

CHAPTER ONE: A STRANGE BOOK, A STRANGE MAN

In a library of Boston in winter, almost all the lights were off, the door was ajar and everything was in absolute silence, except for a small room with a lamp illuminating the interesting book that they had found Peter and Olivia.

Peter and Olivia were two 16 year old. They used to go to walk every afternoon, but that afternoon it was snowing too heavily. They found their shelter in that old library. They spent hours looking for entertainment books (jokes, comics, stories ...) and they only stopped their search when a book fell on Peter's head. The book's title was: *Europe, together and apart*. On the cover was a picture of eight children of their age, some very dark skinned, others very blonde ... different guys. Below the photo appeared a date, which they supposed, was the date on which the book was published in 2010.

Olivia had just started to read the introduction and closed the book, she preferred to keep looking for the comics that should be in the library, but she didn't find them. But Peter insisted that they could spend a nice evening reading the story, it could be an amusing story. Peter grabbed Olivia's arm and led her to a small room, lit the lamp and while she was complaining, Peter opened the book and began to read loudly...

Europe: together and apart

Maybe your parents have bought this book, maybe a good friend has given it to you or you have found it by accident. For us this is more than coincidence. It is the story of a true story and loyal friendship between eight people who met, maybe by chance, or maybe fate.

Everything happened in an afternoon in which the sun was at the top of the sky and was shining and warming with the same intensity every day of the year, there, in Badajoz. Isabel, the typical Spanish girl (brunette, brown eyes, thin, happy ...) was walking alone in the park she used to go with her friends, but that afternoon they were all out of town. In the park she could hear the laughter of children and clucking ducks.

Isabel sat on a bench feeding the pigeons, but soon she got bored and started to do something that relaxed her, looking at people and thinking about them, it was a strange hobby. One woman, well dressed and looked like she was in a hurry, "You're late to a meeting," thought Isabel. Children playing with a ball, just children. Until Isabel saw a very

strange person... A man, wearing a black suit and little hair on his head was sitting on a bench near her, and he was staring at her. Isabel, seeing that the man looked at her, she felt a little shiver, looked away, hiding, and soon looked again. The man was not there. Isabel looked for him, but not finding, she decided to forget what happened. Being bored again, she closed her eyes, put her head back to receive the sun's warmth on your face ... but suddenly, there was only shadow. She raised her head, opened her eyes and in front her she saw seven people, who appeared to be of the same age, three girls and four boys.

They looked different, and she thought that they were aliens. She smiled and said: “¿Qué queréis chicos?” (What do you want guys?). One of them replied: "What!?" while all looked puzzled. Isabel then realized that there were not aliens, not from another planet, but from another country, they were foreigners.

Then a blonde girl asked her:

- Do you speak English?
- Yes, a bit - Isabel replied puzzled.
- You look like from this city, do you know where Castelar Park is?
- Yes, and you too!
- You see! I told you this was the park! - Shouted the boy with a darker skin.

Isabel smiled and they all smiled with her.

- Nice, I'm Isabel. If you want I can show you the park and surrounding area. Here are a lot of beautiful things ... shops where you can buy anything!

The girls smiled, thinking that they were finally going to be able to buy the clothes they wanted, and started to introduce themselves.

- I'm Leyna, and I'm from Germany. Nice to meet you! - She said with a smile. - I hope you can show the best things about your city.

And behind the blonde German girl were two more girls, Sanne, a very tall Dutch girl, and Ileana, a Romanian girl shorter than the former one. All of them wore a bracelet that said "Comenius: Earth, Sea and Sky". Then, the boys introduced themselves. Their names were Kokko, a tall pale guy from Finland, Wimor, who had red hair from Poland, Giovanni, a boy from Italy, very (very) handsome and Jenda, a nice boy rocker in the Czech Republic.

Once everyone got to know one another, Isabel was surprised by the differences of countries, and could not resist asking. They told her they had met online, through a project called Comenius-web (like the bracelets!), the aim of which was to learn English and to learn more about different cultures. And they had decided to meet in Spain.

Isabel looked at her watch, it was one o'clock and it was very hot. She decided to start their tour of places around where one can have fun with his new friends. She showed an entire Castellar fleet, the arc of Puerta de Palmas, the Arab fortress, the tower Espantaperros ... that is, the most historical place in Badajoz. Besides, they stopped to buy the typical pancense sweet from time to time ...All foreigners love sweets of Extremadura!

It was already 3 pm ... lunch! Isabel called her mother to ask if her friends could eat at home. The mother, delighted, she made a Spanish huge omelet and a nice cool glass of gazpacho from Extremadura. They all enjoyed the meal, though at first they made a face when they saw the gazpacho, but then everyone loved it. For dessert Isabel's mother brought a bowl with lots of cherries, red and very very sweet, again, everyone loved them. Later, the mother left them, because she was going to take a "siesta". When they heard the word siesta, everyone began to laugh, and Isabel was very surprised. It seems every foreigner finds the Spanish siesta very amusing.

Isabel decided not to take a siesta on that day, and she accompanied them all to their hotel. They took a shower and they were ready for shopping in stores Badajoz.

They spent hours on the Menacho Street, where they found the shops, and everyone loved them! They bought many things and saw some of the streets of Badajoz. At 10 pm they still felt the heat of the sun, but this was no longer in the sky, and it was time for dinner. Some were tired, but they decided to have dinner together and prepare plans for the next day. Isabel took them all to McDonald's, everyone liked the burgers!

During dinner, Isabel discovered that Sanne and Kokko loved ancient monuments, and she told them about the Roman city of Merida. They decided that one of those days they would have to get to know this beautiful city. But for now, they had agreed to go to the water park the next day. Everyone was excited about the idea!

They met at the hotel entrance at 10 am. Isabel greeted them all very happily and they responded with the same enthusiasm for spending a day together again in the water park.

They took the bus that took them to the water park Lusiberia and they sat together at the back of the bus. They talked about their favorite types of music and films during the trip, but it seemed so strange to Isabel: They all spoke very low, almost whispering, as if to speak a little louder was prohibited. Isabel said it was not something to feel ashamed, for a moment they should forget some of the customs of their countries and she shouted cheerfully: "Speak louder!. Everyone laughed with her.

The bus was passing a small street where Isabel's favorite the shops were. Whenever she passed by, she stood looking at shop windows. Isabel looked out of the windows when the bus stopped at a traffic light. Still looking out the window, but suddenly, there he was. That strange man who she saw the previous day in the park, the man dressed in black, was there, staring at her and all her friends. Isabel began to have some fear of this mysterious man. She closed her eyes tightly, shook her head and looked again. The man was not there. Isabel thought she was going crazy. She decided not to tell the guys, knowing that this was nonsense, that it could be her imagination. Again, she forgot what had happened.

After this entertaining journey by bus (and some concern for Isabel), they arrived at the water park. Once inside everyone went to their wardrobe to wear their swimsuit. Isabel advised everyone to bring sun cream, because their skins were very white and the sun was very strong. They followed her advice and left the locker room with a smile. What would their friends say when they tell them they have been in a large outdoor water park!

Before taking a bath they all decided to put their stuff on the lawn, talking a bit and playing cards. They had fun but ... what was a water park without enjoying its pools!

Everyone ran to the largest pool. They enjoyed like children! Then they ran to the huge wave pool, what impressed them a lot, they thought that this pool was like a beach. It pulled all the huge water slides ... everyone loved it!

After so much fun, they had to stop for a while to eat and get stronger. Everyone sat on towels and ate sandwiches and drank huge cans of Coca-Cola. When they finished eating they began to speak, to know one another better. Everyone gave thanks to Isabel for the good days they were going through, and they prepared plans for the next few days.

At 5 pm there was still a good sun, so that all the girls went sunbathing to get a tan, and the

guys started talking about football, cars ... stuff of guys! Everyone did this, except for Leyna and Jenda, who sat apart, talking very close ... they all smiled when they saw this.

After spending some time lying there, it was very hot, so they went back to the pools and had a lot of fun again.

It was late and the sun was going down, so they decided to collect all their things, to take a shower, they went to the hotel to rest. Isabel accompanied them and when she got home she told her mother the details of the great day she had with her friends. And her mother gave a very good idea to Isabel.

The idea? A day of bulls! Spain is known for bullfighting, right? Well, there wasn't any better trip than that. Isabel took the guys to their hotel for lunch. She also needed a little rest. But the bullfighting was going to begin at 5 pm, so after lunch (and siesta), at 3 pm, Isabel went to the hotel to take the guys to Olivenza, an Extremadura town known for its bullfights. They were about twenty minutes away, and they had started to get to know a bit of the village.

It was already 5 pm and they all went into the square. They thought that it was awesome, the place was "hasta la bandera", which means that it was full of people, and the day was wonderful to spend a good evening of bulls. First came the bullfighters and their crews made a "little walk" (it was beautiful). And soon they began to fight. There were six bulls, two for each matador. Some of the bulls were killed, others taken from the tail, ears ... Some of the guys did not like it much, but because it is an undisputed Spanish custom, they enjoyed it very much. They left the place very happily and they talked about their experience while walking around the town until they arrived at their hotel.

The next morning, Isabel was at the hotel and gave them a pleasant surprise: She had prepared a trip to Mérida! Everyone took their backpacks and left the hotel. They were all very pleased with the idea.

Along the way on the bus Isabel told everyone the story of Mérida. They were impressed to learn that Mérida was a Roman city and the capital of Lusitania. Once there, they first went to the Roman Theatre and the Amphitheatre. They saw several bridges, churches, aqueducts ... Everyone was impressed to learn that these monuments were so old and still remained standing and in such good condition. They made lots of pictures and bought some gifts for their families.

But suddenly something frightened Isabel. She turned to the man dressed in black. During all those days she kept thinking about him, even dreamed about him. And there he was,

looking in the same street in front of them. Isabel was filled with courage, took the arm of the boy nearest him, Giovanni, and she said without taking her eyes from the man,

- This man has been following me all week! Come with me, I will ask him who he is and what he wants!

The two walked towards the man, but before they crossed the street a large truck passed, which prevented them from passing. When the truck was gone ... the man was not there! Giovanni began to search everywhere and could not find him. They told the other guys and they looked at the little street, but they found nothing, so they just comforted Isabel and told her not to worry about anything, and they were there to protect and help her. Isabel realized they were right, that nothing would happen to them, and she continued showing the city, even a little startled, but a little relieved.

When it was lunchtime, there in Merida, everyone went to lunch at a typical restaurant in Extremadura. All let Isabel order the meal for them, because it was she who knew what they should eat, and everyone was hungry for Spanish food because they had spoken highly of it. Isabel hoped they would not get disappointed.

Isabel spoke a while with the waiter, and minutes later he brought many plates full of food. Isabel was explaining them what it all was: Several pork sausages, two plates of cured Iberian ham, plates with various types of sausage (white, black, Iberian ...), bread spread with "cachuela" (lard) and a "Torta del Casar" (one of the finest cheeses from Extremadura). All these were accompanied with a good cold jug of "Sangría" (wine, chopped fruit and fruit juice).

At first everyone was a little disgusted, because almost everything was pork, and cheese smelled very bad, but when they tried it, they could not stop eating... and they asked for more food! When they finished their meal, although they were full, Isabel advised them to try a typical cake from Olivenza, "the people of the bulls" and said the boys, called "Técula Mécula", and all requested a stub. Again, they loved it! Isabel was very relieved because she was right with her selection of the food she had ordered.

It was late, and although the sun still shone, they had to return to Badajoz. They took the bus back, they parted and each went to their room to rest. Of course, Isabel told them that they should be ready for a good picnic the following day.

Said and done! The next morning at 11 o'clock, Isabel prepared a snack and a drink for everyone and went to the hotel to pick up everyone. She led them to Tres Arroyos, a place where people were relaxing at the sun, eating something, playing and talking with friends. It was a large grassy field, with many trees, lush vegetation and a small river. They sought the best place; they put all their things and began to play football with a ball Giovanni had brought.

They spent all the morning and the afternoon there, and they had fun. They played all day, walked through those big trees, talked a lot ... but they were a bit upset that everything would be over soon; they would leave Spain the following day.

After the incredible picnic everyone had a shower and got dressed, because Isabel had promised them they would know the "party Badajoz." Everyone wanted to see if it was just as you saw on TV. And, again, they didn't get disappointed. They left at 10 pm ... and until 5 am they did not stop dancing and fun in all the clubs in town.

It was already five and a half, and the moon was shining on the sky. They sat together in a park to give thanks for the very good days that had happened ... but ... suddenly, Giovanni shouted:

- Isabel! It's him! That is the man who is following you!

Giovanni pointed at a blue building, and there was the black dressed man. Isabel was scared, but immediately reacted with all her friends. Everybody started to run to catch this man and to ask him what he wanted from Isabel, or any of them. They crossed several streets running, without losing sight of man, but suddenly they came to a dead end. Everyone was against a wall, they saw the man get there, and he could not have escaped. But there was no sign of him. Well, better said, yes, he had left something, a little hint ... he had put a letter "Comenius Team." Everyone was very surprised; not knowing whether to open the card to see what was inside. But finally Leyna, who was the bravest of all, dared to pick it up. Before opening she looked at everyone as if seeking their approval, and finally opened it and began to read:

- Curious to know what is happening, right? Well, curiosity killed the cat ... do not be so fast, you still have a long journey ahead to find out, a very long journey. If I were you, I would start by looking at the center of Europe ... Wir sehen in Landenburg.

All were very surprised by what Leyna had just read, especially to hear the last sentence, since none of them understood. Except for Leyna, who explained to her friends that the sentence was in German and it meant "See you in Landenburg".

A lot of questions came to their minds: Who was this man? What would he like? What were they seeking? And the most important them all: What would they do now?

Something was clear: He wanted them to go to Germany, and they wanted to go and find out why. But others were not so clear, more than anything, they were afraid. They had a long talk, and eventually took the more risky option: Why not a trip to Germany? That mysterious man was waiting there, and if they were wrong and it was all a hoax, what would they lose by going there? They could spend more days together and know that beautiful country. Or even they could discover a great mystery, like in the novels of adventure.

Their feelings were really complicated. They were frightened by this man, but they felt a great joy that they could be together one week more, and they could make a great trip.

They prepared everything quickly to get out soon. All spoke with their families (omitting, of course, the story of the mysterious man), they were delighted to spend this incredible experience, they bought the flight tickets, everything was prepared for the trip ... everything had to be ready!

And finally, two days after finding the letter, they were ready to leave Spain. They entered the plane, sat in their places ... and suddenly Kokko found the final clue: A role in his seat. In that paper it was written "You're going in the right direction." Kokko told it to other guys, and they were relieved that they were doing the right thing to unravel the mystery.

The plane began to move ... to fly! Next stop: Germany. What was waiting for them in that trip? They didn't know it yet...

The chapter was over. Peter, surprised by the story, looked at Olivia and asked her:

- Do you like the story? Shall I continue reading?

- Sure! How exciting!, said Olivia loudly. Peter smiled; he knew that she would like the story. He bent his head again, and went on reading...