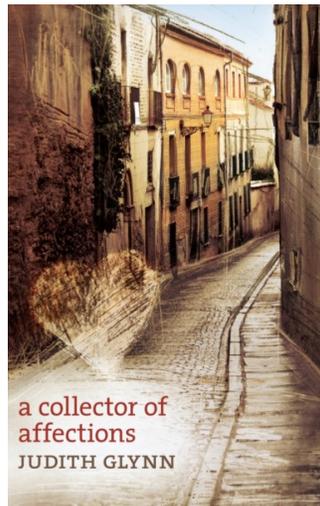


**A Collector of Affections:
Tales from a Woman's Heart**

By

Judith Glynn



Chapter Three

The bucolic and pastoral scenes en route to Madrid blurred as Leah's eyes drooped and finally closed after the exhausting visit with Javier combined with her lingering jet lag. When the bus jerked to a stop at the AutoRes station, she rubbed her eyes awake and was the last person to get off. Just being in the city again gave her an adrenaline high to walk the few blocks to the subway station where she swiped her multi-ride ticket at the turnstile. Tirso de Molina was her stop, close to the center of Madrid. Although familiar with the area, she still ran her finger over the subway platform map and counted the number of stations before she'd get off the train.

She exited the subway and walked the few blocks to her apartment building. She planned a good night's sleep. The next day she'd stroll her favorite streets. Fresh thinking and a much-needed sea change in her life were on the agenda. Leah adored Madrid. She acclimated quickly

whenever she arrived; the city had remained in her heart long after her feet first touched its soil. First stop would be the *Museo del Jamon* restaurant for a *bocadillo doble* with *Jamon Serrano* and a beer. It wasn't a fancy place with hundreds of cured ham legs dangling from the ceiling but she liked mingling with the stand-up patrons. A visit to the Prado Museum was obligatory to view her favorite painting – Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych. A small crowd usually formed in front of the oil masterpiece painted in the 1500s, which some interpreted as a depiction of the perils of life's temptations. Leah drew inspiration from the creativity of others, especially insightful paintings that told a larger story. She hoped to create equally beautiful scenes in her novels where exquisite surroundings, combined with challenges for her characters, filled page after page.

But as she neared her apartment building, she became increasingly despondent about being alone. Once inside the slow birdcage-elevator that inched upward, she was disgusted with herself over the Javier reunion. She flipped open her cell phone and scrolled to his name. "Here's to the death of good intentions," she said and deleted his number, pressing harder than necessary.

Leah went straight to the bedroom when she entered the apartment and pulled at an overhead chain to light the ceiling fixture. Her large suitcase was on the bed with the airline's luggage tag still looped around the handle. Many older Madrid apartments didn't have closets. Instead, an ornate walnut armoire stood across the room, sturdy on its clawed wrought-iron feet. She turned the antique key and the doors squeaked open. She hung up what she could and crammed smaller items into the bottom drawer.

When it finally occurred to her that the bedroom was too dark for the bright Spanish morning, she opened the red velvet drapes and rolled up the outside metal shutter. She didn't hear her cell phone ring until the room had brightened. How odd. Not many people had her Spanish number. Checking the caller ID, no name appeared, only a sequence of nine numbers. She hesitated, trying to remember the last four digits of Javier's phone. When she was convinced it wasn't a call from him, she answered.

"Welcome back, Leah. Recognize this voice?" the male caller asked.

"Well hello, seatmate Miguel," she said, trying not to gush and reveal her delight. What a wonderful surprise to hear your voice. So you didn't forget me?"

"Forget you? Never. I've thought about you ever since you left for Salamanca. How'd it go, by the way?" he said but didn't wait for her response. Instead, he continued about his day at the

Prado Museum, made all the more wonderful with a personal guide who highlighted the fourteen must-see masterpieces. Miguel then paused, leaving Leah to anticipate his next sentence. "You up for a flamenco show with me tonight?"

If she told the truth, she wasn't up for anything but a slow walk around Madrid, a solitary dinner at a restaurant with an outside terrace, people watching, some fine Spanish wine and a good night's sleep.

"Of course I'll go. I love flamenco. It will be great to see you again."

Leah remembered how he had intrigued her on the plane – enough to keep her talking until the Spanish dawn. He made her feel alive. She became a young girl enchanted with his flirting despite their middle-aged hearts. Well, maybe it wasn't flirting. She wanted it to be. Whatever it was, it was magic. She wanted more. He'd be a fun distraction after the brutal reality of Javier.



It was a short walk from her apartment to the Puerta del Sol where she'd meet Miguel under the clock tower. Should she tell him about Javier? Probably not since she might cry. Maybe he'd forget to ask her again. Leah was a strong woman and could discuss practically anything with anybody but she preferred to forget the Salamanca event.

"There you are. You look wonderful," Miguel said after he maneuvered through a small crowd to greet Leah.

His hug thrilled her. A whiff of cologne trailed as he brushed his smooth cheeks against hers with two kisses that escaped into the air. What an infectious and upbeat attitude he had.

"Before we go to the *tablao*, let's have a quick bite. I discovered a terrific *tapas* place on my way to meet you."

"How about we go to the *Museo del Jamon*? It's a block away. I'm due for my first *bocadillo* in Madrid. Agree?" He did.

"You seem a little off," Miguel said as they walked along. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine. Just pensive, which I can be sometimes," she said and led him into the restaurant, pointing out the deli selections and dangling cured ham legs.

Leah loved flamenco. Miguel hadn't seen the dance performed live nor did he know much about its origin. As they sat at a small table close to the stage, she explained that flamenco's

birthplace was Costa del Sol, the region running the length of the Spain's southern coast. Many of the dancers were descended from Gypsy families. They'd been coded at birth to understand flamenco's language and music. The only requisite needed for the rest of the world to experience this exquisite art form was a passion for flamenco's beauty, sorrow and pain.

"How do you know so much?" Miguel asked as the *tablaó* filled with animated patrons.

"When I lived in Spain years ago, I'd go to Andalusia to see flamenco performed by the pros. I'm a true devotee. This was the perfect invite for me tonight."

She then explained flamenco's three elements: the song, which was most important; the dancers, and the music, primarily guitarists. The clapping hands of the performers, who sat onstage in a row of simple, rustic chairs, were the magical accompaniment to the flamenco dancers' feet. The tapping in flamenco music imitated the sounds made in a forge. Many Andalusian men worked as blacksmiths. The lyrics sung during flamenco were often impromptu and composed on stage.

"If you give me your scent, I will give you my soul. How's that for sexy? It's the best I've heard," Leah told Miguel.

Before he could answer, the lights dimmed and several guitar players sauntered on stage followed by six women dancers. Each flung a fringed shawl over one shoulder. The women had jet-black hair slicked back into a bun, highlighted with a red flower tucked behind one ear. "*Olé*," some audience members shouted as the dancers' castanets found their beat alongside the plucked guitars.

After the show, Miguel and Leah strolled in the midnight mist until they reached the city's *Plaza Mayor*, a massive main square like Salamanca's dating back centuries. It felt so right and so peaceful as he motioned for them to sit under a table umbrella and enjoy a nightcap.

"This is none of my business, and you can tell me that, but what happened with Javier in Salamanca?" Miguel asked when he stopped raving about the beauty around them.

"Our blissful rendezvous was a disaster. He wants me as a quasi-companion, an occasional lover. He still grieves for his deceased wife and wants to be a full-time and unattached widower with children."

"So what did you say?"

"I wanted us to be a committed couple."

"And?"

"It's not going to happen. I'll never see or talk to him again. And to think all those years we've known one another went poof. I'll miss the friendship. Oh well."

"I didn't expect that answer."

"You're a guy with good instincts. Why did he want me for so long and then reject me? I know he loves me but not enough."

"*La familia* is exceptionally important to Spaniards. It can withstand a lot. You can kiss him good-bye if he brought his family into the picture. Ask yourself if you want to get involved in that scenario for a lifetime. His wife's memory and their children will always come before you."

"Is it also cultural differences? He brought that up."

"That, too, but mostly he lacks courage when it comes to women. I know many men in Spain like Javier and even some in America. How others perceive them and their marriage is important. He loves you. I'm sure of that. But don't expect him to change. You're too independent for him."

"I wasn't before. Why did he remarry his ex-wife?"

"They probably had an odd marriage but, in his own way, he loved her. Forget him, Leah. He won't live the life you need. I'm a Spaniard, too, but I've lived in America long enough to appreciate a woman like you. Forget Javier."

His insight startled her. Before she could respond, strolling *La Tuna* musicians stopped at their table to serenade them. The minstrel group recreated a twelfth-century tradition begun when struggling university students supported themselves through donations given by appreciative listeners. The group still dressed in traditional costume: black jackets with slashed sleeves; black calf-length or shorter trousers; black tights and shoes, complemented with a white shirt and a colored sash representing the wearer's college. When they left their table to serenade another couple, Miguel suggested it was time to leave. "What a beautiful night, Leah," he said, and reached for her hand.

They lingered outside her apartment building. She wanted to invite him in but resisted the impulse. Instead, she wished him well in his travels through Castilla y Leon and Castilla-LaMancha that would begin the next morning. He'd be gone for two weeks and fly back to Virginia without stopping in Madrid again.

"Call me from the road if you remember. I'd love to hear your impressions of Spain," Leah said in parting.

"How about breakfast tomorrow before I drive to Segovia? Maybe you can give me some travel tips," he said hesitantly.

"I'd love that. You know about the aqueduct in Segovia. Right? Oh, and be sure to eat lamb or roasted pig. I'll think of some more things," she said, elated at his request to see her again.



"Have you seen Segovia?" Miguel asked Leah at the end of their breakfast.

"Yes. Beautiful place."

"Want to see it again?" he said softly.

"Now?" she asked incredulously. She'd seen the famed city with the Roman aqueduct several times, but she accepted his offer with excitement.

What was going on? Her emails would be left to languish; her pledge to write, sabotaged; her friends neglected and long walks abandoned. Instead, she'd spend the day in Segovia with tender Miguel. He'd later reveal how his invitation had become a struggle when Susan, his Virginia girlfriend, flashed across his thoughts. He invited Leah anyway.

"Seatmates again. Destination Segovia," Miguel said as they buckled their car seatbelts. "Happy to have you aboard, madam," he added and saluted.

Once on the road, Spain's magnificent and billboard-free highway opened up before them with panoramic views of the *Meseta*, the massive central plateau in the center of the Iberian Peninsula. At times, stark brown and gray tones highlighted the parched earth. Square bales of khaki-colored hay were piled into stair-like forms while others were placed randomly on the farmlands. It was a delightful ride.

The conversation included his favorite literary characters, many names new to Leah. Mostly they laughed and shared anecdotes from their lives. But there was more going on than conversation, and they knew it. They were well-schooled in the art of seduction and its consequences. When they ran away to Segovia, Miguel broke his commitment to a trusting woman back home. Leah betrayed her, too, though neither of them mentioned that.

Despite being successful business people with a few gray hairs, they acted like carefree teenagers, stretching each hour to its fullest. They arrived in glorious Segovia in the afternoon.

Absorbing it all, they sat at an outdoor cafe in a cozy, embracing plaza where stone buildings were adorned with wrought-iron balconies covered with geraniums.

As the day slipped into early evening, they strolled arm in arm, stopping often to laugh along the stone streets and to window shop. Miguel had a comedic sense of timing and would act out dramatic parts. One moment he'd be a boisterous, angry Spaniard jamming his hand into the bend of his elbow. Then he'd drop his voice several octaves and become a gravel-voiced old man.

Rounding a corner, they came upon Segovia's multi-spire, sixteenth-century cathedral where the spotlights illuminated and spilled into the *Plaza Mayor* and over its ornate wrought-iron bandstand. Absorbed by the beauty of the city, Miguel and Leah missed the tolling of the Town Hall's hourly bell. When they finally checked bus and train schedules, it was too late for her to return to Madrid.

"How about we have dinner in Segovia? I'll change my double-bed room for one with two singles. You can return to Madrid in the morning," Miguel suggested.

"Sure. That sounds like a good plan," she said hesitantly.

The reality was that she didn't have a quick answer and didn't know what to do. His *two single beds* suggestion made her feel a little trapped. Being intimate with Miguel wasn't what she had in mind. She assumed he didn't either. Nothing about their day hinted at romance. His hotel invite didn't have a sexual nuance; otherwise, she'd have opted for her own room. She had made love with Javier in Salamanca and wasn't ready to make love to a different man so soon afterward. And it wasn't her style to be coerced into a suggestion like his. She was too worldly for that nonsense. She couldn't imagine he'd be so naïve to think she'd sleep with him. They were new friends, seatmate buddies now in Spain. She liked it that way.

But resisting Miguel's charm had become difficult for her, especially when he spoke to Spaniards in their language. He sounded so gallant and polished. She listened and smiled as he stopped a sweet, arm-holding pair of elderly women to ask for their perfect restaurant suggestion. The evening had a cool nighttime breeze. Leah's arm was linked into his, and she pressed closer to feel his warmth. The women's choice was the nearby José María Restaurant. It had a four-foot-wide, cast-iron suckling pig on its outside wall lying in a roasting pan with its head and legs hanging over the rim. Skilled waiters could cut through the regional *cochinillo asado* dish by making blunt cuts with a dinner plate turned sideways.

Miguel and Leah were led to a back table. Hundreds of wine bottlenecks, some covered in dust, protruded from an aqueduct-style wine rack attached to the wall. Black-suited waiters scurried about with white napkins draped over one arm, matching the tablecloths draped on the tables. Talavera de la Reina ceramic *artesanía* wall plates encircled a photo of Spain's King Juan Carlos shaking hands with the restaurant owner. And while the crowd buzzed with animated talk, Miguel and Leah spoke softer and sweeter words as the hours passed and the wine flowed.

"I love your face and eyes," he said. "I really like you a lot, Leah."

"Beautiful compliments, Miguel. Don't stop them."

"Can you believe we're having dinner in Segovia? When I sat next to you on that plane, my trip didn't include this night with you. Every day had a purpose; every night had a hotel room for one."

"Hey, sometimes we get sprinkled with magic dust when we travel. Maybe that's what happened. Celebrate life. We're living the best of it right now."

Leah fed Miguel from her plate, tracing her lips with her tongue. The long, enchanting dinner ended with a nightcap, compliments of their waiter. As they left the restaurant, Leah realized she'd never intended to find herself falling in love with Miguel – never – but under the stars, a teasing moon beckoned them to their hotel, a short walk along a street lined with vintage hitching posts.

Arriving at Room 104 became a blur in her memory. Her first clear recollection was of stepping out of the hot shower with her nipples erect. Since she didn't have a nightgown, she borrowed Miguel's T-shirt and pulled up her lace panties for the walk to her twin bed. She had a crucial decision to make about the intense desire that was heating and moistening her as intensely as the shower had done. She decided to share her confusion.

"Miguel," she called, as she opened the bathroom door. He approached wearing a T-shirt and shorts. "I'm confused. I don't know what to do. We've had a wonderful day. I don't want it to end. Now we're alone in this room. What will happen to us if we make love?"

"Here's my answer," he said and placed her hand on his hidden erection.

"I thought so," she whispered as they kissed briefly at the bathroom door before she pulled away. She walked into the bedroom with the two single beds and chose the one closest to the wall. Miguel stood in the shadows watching her.

"I want you," she sighed when their eyes met.

He walked slowly over to her bed, lay down beside her and slipped one arm under her neck while the other drew her closer to him. They murmured endearing words on their shared pillow, words that neither had said aloud. When their naked bodies touched, it was the inevitable continuation of their minds connecting on the plane. His first kisses were short and awkward, like those of a schoolboy's. The window shutters were slightly ajar, and the golden light reflecting into their room from the nineteenth-century outdoor lantern was their bed cover. If the room was cold, they didn't notice. Words vanished as their kisses intensified.

"*Te adoro*, Leah," he whispered as his tongue moistened her ear. "I adore you," he repeated in English. "What is happening to us?"

"I don't know," she sighed.

He cupped her head with his gentle hands, met her eyes with his, smiled his love for her and then gently slid his tongue inside her mouth that he had squeezed into a tight opening. She accepted it and pushed her body against his, returning his passion. His moist tongue encircled her nipples, eventually moving down her body until she could see his adoring eyes gazing up at her from between her legs. Miguel was a superb lover, a giver.

"This changes everything," she gasped, as he tasted a different Leah.

When he raised her legs to inch himself over her, he rubbed his erection against the wetness between her legs. The only sound she heard as he found his way inside her was the flow of her own sweet juices assuring Miguel he was finally home that night. When she rolled on top of him, his fingers stroked her hips. Later, she caressed his thighs, gently spreading them so her lips could take him into her mouth.

"You know what you're doing," he moaned and whispered. "You're an eighteenth-century courtesan." Leah jokingly asked if an eighteenth-century courtesan translated into a modern-day whore.

"Not at all. You're beautiful, intelligent, and you love to make love. You've been made love to very well."

It was a supreme compliment. A gold medal bestowed to her on a pedestal of sheets. She imagined the sensuous women of years passed who loved the noblemen in the books Miguel carried in his head and heart.

"One man would never have been enough for you," he said as Leah climaxed.

When he drifted off to sleep, she lay awake shaking her head against the pillow. What had she done? What had they done? And what would come next?

Spain's nightlife is infamous and Segovia's youth lived up to its reputation through the wee hours of the morning. Young women on clicking high heels and rowdy young men paraded beneath their semi-opened windows as Miguel slept. Leah didn't. The *Calle de Isabel la Católica* stone walkway below honored Spain's fifteenth-century queen who financed Christopher Columbus' journey to the New World. Was Leah about to take a new journey with Miguel? How did their lovemaking happen so fast? She'd just broken away from a man she'd wanted to be her lifetime companion. Miguel had a girlfriend at home. Maybe the alcohol at dinner had lowered their resistance. Maybe hot, sexy Spain enticed them into bed. Or maybe not. Her single life had its merits, but what was she doing in bed with a seatmate she'd just met?

"Let's make love again," he suggested when he awoke slowly and reached for Leah just as the phone rang. "Don't answer that," he said quickly and sat upright. His request was too late as her hello passed through the receiver.

"It was my wake-up call. Don't you remember I'm taking the bus back to Madrid this morning?" she said when she hung up. An all-too-familiar sensation came over her as she saw Miguel staring straight ahead. A committed man in another woman's bed is terrified if he thinks he's been caught. "It's quarter past two in the morning in Virginia. Your girlfriend is probably asleep in your bed, and you're in mine," Leah said.

"I don't want you to go," he said pulling her close as he placed his erection between her legs. The night had transformed them into instantaneous and moist lovers, which again placed him inside her with ease. His lustful climax came from a place in his heart, body and soul that had lain dormant for years. The Spanish words he gasped between gritted teeth called out to the deities in the heavens.

"I haven't cum in Spanish for years," he said and slumped to one side of their bed.



Riding the stuffy bus to Madrid sickened Leah. The rushed breakfast coffee and pastry she shared with Miguel curdled in her stomach. The abundance of wine the night before created a pounding headache. She placed her forehead against the cool windowpane as the crowded bus

bounced along. How did a simple invitation to Segovia result in an overnight with Miguel, being hung over and so sexually aroused with his memory that she was still moist? She wasn't that impetuous to run off willy-nilly with a stranger but that's exactly what she did. She was a seasoned woman with an attuned instinct for choosing lasting bedmates and not one-night stands. Her Madrid trip was supposed to resolve issues that gnawed at her psyche, not create new ones. But what incredible joy Miguel gave her.

When the bus pulled into the Madrid bus station, Leah had already been in and out of the city twice despite being in Spain for only four days. She'd contacted none of her Madrid friends or her family back home. The refrigerator was empty; her emails unanswered. She was flat out exhausted, physically and emotionally. She'd slept with two men and neither was permanently at her side.

Leah's apartment building with its balconies overlooking a green plaza and a gushing fountain was a welcomed sight. Once inside, she went directly to the bedroom, lowered the metal shutters, took a shower, slid naked under the bed covers and slept for the entire day.



"I need to talk to you right away," Leah said to her friend Rocío. It was the first call she made when she woke up. She was still in bed when she reached for the phone.

"Welcome to Madrid, Leah. Or should I say welcome home. Where are you? I lost your cell number and was getting nervous when you didn't call."

"Oh my God, Rocío. The most amazing thing happened. I don't know why I did it. Can I see you in an hour?"

"Of course but give me a hint. You always have a story. This one sounds extra special."

"Hint? Think seatmate, Segovia, lust and confusion."

"What? Oh, never mind. Come visit me. I'll make *paella*. I know, I know, no shrimp for you, only chicken. Hurry."

"Great. I'll bring the wine."

Refreshed and eager to see her friend, Leah dressed quickly and took a cab to the wealthy Salamanca district and Rocío's apartment on *Calle de Lagasca*. The building had a *potero* who opened the door for her, modern elevators and slick marble hallways. Rocío had decorated her

spacious two-bedroom home with exquisite taste. Leah adored her friend but not her cats. The friends had remained in frequent contact that evolved with Skype and email. A favorite topic was men.

"*Guapa*," Rocío greeted Leah as she opened the door with a flourish. "You look marvelous. Come in, come in," she repeated after they rocked back and forth in a bear hug. "Let's uncork your wine and you can tell me your fantastic story. Or should I only ask his name? Wait, don't tell me just yet. First we need full wine glasses. Wow! Look at that smile on your face."

Leah walked out onto Rocío's terrace while her friend prepared their drinks. Any skyline view was limited since the apartment was located in a congested neighborhood. Instead, she peered over the railing, remembering the many times Javier treated her to shopping sprees on the upscale street below.

"Okay, my dear, begin," Rocío said when she joined Leah, and they toasted. "Who's the mystery man?"

"Miguel Santiago," Leah said and blew out his name between pursed lips. "He was my seatmate on the flight over. We talked the entire way. I never expected to see him again, but we ran away to Segovia where we made love. It's incredible this happened to me. Javier and I slept together in Salamanca, too, but we're finished. Completely finished."

"You're talking too fast, Leah. Slow down, please. I can't follow you. One lover at a time."

Rocío never took her gaze away from Leah, sitting stone-faced as a cat jumped on her lap. She still had a shapely body with narrow hips, rounded breasts and long legs. Her flawless skin contrasted with her jet-black hair pulled back in a bun with an exotic Spanish comb tucked in it. Her expensive clothes came from the top shops on *Calle Serrano* accented with scarves purchased at Loewe. Rocío wore 18-karat gold bracelets and Majorica pearls.

She was also a seasoned woman so Leah felt at ease discussing her sexual escapades of the past few days. Although her friend had had several romances in and out of marriage, she'd soured with age and was judgmental.

"Listen. Javier is like most men," Rocío said. "He didn't want an emotional conflict with you and took the line of least resistance. He reverted to what was comfortable and familiar behavior. You were his mistress, even after his wife's death."

"So you don't like affairs. Is that what you're saying? Or no affairs with married men or Spanish men with deceased wives?" Leah questioned a bit annoyed with her friend.

"You should only be involved with single men who want a new woman. Learn from my mistakes, Leah. Don't you remember the delirious and painful affair I had with Ricardo?" He was a fellow Spaniard, married to a Spanish woman and lived in New York. He and Rocío were lovers when she was married and living in New York. "I'm still disgraced behind my back and hurting. We were deeply in love. But when our affair was discovered, I lost my husband, his wealth, my standing in the Spanish community and self-respect. Ricardo only lost me."

"And guess what?" Rocío asked Leah. She tried to laugh but tears came instead. "Ricardo and his wife are still married with memories of a long life together, me being one of them. My husband and I *separated* for years until Spanish law let us divorce. Would I have had the affair if I had known the outcome? No. I should have known better. I'm a Spaniard but love and lust have no conscience. *La familia*, Spanish marriages, infidelities and no divorce are an engrained way of life for some of us."

"Did I do the right thing by leaving Javier?" Leah asked.

"Absolutely. Why ask me that? You know you did. Move on. You deserve better. Now tell me about Miguel. This one might have some promise."

"Truthfully, you may not like this story," she said and relived the plane ride and Segovia. "He's incredible. What a charmer. What a lover. I'm crazy about him. It was lust for sure but something else was going on. He's got a girlfriend in Virginia."

"Oh, come on, Leah. A girlfriend back home?" Rocío said and looked down her nose, shrugging her shoulder. "Not nice behavior for the two of you?"

"I know, I know. But he's not engaged or married. She sounds like a sister or best friend. For me, it was sexy and perfect timing after the dump from Javier. I don't expect to see Miguel again. I just wanted your reaction to this far-fetched seatmate story. So what's your advice on affairs? What should I do?"

"Truthfully? I think lustful love where you lose your sense of direction is a sickness. Avoid it. Cultivate deep friendship, then make love but not when either party is involved with someone else. The relationship works better without a lie as the foundation. Miguel will be back. Mark my words. But let's forget men for now and eat *paella*. I prefer to hear about your family and your daughter's wedding plans," Rocío said as she took the wine glass out of Leah's hand and led her to the kitchen.

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