

Good Translator



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Chapter 1

Clara Harrow had never lost an argument she cared about, and she wasn't about to start on a Monday.

"Listen to this, Oliver." She jabbed the page with her pen. "*Students will immerse themselves in the rich tapestry of Spanish culture.* It's a gap-year pamphlet."

"Mm."

"Whoever wrote it thinks the subjunctive is optional. Honestly, it reads like a hostage note."

Her husband didn't look up from his toast. "Mm."

"You're not listening."

"I am." He grinned at her over the rim of his mug, and there it was again, the small, stupid flutter she'd been feeling for two years. Now it came with a ring.

They had been married thirty-one days.

Clara was twenty-six, and the most formidable woman in the languages department at Hollis Park

Academy, a title she held unopposed, since the other three teachers were scared of her. She was tall, her chestnut hair was in a French twist that permitted no strays. She wore framed glasses, and crisp blouses buttoned one higher than fashion advised. It didn't help. She was full-chested and

narrow-waisted, and every blouse she owned was locked in a running dispute with its own buttons. Clara considered this the body's problem, not hers. Her English was clear and sharp and very British. Her Spanish was also really good. Ten years of study and practice had made it so natural that when she switched languages she seemed like a latina woman.

She knew she was intimidating. Ex-boyfriends had told her so, and once a taxi driver. She took it as a compliment every time.

She was the kind of feminist who couldn't stand men explaining things to her, who took it as a personal insult when someone said "girl" about a grown woman, and who treated anyone who disagreed with her as an enemy. At one dinner party she argued so fiercely over the phrase "she was asking for it" that the host topped up her wine, hoping it would make her shut up.

But she never lost her temper. She just got more precise. And she never swore. Not "damn," not "bloody," nothing. "If you know the right word," she liked to say, "you never need the wrong one."

Oliver Bennett was twenty-five, a junior architect and a devoted husband, and he had learned to put up with her worst qualities for love. To him she was the one exception to her own rule. He'd fallen for her at a university lecture, watching her take a visiting professor's argument apart without so much as a pause. He had loved her certainty then, the same way he'd loved it at the altar, where she delivered her vows like a Supreme Court justice reading a verdict.

What he wanted now, with a hunger that had started to make him quiet and odd at dinner, was for her to say something filthy to him. Just once.

He had tried hinting.

On the honeymoon in Lisbon he'd murmured against her throat, "Tell me what you want," and she'd answered, "I want you to be gentle and hold me."

It was lovely. It was also, after two years of imagining the first month of marriage, like ordering a feast and getting a nice cup of tea.

Clara wasn't cold. She was warm and responsive, and sometimes, right at the edge of her control, she would arch against him and make a sound that stopped his heart. But she never said anything. Not a word. Once he'd whispered, "Do you want to suck my cock?" against her ear, and she had gone stiff, then laughed her aristocratic laugh. "Oliver, honestly. Where did you pick that up?"

He hadn't tried again.

He'd thought about asking a real person. He had even found a marriage counsellor in Islington and got as far as typing his name into the booking form. Then he'd pictured himself in that office, in daylight, saying *my wife won't talk dirty to me* out loud, and the shame had crawled up his neck like a rash. He closed the tab. He couldn't say it to a stranger's face. He could barely say it to himself. And if Clara ever found out he'd discussed their bedroom with anyone, she would go quiet and cold in a way that would take a year to thaw.

So at one in the morning, the night before that Monday's toast, with Clara asleep beside him in her cotton nightgown, he carried his laptop into the bathroom, sat on the edge of the bath, and typed, red-eared: *how to help my wife be more open in bed*.

The first result was a counselling forum with a clean blue interface. A box at the bottom said *Talk to a counsellor, anonymously*. No faces. He told himself it couldn't hurt. Forty minutes later he had told a Dr. M. W. more about his marriage than he'd ever told his own brother.

She won't take it from you directly, Dr. M.W. wrote. Women like your wife are protected by their own image. Confront her and she'll get defensive, and you say she never backs down. What you want is an indirect approach. Put her somewhere she'll be slowly, safely exposed to a different way of speaking, and let her find her own voice. We run a network for exactly this.

Network? Oliver typed.

Dr. M.W. sent a link. It went to a site called Stepping Up, all soft focus and good design, with a banner that said *Help her find her real self*. Below it ran page after page of reviews from husbands. *Our marriage is unrecognizable now. She smiles differently. Best money I ever spent.*

How does it work? Oliver typed.

Look at the categories, Dr. M.W. replied.

The site was laid out in tidy tiles, each with a photograph. Babysitting. Housekeeping. Translators. Each opened onto a list of postings, and each posting, Dr. M.W. explained, had been put up by a counsellor in the network.

They're professionals who give their time at a steep discount because they believe in the work, he wrote. *Your wife takes an ordinary job. During the working day the counsellor talks with her, subtly, without ever saying what*

he is. He gets her talking about her marriage, her needs, her inhibitions, and she leaves with her problems half solved and never feels she was treated. She'll think it's a pleasant job with an interesting employer.

Oliver read the paragraph three times. It was exactly what he needed: someone with a professional's patience to do the talking, so that neither of them had to. A man working on Clara in the one place she'd never get defensive, because she wouldn't know she was being helped.

Which category would suit her? he typed.

Tell me about her, wrote Dr. M.W. *What is she proud of?*

Oliver thought about it.

Does she like children?

Not really, Oliver admitted. *She says thirteen-year-olds are plenty.*

Housekeeping?

He laughed, quietly, in the bathroom. *She'd rather die. She'd take it as an insult.*

Then what does she need from a job? Think about your wife.

She's a teacher. Fluent in Spanish. She spent a year in Seville.

Oliver considered. *She loves being told she's good at Spanish.*

Then there's your answer, wrote Dr. M.W. Translator. She'll feel respected, and her counsellor gets her undivided attention for hours. She's likelier to open up to someone she's helping than to someone she suspects is helping her. Click it.

He clicked it.

A screen appeared: *You're being redirected to a trusted partner platform.* A moment later he was on a popular freelance site in the world, It was highly recognized that he felt a bit silly for having hesitated. One profile sat glowing at the top of the page.

Two hundred and ninety reviews. A headshot of a dark-haired man in his forties, silver at the temples, with an amused mouth. His name was Julien Serra, a producer and recruiter specializing in linguistics and on-set interpretation. He was looking to fill a position.

Always delivers, said one review. *Calm, generous, brilliant with difficult clients. Changed how I think about communication,* said another. Oliver read forty of them. They were the most reassuring things he had ever read.

The price was five hundred pounds a day. His stomach lurched until Dr. M.W. walked him through the sums. *Three hundred of it tops up your wife's wage. The production pays her six hundred, you add three, and nine hundred lands in her account. She'll believe every penny comes from the client. She'll think she's being paid handsomely for a rare skill, which she is. The other two hundred is the counsellor's flat fee.*

So I'm paying two hundred a day for the counsellor, Oliver typed slowly.

Two hundred a day for the most discreet marriage counsellor in the network, plus a salary your wife will be proud of. And here's the best part.

You can use that money to cover the next day. After the first day, she's paying for her own counselling.

That's an incredible deal.

We think so.

He booked five weeks, starting the first Monday of the summer holidays, and paid for the first day. Then he shut the laptop feeling like a man who had solved a puzzle.

"They found you through a platform," he told her on Wednesday evening, over the curry he'd cooked to cushion the news.

"Found me." Clara put down her fork. "I'm not on a platform."

"I might have made you a profile." He put on his most charming wince.

"You said you wanted something to do over the summer."

"I did say that," she conceded.

"Five weeks. Nine hundred pounds a day."

"Nine hun-" She stopped. Clara did not stop easily. "That's a ridiculous number."

"A production company needs a Spanish-to-English interpreter for their crew. Short hours. Mostly sitting around, they said. It's out in Essex, forty minutes up the A12, so you'd be home every evening." He had practiced the speech in the shower.

She narrowed her eyes, the look she gave a student who claimed the dog had eaten the homework.

It was the summer holidays, and nine hundred pounds a day was a lot of money. Clara loved money the way she loved a well-built sentence.

“Fine,” she said.

Oliver kissed her hand and thought, with the optimism of the doomed, *this is going to work*.

He had no clue what was waiting for her in Essex.

The address was on a quiet street of big detached houses, set back behind iron gates and clipped hedges. The one at the end had pale brick walls, tall windows and a long, immaculate drive, where three black vans sat in sharp contrast to the expensive cars that usually parked there. Every window was covered with heavy black cloth.

Of course the client is wealthy. He’s paying nine hundred pounds a day.

At nine on Monday morning Clara stood on the pavement in a cream blouse, a navy jacket, a pencil skirt and low heels, a leather notebook under her arm.

The door opened.

“Ms. Harrow.” The man in the doorway was Julien Serra. His accent was French underneath, sanded down by years in several countries. He wore a

pale linen shirt open at the throat and held out a warm, dry hand. "Julien Serra. I'm so glad you came."

"I kept my name," she said, before he could call her anything else.

"Of course you did." His smile grew, as though she'd said exactly what he'd been told she would. "Come in. Mind the cables."

She took two steps inside and the house hit her. It was cool and dim. Lights on tall stands blazed in what had once been a living room, and a dozen people moved around them looking tired. They talked over one another in fast, idiomatic Spanish: Mexican, Colombian, one voice from Valencia. Within ten seconds her trained ear had caught a phrase so crude that her face turned red.

"Que se la meta hasta el fondo, y que ella grite, ¿ves? Cierra en su cara."

Clara translated it automatically. Then she stopped walking.

"Mr. Serra." Her voice was very calm. "What exactly does your company produce?"

He didn't pretend. He looked at her with an open, almost respectful gaze, like a man reciting from notes he'd learned long ago.

"Adult films. Premium, for the Latin American and Spanish markets, released in Spanish." He paused to watch her face. "Our leads are American and British. The crew speaks Spanish, and half my set can't understand the other half." He spread his hands. "I need someone to make the two sides of my house understand each other. In the room, in real time." His mouth tightened apologetically. "I'm sorry. The listing is vague on purpose, for legal reasons. And I'd rather people saw the work before they judged it."

Oliver, she thought, with a clarity like ice. *I am going to kill him.*

"I can't do this."

"I understand." Julien's manner softened. "Then there's no obligation. I'll pay you five hundred pounds for the trouble of the trip, and you can go whenever you like. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. Truly."

Five hundred pounds.

A generous consolation for a wasted morning. But nowhere near enough for the deception, or for the long drive back to Islington with nothing to show for it except the knowledge that her own husband had outmaneuvered her.

She should leave. The decision was obvious, and Julien had made it remarkably easy.

He had offered her an exit, very graciously.

Clara hated being expected to do anything.

She looked past him into the bright room. The crew stepped around cables and equipment, still talking in quick, overlapping Spanish. A woman in a silk robe sat cross-legged on a sofa, eating grapes from a plastic tub with the calm of someone at a picnic.

It was disappointingly ordinary.

For years she had argued that the only honest question about any woman's work was whether she'd chosen it. The woman on the sofa looked like she'd chosen it.

Clara hated being made to live inside her own argument.

Nine hundred pounds a day.

Twenty-five working days.

Twenty-two thousand five hundred pounds.

She didn't need to calculate it twice. She did anyway.

It would clear months of expenses, rebuild her savings, and leave enough for the things she'd put off because she was too sensible to spend money she hadn't earned.

Twenty-two thousand five hundred pounds for five weeks of work.

And she was thinking of walking away because the job offended her.
Or because she was afraid of what taking it might say about her.

The distinction annoyed her.

She was a linguist, not a participant. Her job was to help people understand each other, and what they were making didn't change that. If anything, precision mattered more here, where a misread instruction could cost more than embarrassment.

A perfectly respectable argument. She admired herself for producing it so fast.

“Before I consider anything,” she said, turning back to Julien, “I want the full contract, a precise description of my duties, and confirmation that I won’t be asked to do anything beyond interpreting. No extra duties, and no change to the scope once work begins.”

“Of course.”

“And the rate is nine hundred pounds a day?”

“Yes.”

“Payment terms?”

“End of each week.”

“I want the first week in advance.”

He thought about it for a moment. “That can be arranged.”

She’d come ready for a fight. His instant agreement left her with nowhere to aim her indignation.

How inconvenient.

Clara glanced once more at the room. The woman on the sofa was looking at her phone now. The crew went on setting up.

She could still leave. Five hundred pounds would be waiting, along with the satisfaction of having turned down a job she considered beneath her.

I don't even watch porn.

Instead she straightened her jacket.

"I'll review the contract."

Not *I'll take the job*. She wasn't going to give Julien that satisfaction yet.

He stepped aside.

Clara walked into the room.

She told herself it was a professional decision, based on the scope of the work and the terms of the contract.

The twenty-two thousand five hundred pounds had nothing to do with it.

She was an excellent liar, as long as the person she was lying to was herself.

"I'll stay," she said. "On my terms. I translate. I don't appear on camera."

Julien Serra smiled slowly, like a man whose game had just begun.

"Done," he said. "Welcome to the set, Ms. Harrow."

The contract landed in her inbox before she'd found a chair. Eleven pages, and she read every one. Nothing fishy. She signed. A few minutes later someone put cash in her hand: four thousand five hundred pounds.

"Live," Marisol explained in rapid Spanish. She was the script supervisor, small and sharp-eyed, with a clipboard she handled like a weapon. "Beto, the director, gives his directions in Spanish. Our English talent speaks none. You stand by the monitor, out of frame, and turn his notes into English the second he gives them. When a scene has dialogue the English cast needs, you tell them that too."

"I follow maybe two thirds of what Beto says," Julien said from his canvas chair.

"And the third I miss is always the one that matters. I've lost three translators on the first morning. I'm hoping you won't be the fourth."

Clara Harrow had never learned how to lose.

The nakedness wasn't the hard part, though there was plenty of it, and the crew handled it with brisk indifference. She didn't have to look at anyone's body to do her job. The hard part was the vocabulary. She knew the Spanish. She'd read the classics, and enough Lorca and Almodóvar to know the rough end of the register. But she had never once said the English equivalents out loud, and the English equivalents were exactly what the job demanded.

The first test came a few minutes in.

“Dile que le agarre la verga,” Beto said, nodding at Lucía, the Brazilian-American lead, sprawled on the sofa in a robe. “Con las dos manos. Y que lo mire.”

Clara opened her mouth and nothing came out.

“What did he say?” Julien asked, without turning.

“He would like Ms. Lucía to take hold of Mr. Dean’s... member. With both hands. And to look at him.”

Silence. Then someone on the crew snorted. Then Lucía laughed.

“His *member*,” she repeated. “Honey, nobody’s said member on a set since 1974.”

Clara’s face went hot. She kept her chin level. “It’s an accurate translation.”

“It’s a eunuch’s translation,” said Julien, finally looking at her, one ankle over his knee, his dark eyes openly entertained. “Beto said *verga*. That’s a cock, Ms. Harrow. A hard one. Say ‘member’ and Dean has no idea what’s wanted. I thought you were fluent.”

Her pride stung.

“I know what it means. I simply find that language unnecessary.”

“I’m sure you do. And yet it’s the job.” He leaned back. “Cock. Say it.”

The house went quiet. Clara drew a breath. She had once corrected a school inspector’s grammar in front of a full assembly. She would not be

beaten by a word of four letters.

“He said,” she announced, with glacial precision, “to take hold of his... cock.” It came out like a cough.

“With both hands.”

Lucía applauded. Dean, bored in his boxers, said, “Cheers, love.”

“Ms. Harrow,” said Clara.

“Cheers, Ms. Harrow.”

She didn’t look at Julien. She could feel his amusement like a hand on the back of her neck.

I’ll show them just how good my Spanish is.

The cutting room was the back bedroom of the house. Julien Serra sat in front of three monitors with his feet on a flight case.

His phone rang. The screen said *M*.

“Tell me she stayed,” said Dr. M.W.

“The bitch stayed.” Julien said. “She wanted a contract and an advance. And she read all eleven pages, the whole damn thing. She’s a hard one to crack.”

“The plan will work. I’m sure of it.” There was the soft click of a keyboard. Julien laughed.

“How long will it take?”

“Lucía took three weeks,” Julien said. “Three weeks, and she was begging me for the camera. Now she works for nothing. She hasn’t asked for a fee in two years.”

“Because she thinks it makes her marriage spicier. She signs whatever I put in front of her and thanks me for the opportunity.”

“And the husband?”

“She dumped him.” Julien sipped his cold coffee.

“That’s my favorite part of this line of work.” Another laugh.

“Mine too.”

“And Clara?”

Julien didn’t answer at once.

“She’s harder than Lucía,” he said finally. “Prouder. That’s what makes her perfect. She’s a woman who needs to be the best at everything, and all I have to do is let her be the best at this. Three weeks, four. She’ll be asking

me for a role. And she won't ask for a fee. A fee would make it a job, and she'd never beg for a job. Free means it's art."

"Then she'll do it for nothing."

"She'll do it for nothing, and she'll thank me. And her husband will keep thanking me for the privilege. Until she dumps him."

"Oh, Im gonna enjoy this" The call ended.

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