small town in the Galician mountains of northwest Spain, it was necessary to fly into Santiago Airport. Upon arrival, a driver named Carlos would pick her up and take her to Sarria, where she would spend her first night before starting the walk tomorrow.

Dinner out on my own tonight, she thought. She sighed as she put the itinerary back in her backpack. When was the last time I did that? She couldn't remember.

“Are Lingus Flight 742 to Santiago de Compostela is now departing from Gate 302.”

Taking a deep breath, Paula gathered her things and stood up. The good-looking redhead was sitting completely still, staring in front of her. She's definitely at the wrong gate, Paula thought as she nervously joined the line of happy hikers.



What on earth am I doing here? Rachel looked around at the people queuing up excitedly to board the Aer Lingus flight. It's like I'm trapped in some awful outdoor adventure movie.

Some men, some couples but mostly groups of women over forty, it seemed, were chatting, comparing itineraries and looking very excited.

What is everyone so happy about? It's just a walking trip. She didn't get it. She was here to get away, somewhere Craig would never think of looking for her. She needed to clear her head and try to think what her next step could be after the most humiliating episode of her life.

But these people chose to be here, she thought, and some had done this before judging by the Camino badges on their backpacks, and the shells with red crosses tied on to their bags with red string. One big group seemed particularly excited, laughing and chatting animatedly about the routes they were taking. She made a mental note to avoid them.

Crossing her long legs, she looked down at what she was wearing. She had literally googled **what to wear on the Camino** and ordered everything online from Decathlon with next-day delivery. She had to admit that the hiking trousers and tops were very comfortable and it was a while since she spent a whole day in flats, but it was not the type of clothing she would choose to wear full-time at home or anywhere else.

Finishing her iced coffee, she shook her head. How had it come to this? She sat staring ahead of her as the flight attendant called the flight for boarding. She felt sick.

I don't have to do this. I could just get up and leave the airport right now.

But go where? She was on four weeks' leave from work so she couldn't return there. She had hoped that a week walking would give her the space to think clearly about what had happened and help her plan her next move. But, looking around now, she wished she had done more research on the Camino.

She knew that "El Camino" meant "The Way" and that "Santiago" meant "Saint James" – one of the Apostles – and that the different walking routes, starting in France, Spain and Portugal were ancient pilgrimage routes but that nowadays religious and non-religious walked the route that fitted the amount of time they had. She didn't want to know any more about the history of it. The travel agent assured her that all she had to do was follow the yellow arrows on the route and that was all the information she needed.

"Could the final passengers for Aer Lingus Flight EI742 to Santiago de Compostela board now at Gate 302."

Rachel looked around. Just a handful of people remained. One woman was in total panic as an Aer Lingus gate agent helped her look for something in her upturned handbag. Maybe I should offer to help, she wondered as she picked up her passport and stood up. Feck it, I don't need any more drama in my life, she decided as she walked past them to board the flight.



“I’m so sorry, I’m sure I had it a minute ago.”

“Don’t panic, we’ll find it.” The gate agent sat down beside Cathy and helped her go through the contents of her bag, upturned on the empty table beside her, as the other passengers lined up to board the plane.

Cathy felt such a fool. She had arrived at the airport hours before to avoid this type of panic. She hadn’t slept much the night before, knowing she had to be up so early to catch the airport bus from Mullingar, so that hadn’t helped. It would have been quicker to drive but Ted always said she was such a nervous driver and that she’d never manage Dublin traffic. He was probably right, so she didn’t chance it.

“I’m such an idiot.” Cathy nervously twisted a strand of her thin brown hair which had slipped out of her ponytail.

“Now don’t say that. It must be here.”

“I’m in such a tizzy now!” Cathy was sweating. She was overheating in her large hiking top and wished now that she had taken the adventure shop assistant’s advice on buying a smaller size.

“Ah, here it is!” the agent said, holding up Cathy’s copy of *The Weekend Break*, the novel she had just started reading on the bus. The corner of her boarding pass was sticking out from the pages.

“Oh, thank you so much! I forgot I was using my boarding card as a bookmark. I’m so sorry!”

“Honestly, there’s no need to apologise.” The young agent smiled and helped her put everything back into her bag. “People get very stressed when flying – it happens all the time.”

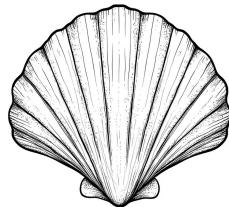
“You’re very kind – it’s just that I haven’t flown in years – nearly thirty years – and I never travel alone so this is all … new to me.”

“Well, you’re sorted now and you are going to a beautiful place so let’s get you on board.”

Cathy felt so stupid. What if Ted was right? What if she wasn’t able to manage without him? A worry wart, that’s what he used to call her. But she wasn’t always like that, and she knew it.

No. Ted was wrong. I know I can do this, she said to herself. Gathering up her things, she took a deep breath and set off to board the plane.

CHAPTER 2



SANTIAGO AIRPORT

SPAIN

A blast of hot Spanish air greeted the passengers as they disembarked from the flight. It was twenty-five degrees in Santiago de Compostela, a nice contrast to the grey day they left behind in Dublin. Being a small airport, going through passport control was quick, and they were through to the baggage carousels in no time.

Paula spotted her backpack immediately and threw it over her shoulder. It was one of Kevin's. He had about four different types of backpacks of different sizes and lengths, hung up in the garage.

“It’s important to get the length right,” he’d said, measuring one up against her back.

Paula had made interested sounds but really she didn't care as long as she could carry it. She was taking very little with her. The advantage of this type of walking holiday was that there was no dressing up. It was hiking gear during the day and comfortable clothes, with a change of shoes or sandals for the evening. After Jill pulled out of the trip, Paula watched some YouTube videos on packing for the Camino and reduced her clothes pile to the bare minimum. One of the things she was looking forward to was not caring about how she looked for a week. Her new comfortable hiking clothes made her less conscious of her menopausal spare tyre which had appeared around her waist ten years ago and refused to leave. She hated it.

Rachel stood at the carousel. She had managed to get through the two-hour flight without speaking to anyone. The two women beside her talked nonstop about their Camino plans but Rachel kept her headphones on, happy to have a window seat as she listened to a Mel Robbins podcast about restarting your life and building yourself back up after a huge life change.

Being single at thirty-nine was certainly a curveball she hadn't seen coming. Picking up her bag, she checked her notes and headed out into arrivals to look for a driver called Carlos.

In the arrivals area, a tall, tanned man who looked to be in his early sixties stood with a sign that had CARLOS written in capitals on it. His wavy silver-grey hair was held back from his face by the sunglasses on his head as he greeted the Irish group he was meeting from the flight.

He certainly is fit for an older guy, Rachel noticed, remembering what her best pal Charley said to her when she rang to wish her bon voyage: "The best way to get over one man, is to get under another one!"

Rachel brushed that thought aside. He might look like a silver-haired Antonio Banderas, but even the thought of going near another man again made her nauseous. Male company was the last thing she needed on this trip.

Carlos ticked everyone's name off a list.

"I am just missing one person, a lady called Cathy Kinsella. Does anyone know her?"

Everyone in the group of about ten people shook their heads.

Just then, a stressed-looking woman with a huge suitcase came through arrivals, looking around frantically.

That's the same woman who was panicking in Dublin airport, Rachel noted.

"*Cathy?*" Carlos called out.

The woman nodded and came over. She went to shake his hand and dropped her passport.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, my case was last to come out and then I couldn't find my passport," she said, bending down to pick it up. Her shoulder-length brown hair was tied back loosely with an elastic band and loose strands had fallen around her face.

"It is not a problem," Carlos said kindly. "Follow me, everyone!"

Carlos's minibus was just outside the door. He opened the back for everyone to put their backpacks in. Rachel leaned her bag beside the bus and went to climb in.

"Excuse me? Everybody puts their own bag in the back," he said with a smile.

Rachel did not return his smile but quickly placed her bag in the back of the van before getting in.

Cathy struggled with her case, so Carlos helped her lift it in.

"I'm so silly to bring a suitcase," she said, embarrassed when she saw everyone else had a backpack. "It's just I couldn't decide ... there was so much choice ..."

"Please, don't worry. We will manage," Carlos reassured her.

"So sorry," Cathy said to the other passengers as she boarded the minibus last and took her seat before letting out a long sigh.

Before they left the airport, Carlos stood at the front of the minibus and welcomed everyone to Spain. He informed them that the bus journey would take one hour and thirty minutes. The Cathedral in Santiago was the end point of their Camino pilgrimage so the transfer would take them 115 kilometres east of the city to their starting point – Sarria in the Galician hills.

"Galicia is often referred to as the Ireland or Scotland of Spain," he said, "but not just for the amount of rainfall we get here, making everything very green, but because the influence of the Celts has endured the longest in this region. And, would you believe, the bagpipes are a very popular instrument here!" He smiled. "Also, the Galicians have their own language. Spanish will be understood, but you may hear Galician spoken amongst the locals. This is a reminder that Galicia is autonomous and therefore a nation within

a nation. As you probably already know, it is said that the body of St James is buried in the Cathedral de Santiago. Today, some people walk the Way of St James for their own religious reason but for others it is an adventure and an escape from busy everyday lives. So sit back and relax and, if you look out the window on our way, you will see some pilgrims along the road.”

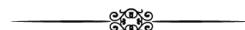
And with that he sat into the driving seat and they were on their way.

Some of the people on the bus were discussing their previous trips on the Camino and Paula was eager to chat to them and hear their advice.

“Am I naive in thinking I can just follow the yellow arrows and the people in front of me?” she asked one of the more experienced walkers.

“No, not at all – it is that straightforward. But don’t try to keep up with anyone,” he advised. “Walk at your own pace. If you try to keep up with people or race ahead, you could end up with nasty blisters or, even worse, an injury – it does happen. So go at your own pace and enjoy it. The scenery is beautiful and there are loads of places to stop and have a coffee – so make use of them. That would be my advice.”

Paula felt better after hearing that. She’d never walked more than ten kilometres in one go and she certainly didn’t want any blisters, so she would gladly take his advice.



The bus passed through some small towns as it went further into the hills and the countryside. Open fields and forests stretched out for miles as they headed towards the mountains in the distance.

Cathy was sitting at the back, staring out the window, taking in the scenery. She could hardly believe that she was here in Spain and doing it by herself.

Rachel relaxed a little. She put her headphones on and closed her eyes. She wasn’t listening to anything; she put them on to prevent people from talking to her. She wondered how many of the group were here for the same reason she was: to think, to walk and sort things out in their heads and maybe, like her, to find a new direction in their lives. A bit much to ask for in one week but, hey, “*The Camino provides*”. This was the phrase she had seen many times on the Camino Facebook pages she joined for information.

It was also the phrase used by the pension manager when they arrived in Sarria to find that there was a problem with the room allocations.

After the ninety-minute transfer Rachel, Paula and Cathy were the last people to be dropped off at their pension. The guesthouse at the end of town was made of local sand-coloured stone with blue wooden shutters on the windows and wisteria creeping up the outside walls. It was very pretty but there was a problem. Instead of three single rooms, the pension had booked one room with three single beds.

“Three beds!” Rachel sighed loudly, dropping her bag on the floor and leaning over the reception desk. “If I’d wanted to share with other people I would have booked an albergue for half the price and bunked in with forty sweaty hikers! No offence,” she said, turning to Cathy and Paula, “but I’m sure these ladies feel the same. I booked a single room, I paid for a single room, and I *want* a single room.”

As it was popular for hikers to stay in albergues – special hostels for pilgrims – the manager, when realising there was a room shortage, didn’t see any problem in putting the three women in a room together.

Rachel, however, did not share his view. Her 5-foot-8 height had her towering over the manager who, in his late sixties, had seen many pilgrims arrive wound up on their first day and was not a bit fazed by Rachel’s demands.

“As I said, this is a problem only for this one night, all other nights are okay, but a pilgrim was injured and could not leave his room today and there was confusion and cancellation and a late booking. These things happen,” he shrugged, “but remember – ‘*The Camino provides*’.”

“What does that even mean –” Rachel began.

“Excuse me.”

Everyone turned to Cathy who spoke in a voice just a little louder than a whisper.

“I’m happy to sleep anywhere tonight. It’s getting late and I just want to drop my bag and get something to eat.”

“Me too,” added Paula. She could tell from the look on the manager’s face that the tall redhead who seemed used to getting her way wasn’t going to get anywhere with this guy. “I’m happy to share for just tonight. As you say, these things happen.” She lowered her voice and leaned in close to Rachel. “I don’t think you’re going to get anywhere here. It’s a small town and there won’t be many other options.”

Rachel looked from Paula to Cathy and back to the manager who was yawning now. She wanted to tear a strip off him for yawning in front of her,

but she conceded that it would get her nowhere.

Patience, Rachel, maybe this is your first lesson on this Camino.

“Fine, we’ll take the room,” she said.

As if there was ever any other option, thought Paula.

When they carried their bags upstairs to room Number 3, they were pleasantly surprised. The room was huge, and the beds were far apart from each other. The exposed brickwork was beautiful and each bed had a lace eiderdown which matched the lace curtains.

“Okay, this room is beautiful,” Rachel had to admit. “Sorry if I was a bit cranky down there but it’s been a long day in a horrible week.”

“No need to apologise,” Paula said as she started to unpack her bag. “I’m starving. Would you guys like to join me for dinner?”

“Absolutely. I definitely need a glass of wine,” Rachel said, taking out her packing cubes. Everything she’d brought was in its own special pack, Paula noticed – she must be well used to travelling.

“I think I’ll just grab a snack from the shop,” Cathy said, sitting on her bed beside her unopened suitcase.

“Are you sure? It’s going to be an early start tomorrow and we have a long day of walking ahead.” Paula didn’t want to force the issue, but this shy woman looked so thin and pale. A good feed might help.

“*Em*, well, maybe you’re right, yes. I will come with you if that’s alright. I’m very tired but I should eat something. Thank you.”

“Great, let’s go,” said Paula. “I think most places close early in these mountain towns. The pension owner recommended a place called Roberto’s.”

It was still bright outside and the walk to the restaurant was by the town’s river.

“I recognise that river from brochure pictures,” Cathy said, smiling. She could hardly believe she was seeing it in real life.

The mountain air smelt so clean and fresh and, although the sun had gone down behind the mountains, it was still warm and many people were dining outside.

They passed their first Camino sign, a large stone bollard with the famous blue-and-yellow scallop-shell symbol on it, above a yellow arrow pointing the way and, underneath that, the distance to the Cathedral in Santiago, 114.539 km engraved in the stone.

“Almost one hundred and fifteen kilometres to Santiago,” said Paula. “Do you mind if I take a photo of us at the sign?”

The others agreed and let Paula take a selfie which she then sent to her friend Jill and to her family WhatsApp group to let Kevin and the kids know she’d arrived.

“If you give me your numbers later I can send it to you,” said Paula, putting her phone away.

“Oh, that would be lovely!” Cathy said. “I can send it to my daughter then.”

Rachel agreed, to be polite.

When they arrived at Roberto’s, they were lucky to get a table outside, overlooking the river.

“It’s a busy town,” Paula said, looking around. “And aren’t the railings so pretty?”

The riverside railings had the famous Camino scallop-shell design in the ironwork.

“I believe that Sarria is one of more popular starting points for people,” said Cathy, “because it’s just over one hundred kilometres, which is the minimum requirement you need in order to receive the Compostela.”

“What’s the Compostela?” Rachel said, looking around for a waiter.

“It’s the Camino Certificate of Completion,” said Cathy, surprised that Rachel didn’t know this. Cathy had dreamed of one day receiving hers and now it was going to happen.

“Well, I need a glass of wine,” Rachel said, changing the subject as she raised her hand for the waiter. “Anyone else?”

“I’ll join you,” Paula said, sitting back and taking in her surroundings. She recognised some people from their flight sitting nearby with delicious platters of meats and cheeses in front of them. Other tables seemed to be occupied by Camino walkers too. Everyone looked so relaxed.

“Water for me, please,” Cathy said, nervously running her Miraculous Medal back and forth on its chain.

“Is that a Miraculous Medal?” Rachel asked, noticing the image of Our Lady on it.

Cathy nodded.

Rachel leaned forward to look at it. “My mother used to slip one into my handbag when I went home for a visit. She said it would keep me safe in the big city of Dublin.”

“It was a present from a friend,” said Cathy.

The waiter returned with their drinks and the menus.

Paula held her glass up. “*To a great week!*”

“*A great week!*” the others responded, raising their glasses and then taking a sip.

“I can’t believe it’s almost one hundred and fifteen kilometres from here,” said Paula. “I’m feeling a little nervous now.”

“Me too,” said Cathy.

“So how much training have you guys done?” Paula asked, taking a sip of her wine.

Cathy and Rachel looked at each other.

“None!” they said together, as they laughed and shook their heads.

“Well, I walk five kilometres every day to and from work,” Cathy said.

“That’s a lot, you’ll be fine,” Rachel answered. “I don’t walk much but I work out three times a week in the gym early mornings so I’m hoping that will help.”

“Okay, now I feel completely inadequate,” Paula said. “I walk a little bit but I should have put more thought into this. My friend Jill organised everything. I was just planning on following her but she had to pull out to take care of her mother who fractured her hip so I’m completely underprepared. I know people book months, even years in advance to go on the Camino but I only booked this two weeks ago.”

“So did I,” Cathy answered.

“So did I,” said Rachel.

The three women looked at each other.

“Oh God, what are we like!” said Paula.

And the three of them burst out laughing.