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**From self-publishing
to traditional
publishing: The Spanish
Love Deception**

An alternative translation of a
chapter

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“[T]he principal problem of translating the novel is to respect its shapeless polylogic and avoid an arbitrary homogenization.”

(Berman 1985/2012: 243)

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Abstract

Online-based publishing and distribution services have rapidly revolutionised the literary market amid the digitalisation of entertainment means such as literary products. In a process of widespread democratisation, the powers and roles of the different agents and groups of the literary system have shifted and were redistributed. Self-publishing has established itself as one of the most important means through which authors have claimed power to themselves and started to bypass the imposing role and constraints of gatekeepers. The economically and technologically favourable conditions of digitalisation allowed for marginal publishing costs to decrease and consequentially for self-published products to thrive in the literary market, as they were more affordable for consumers. This work aims to provide a snapshot of the new balance of powers within the literary system through the presentation of the case study of the publication journey of the novel *The Spanish Love Deception* written by author Elena Armas. In addition, through the thorough analysis of the proposed translation of one chapter of the case study novel, this work wishes to shed light on the incorrect translation approach endorsed by the publishing house that published the official Italian translation.

Introduction

The introduction of new technologies gave rise to a process of digitalisation¹ of various kinds of information and products with the aim of storing, processing and/or transmitting them (McQuail, 2000). Digitalisation has proved to be valuable in several fields as it permitted the digital preservation of fragile or perishable materials for cultural heritage preservation institutions such as libraries and museums (Riley-Reid, Trevar D. 2015). The digitalisation of entertainment means such as literary products and the subsequent introduction of new digital publishing options, as self-publishing, allowed for the reduction of marginal costs of production, promotion, storage and distribution of literary products (Waldfogel, 2017: 199, 200. Fürst: 2019: 48). These economically and technologically favourable conditions led to a broadening of the literary market and its agents, as authors, through self-publishing, could provide their works to consumers without resorting to the services and interference of publishing houses. The widespread adoption among authors of self-publishing as an empowering practice (Poletti, 2005:186) prompted a substantial change in the power equilibrium and roles of the groups of agents of the literary system. In this sense, digitalisation and self-publishing have started a process of democratisation of the gatekeeping power previously held solely by gatekeepers of the literary system. The primary aim of this work is

¹ Or digitization.

therefore to provide a brief overview of the new power equilibrium within the literary system through the analysis of the publication journey of the novel *The Spanish Love Deception* written by author Elena Armas². The case study novel represents a notable example of the new behavioural tendencies displayed by the publishing industry in front of the democratization of the publishing market and literary system. Alongside such an overview focused on literary products written in the English language, through the proposed translation of a chapter, this work wishes to provide a critical analysis of the translation method and approach that should have been employed for the official Italian translation as opposed to the one endorsed by the Italian publishing house, Newton Compton Editori.

This work is structured and divided as follows. Chapter 1 will provide a brief insight into self-publishing as one of the forms in which the democratisation of the production of entertainment means was realised within the literary system. Therefore, to understand the power ramifications and roles involved in the literary system, such a section will introduce it as intended by the Polysystem Theory. Chapter 2 will provide preliminary information regarding author Elena Armas, the genre and plot of the case study novel *The Spanish Love Deception*, alongside a thorough description of the publication journey the novel underwent. Chapter 3 will focus on a detailed multi-level critical and comparative analysis of the translation problems encountered and will illustrate the translation choices made within the framework of a given translation approach. It is important to note that in Appendix

² Her exact birthdate remains undisclosed, but she is believed to be born in Spain on June 22, between the 1980s and 1990s.

A and B are reported respectively the unabridged source chapter of the case study novel and its proposed Italian translation. The concluding section will summarise the contents of this work and offer an insight into possible future research amid self-publishing in the literary system.

CHAPTER ONE

A brief theoretical overview of self-publishing within the literary system

1.1. Introduction to the overview

Since the dawn of the digitalisation of various branches of the entertainment industry, such as publishing, cinema and music, opinions regarding the resulting democratization of the gatekeeping powers have been numerous and discordant. However, the aim of this chapter is not to present a detailed analysis of said argumentations but to propose a brief insight into self-publishing, one of the many forms in which the democratization of the production of entertainment means presented itself within the literary system. To do so, the literary system will be interpreted as intended by the polysystem theory. Such theory has been one of the sources of the descriptive turn of Translation Studies and proved to be a revolutionary means to understand and analyse language and translation (Pym, 1998:14). However, in this instance, being only an introductory means, its numerous applications and debated flaws will not be analysed.

1.2. The literary system

1.2.1 Polysystem theory

The term “polysystem” was coined and introduced by Israeli literary and cultural theorist Itamar Even-Zohar in a series of papers written from 1970 to 1977 and later collected in *Papers in Historical Poetics* (1978). The definition he provided was that of an aggregate conjunct of heterogeneous literary and extra-literary systems³. The theory and approach with the same name that he elaborated were the alternative reaction to the prescriptive and restrictive models of the 1960s that were “ahistorical, static and text-oriented” (Codde, 2003:91). The theory that later would be developed by scholars at Tel Aviv University had its foundations in the late Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism (Munday, 2016:170; Aveling, 2005:9). In fact, as highlighted by many translation history scholars, Even-Zohar heavily borrowed the ideas of Tynjanov and Eikhenbaum. For formalists such as Tynjanov the literary tradition was no longer regarded as linear and continuous, but rather as a struggle that involved deconstruction and reconstruction based on the influence literary works had on the extra-literary framework⁴ (Gentzel, 2001:138 and 140). Moreover, the concept of “system” was first introduced by Tynjanov as he claimed that elements did not exist independently but were interrelated to other elements belonging to different systems that interacted and conditioned each other (ibid).

³ “a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partially overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent” (Zohar, 1990: 12).

⁴ Therefore, literature was perceived as a fundamental and rooting part of the historical, social and cultural framework and dynamically mutated within the hierarchical structure (Munday, 2016:171).

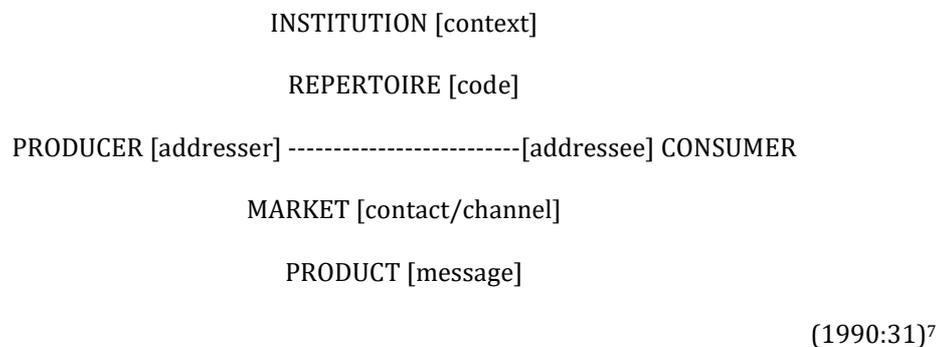
Thus, Even-Zohar implemented the arguments made by Tynjanov on a literary system based on hierarchy, interconnection and mutation and to that he incorporated his definition of “polysystem” and his observations on the function of translated literature within the network of given cultures and societies, to explain it. Even though he built on an already existing theoretical foundation, Even-Zohar proactively reacted to the flaws of “the traditional aesthetic approach” (1979: 22) based on the restrictive and elitist regard towards “high literature” and the disregard for what were considered irrelevant literary systems as the one of translated literature. His work focused on examining the intricate interrelations between various systems and was fundamental not only for the development of translation theory but also for literary theory since it demonstrated the essential role of translation for cultural evolution and literary studies (Gentzler, 2001:143 and 148. Even-Zohar, 1990). Consequentially, the theoretical contributions elaborated by scholars who directly followed and/or employed the polysystem theory⁵ focused, for example, on the norms of translation, pragmatics, reception, and sociological aspects that included ideology, patronage, publishing and distribution (Gentzler, 2001).

1.2.2 The structure of the literary system

Within the theoretical view illustrated by Even-Zohar, the notion of literary system can take two different declinations. The first one is that of “the network of relations that is hypothesized to obtain between a number of activities called ‘literary’, and

⁵ As for example Toury (1978.1980.1985.1991.1995.2004), Hermas (1985.1996), Lefevere (1988.1984.1992), Lambert and Van Gorp (1985).

consequently these activities themselves observed via that network” (1990:28). Or else, defined as “the complex of activities, or any section thereof, for which systemic relations can be hypothesized to support the option of considering them ‘literary’” (ibid) ⁶. In this sense, among the set of activities that are defined as “literary” are included the ones performed by writers, literary journals and literary critics (Even-Zohar: 1990: 31). Additionally Even-Zohar borrowed the scheme of communication and language elaborated by Jakobson and adapted it to literature to better illustrate the factors and activities involved within the literary “(poly)system” (ibid):



As can be seen, the interrelation between the above factors grants them to function in a free and fluid manner⁸. Hence, the literary system, which has in itself embedded the concept of “*change*” and hierarchical interdependence (1990:33-4), is not only composed of textual factors but also of “above-the-text [internal]

⁶ Again, Even-Zohar, elaborated the definitions above from the key points made by Tynjanov and Eikhenbaum on the systemic approach and on the functionalist notion of literature. In fact, as reported by Even-Zohar, Tynjanov conceived of literature as strictly intertwined with texts and overall, the systemic idea in his works was implicit in an “extended interpretation”. For Eikhenbaum instead, literature was labelled “in functionalistic terms” as the autonomous and heteronomous network of the dominant literary activities and factors that behaved as one whole (1990: 29-32).

⁷ Even-Zohar included the terms of the scheme elaborated by Jakobson in brackets, which were reported here in the same manner.

⁸ Which Even-Zohar illustrated as follows: “a CONSUMER may ‘consume’ a PRODUCT produced by a PRODUCER, but in order for the ‘product’ [...] to be generated, a common REPERTOIRE must exist, whose usability is determined by some INSTITUTION. A MARKET must exist where such a good can be transmitted” (1990:34).

occurrences" (ibid). So much so that texts are no longer regarded as the most important product of the system (ibid).

To disambiguate possible misunderstanding of the implied meanings of the term "writer", Even-Zohar preferred to use instead "producer" (ibid). Producers fulfil numerous roles and are conceived of as a plurality of "conditioning and conditioned force[s]" in the literary system that can include groups and social communities that relate to one another and possible consumers (1990:35). In this sense, producers also belong to the literary market and institution insofar as they respect and operate a legitimized repertoire (ibid. Codde, 2003:101).

To detach from the inadequate hypothesis of standard literary theories that saw in the "reader" the absolute target for literary production, Even-Zohar avoided the use of such a term. Instead, he preferred the term "consumer" since the consumption of the "textual products" of producers is not limited to reading and hearing⁹. As producers, consumers too are conceived of as a group, which is conventionally known as "public" and whose role ranges across various activities across the whole system (1990:36-7).

The term "institution" defines the combination of all the factors and activities connected to the conservation of literature as a "socio-cultural activity" (ibid: 37). The main role it fulfils is that of gatekeeping the official culture¹⁰ by holding control of the literary norms and sanctioning those that do not comply with them (ibid), but

⁹ Moreover, consumers can be distinguished between "direct" and "indirect" depending on their level of interest in the literary activities (Even-Zohar, 1990:36).

¹⁰ As it should control production and consumption. However, the success (or failure) of the literary products and thus of the repertoire promoted, is the result of the relation institution has with the market (Even-Zohar, 1990: 39. Codde, 2003: 101).

it can also support the creation of new or repertoires. As producers and consumers, the institution too is regarded as a heterogeneous and plural conjunct that includes: publishing houses, groups of writers, editors, critics, mass media, clubs, government bodies, educational institutions and others (ibid). Given its heterogeneous and plural nature, institutions do not operate in a unified manner but struggle to occupy the highest position in the hierarchy of the system and thus become the establishment (ibid: 38).

The “market” consists of all factors involved in buying and selling literary products and promoting their consumption (ibid). Therefore, similarly to the other parts of the literary system, the market is a heterogeneous aggregate of the dynamics involved in the exchange with consumers and as such, it includes “merchandise-exchange institutions” as bookshops and libraries (ibid). It is essential for the literary system to allow the market to proliferate and expand, as it benefits the development of the socio-cultural activity of literature (ibid: 39).

The term “repertoire” defines the set of rules and models deemed legitimate by the dominant circle of the system that regulates the production and consumption of literary products. It is composed of the grammar and lexicon of the language of the system, and it may aggregate with other repertoires of different hierarchical levels (ibid). Moreover, depending on the status of the interrelation that the repertoire has with the other parts of the system, it can be “canonized” or “non-canonized”¹¹.

¹¹ With the term “canonicity”, Even-Zohar refers to the position occupied by the group to which the repertoire belongs. Thus, canonized repertoire, which occupies the centre of the polysystem, can present either conservatory or innovatory features (1990:9 and 18).

The “product” of the literary system is not necessarily limited to cultural artefacts and the notion of “texts” as they are just a partial expression of literature. Thus, products include “any performed set of signs”, activities and behaviours as well as their outcome, thus utterances, texts, images and events (Even-Zohar, 1990: 43. Codde, 2003:100). Products can enter the system through static canonicity, via the literary canon as pieces of literature which will be preserved, or through dynamic canonicity via a model of the repertoire (Even-Zohar, 1990:19).

Building on the polysystem theory, Lefevere argued that the literary system is controlled by two groups. The first one is represented by the professionals of the literary system, such as critics, reviewers, academics and translators. The second group is the patronage outside the system composed of influential individuals, institutions and groups such as publishers and mass media. Both groups are cultural gatekeepers insomuch as they have the power to define the dominant repertoire or poetics and even influence the ideology of the system (Munday, 2016:200).

Thus, the struggle for control between the various hierarchical strata and groups of the polysystem determines the moving force for its natural change or evolution (Even-Zohar, 1990:14). A different opinion on the matter was the one expressed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu¹² for whom the literary system was instead hypothetical and autonomous, and thus literary change was independent to external evolutions¹³ (Codde, 2003:108).

¹² Even-Zohar himself recognises how the idea of literary system that Eikhenbaum developed was very similar to the one of *champs littéraire* illustrated by Bourdieu (1990:30).

¹³ In his view, external developments could only support internal literary changes but not trigger them (Codde, 2003: 108).

Change in the literary system may not necessarily depend entirely on internal or external factors as both can contribute to it. Literary production can change reflecting the socio-historical evolution of the world¹⁴, but such changes need the legitimisation of the system. In this regard, Even-Zohar foresightedly stated that the gatekeeping roles have loosened and in modern times, fashion and conventions are established¹⁵ by “mass media and their celebrities, highly respected critics and others” (1990:210). Such argumentation and the power of mass and social media will be later explored through the case study presented in Chapter 2.

1.3. Self-publishing in the “golden age” of the literary system

As argued in the above paragraph, products can enter the literary system essentially in two ways: via dynamic or static canonicity. However, it is possible to assume the existence of a third way that combines both. In fact, nowadays, literary products may observe established literary conventions and thus be static, but at the same time not adhere to canonized production models and thus be dynamic. The combination of these two manners is perfectly embodied by self-published literary products within the current era of digitalisation of entertainment products.

As argued by Waldfogel, digitalisation¹⁶ led to a “golden age” both for consumers and the entertainment system itself, since the number of products created and made available significantly increased as well as the public (2017:196,

¹⁴ Since producers create “a systematic and critical representation of the social world” (Bourdieu qtd. in Codde, 2003:108).

¹⁵ And therefore also legitimized.

¹⁶ Also known as “digitization”, is the process of conversion of analogical information into digital formats and representations (Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Aslanov and Mirzagayeva, 2022).

210). As a result, the literary market has been transformed and the roles and hierarchies in the literary system have mutated alongside the appointed agents of control. Hereafter, an overview of this shift and redistribution of powers within the literary system will follow.

Since 2007, the widespread use of e-books and digitalisation allowed for the costs of production, promotion, storage and distribution of literary products to be reduced (ibid: 199, 200. Fürst: 2019:48). These economically and technologically favourable conditions led to a broadening of both the market and the group of producers at the apparent expenses of traditional gatekeepers.

In fact, an increasing number of creators (henceforth referred to as authors) resort to self-publishing to bypass traditional gatekeepers¹⁷ and directly release in the market their products for the public to enjoy (Waldfoegel, 2017:50, 57). In this sense, self-publishing could be defined as an “antiauthoritarian” practice (Nehring qtd. in Poletti, 2005:186). However, such a definition is loose and reductive as self-publishing, alongside other activities¹⁸, belongs to a context and subculture of empowering independent practices¹⁹ that create independent media²⁰ (Poletti, 2005:185-6. Fürst, 2019:484).

According to the data provided by an Author Earnings²¹ report in 2017, (qtd. in Phalen, 2017:3), publishing houses lost a remarkable amount of power in the market as authors claimed that for themselves with their self-published literary

¹⁷ Thus, as illustrated in the previous paragraph, publishing houses.

¹⁸ Such as festivals, conferences and music, to mention a few.

¹⁹ Also known with the acronym “DIY” which stands for “do-it-yourself”.

²⁰ Also known as “Indy Media” (Poletti, 2005:186).

²¹ In 2018 the platform was assimilated by “Bookstat”.

products. It would seem that this fulfilled one of the main negative predictions moved against digitalisation, which conceived of it precisely as a threat to the stability of the literary system²² and its powers. Nevertheless, the literary system did not collapse but instead thrived from the beneficial introduction of self-published literary products. This is because, as theorized by Even-Zohar (1990:27), the system might be endangered only if change is not controlled or properly managed and not if the position holders²³ see their power and their position threatened.

Before digitalisation and self-publishing²⁴, authors who desired to have their works published had to go through gatekeepers as they needed to find a literary agent who would submit their manuscript to an editor at a publishing house that would ultimately decide if it was worth being published or not²⁵. In most cases, this process resulted in rejection at various stages. Moreover, as gatekeepers have proved themselves to be poor and imperfect judges both of the quality and the commercial worth of literary products²⁶, the market, the consumers and the authors have suffered from this monopoly and the resulting narrow range of products made available (Waldfoegel, 2017:197. Hviid et al. 2016:23).

²² As illustrated by Waldfoegel (2017:197), other complaints and previsions regarding digitalisation and the democratisation of gatekeeping powers focused on the possible lack of quality of products and the risk of surplus. For further insight into the oppositional positions that see digitalisation as a threat and “disruptive technology”, see Hviid et al. 2016.

²³ As in this instance gatekeepers.

²⁴ According to Waldfoegel, “even as late as 2017” (2016:200).

²⁵ Such a decision did not take into consideration the cultural contribution a product might have had for the literary system but was purely based on financial assessments (Hviid et al. 2016:6)

²⁶ One of the most important examples is represented by the literary case of the *Harry Potter* series which was initially rejected by no less than twelve publishing houses before being accepted and published by Bloomsbury in 1997 (Hviid et al. 2016:22).

With digitalisation, the powers within the literary system shifted. Nowadays, thanks to technological advancements, authors either who were rejected by publishing houses or who simply wish to publish their work without the involvement of gatekeepers can do so by using the online publishing and distribution services offered by: Amazon, Apple, Author Solutions, BookBaby, Draft2Digital, CreateSpace, Enterprise, Inscribe Digital Lulu, NookPress, Scribd and Smashwords (Poletti, 2005:9. Waldfogel, 2015:52. Hviid et al. 2016:9-10).

Self-publication²⁷ allowed for the democratization of the literary system, thus the substantial liberation of the creative world from “conventional procedures for publication”, and in so doing, it allowed consumers to benefit from a broader and newer range of products at reduced prices (Fürst, 2019:484).

As a result, self-published literary products have rapidly gained a significant part of the total sales in the literary market²⁸ and from 2011 they began to be featured in best-selling lists (Waldfogel and Reimers, 2015:55. Waldfogel, 2017:47. Phalen, 2017:3). According to the data presented in the reports released by Author Earnings²⁹ the market share of self-published literary products rose to 43%, matching the one of the biggest traditional publishers³⁰ (Hviid et al. 2016:25-6).

²⁷ Thanks to the accessibility and ease of use of online platforms and the reduced marginal costs of production and distribution.

²⁸ Since 2007 the number of literary products introduced into the market by self-published authors has grown significantly and now exceeds the number of products released by publishing houses (Waldfogel et al. 2017:48).

²⁹ Such reports covered the period between February 2014 and January 2016.

³⁰ The market for literary products written in English is dominated by five big publishers also referred to as “Big-5”: Bertelsmann (includes Penguin Random House), Hachette Livre UK (includes Headline, Hodder, Little Brown and Orion), News Corp (with HarperCollins), Holtzbrinck (with Pan Macmillan), and Simon & Schuster (Hviid et al. 2016:8).

The increasing importance of self-publishing within the literary system might have erroneously led to believe that the literary system would have been on the brink of collapsing. However, as mentioned before, the literary system and its agents³¹ instead did react to the shift in hierarchy and power control initiated by digitalisation. As reported by the Association of American Publishers in 2015, since the traditional printed book was no longer the product that dominated the demand of the literary market, publishers began to invest in technologies to provide consumers with digital alternatives too (Phalen, 2017:4).

Moreover, the shift in the balance of powers within the literary system is not absolute, as the position occupied by authors is hybrid since they can switch between self-publishing and traditional publishing practices (Laquitano qtd. in Shumake, 2017:3). As reluctantly proven by Hviid et al. (2016) in their analysis of the effects the increase of self-publishing practices had on the behaviour of publishers, self-published authors and gatekeepers can indeed coexist and cooperate in the literary system. One of the options publishing houses have to ensure that their literary products will be well received by consumers is to improve the qualitative assessment and scrutiny of the manuscripts that are proposed to them (ibid: 25)³². The second and most relevant option is for publishing houses to adopt the “Wait-and-See” strategy, thus thoroughly analysing self-published products within the literary market and then selecting the ones that emerge as most successful (ibid). In this sense, Pâquet argues that publishing houses treat the

³¹ In this particular case, gatekeepers as publishing houses.

³² Such an option would presumably result in a decrease in self-published literary products in the literary system (ibid), however, it seems as is not widely adopted.

market trend of self-published products as their “slush-pile” from which they find new authors who can grant them success³³ (2021:12).

The latter strategy indeed describes the behaviour that publishing houses nowadays tend to have towards the literary market, since a significant share of successful literary products was once self-published before being published in a traditional manner (ibid. Waldfogel and Reimers, 2015:55). This may lead to a substantial change within the market of the literary system where the majority of the literary products traditionally published would not originate from unpublished manuscripts but rather from self-published products (Hviid et al. 2016:26).

To conclude, self-publishing might be considered a reaction to the limitations imposed by gatekeepers but it is not a means used to rebel against them. It might challenge and compete with publishing houses but is an innovative means and approach to publication that can legitimise authors who resort to it as rightful producers in the literary system and at the same time benefit consumers (Fürst, 2019:495-6). What was presented in this chapter was a brief and superficial theoretical snapshot of self-publishing within the literary system in its current “golden age” as a consequence of digitalisation. The subject matter will be further analysed and thoroughly discussed in the following chapter with the presentation of the case study of the novel *The Spanish Love Deception*.

³³ Given the fact that such authors already have a somewhat secure readership. Moreover, publishing houses can also resort to the perusal and analysis of digital self-publishing online platforms such as Wattpad. In fact, from the latter platform publishing houses found and therefore acquired numerous literary products such as: the *After* series by Anna Todd (2014), *The Kissing Booth* by Beth Reekles (2011), *Anónima* by Wendy Mora (2005), *A través de mi ventana* by Ariana Godoy (2019) and many more.

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction to the source text

2.1 Information about the author

As illustrated in the Introduction of this work, the text that was translated³⁴ and will be analysed later in Chapter 3 is an excerpt of the novel *The Spanish Love Deception* written by the Spanish author Elena Armas.

It should be noted that Armas, despite the overwhelming recent success, still leads a rather reserved life. Hence, the public information regarding her account is limited per her desire of privacy; as a consequence, sensible and private data such as her exact birthdate remain undisclosed. However, as mentioned in numerous interviews and interactions with her readers, both online and during in-person events, Armas defines herself as a millennial. Thus, according to the different definitions and variations of such term³⁵ and based on the information the author shared, it can be assumed that she was born in Spain, on June 22, between the 1980s and 1990s. After graduating in chemical engineering, she worked in academia as a researcher for a brief period of time, though later she was employed at an

³⁴ The chapter chosen as a source and its translation are to be found in Appendix A and Appendix B of this work, respectively.

³⁵ The definition provided by the Macmillan dictionary suggests that the term refers to people who reached adulthood around the year 2000. Whereas the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the Cambridge dictionary and the Oxford dictionary provide a more precise definition based on a birth interval that is said to extend from the 80s to the 90s.

engineering firm. As a consequence, she travelled and lived in numerous European countries for years before eventually settling in Germany. Despite being very fond of exploring new cultures during her work-related travels, Armas found her sole constant and sense of belonging in stories and novels.

From early childhood, she developed a passion for literature, which she nurtured throughout her formative years. Still, it was once she entered adulthood that she decided to dedicate her leisure time to share her passion with others. As a result, using the WordPress platform³⁶, Armas started to write a blog titled “thebibliothèque”³⁷ which was exclusively devoted to the topic of books. Subsequently, she created a companion Instagram account with the same name, where she would post reviews of the novels she read and through which she could connect with other readers and reach numerous authors.

Her literary preferences matured and changed over time and consequentially so did the content she shared with others on her preferred platform. In the beginning, she focused mainly on young adult³⁸ fantasy novels such as The Grishaverse series by bestselling author Leigh Bardugo or The Mortal Instruments series by bestselling author Cassandra Clare. Later Armas started to venture and explore other genres and focus on romance novels instead, which not only became her favourite but also contributed to inspire and deeply influence her creative

³⁶ WordPress is an open-source software platform that was initially created as a personal blog-publishing system and has now developed and grown to become one of the central content management systems in use for web content, advocating for democratized publishing,

³⁷ It is important to state that the blog in question has now been rendered private and is no longer available for consultation.

³⁸ The term “young adult” and its more commonly used acronym “YA” refers to the category of fiction that is intended mainly for adolescent readers. Thus the range of age of the target public it addresses is set from 12 to 18 years old.

process. However, the specifics of her writing style will be later analysed in Chapter 3 in the section dedicated to the textual analysis.

2.2 An overview of the publication process

As was hinted in the Introduction, the novel *The Spanish Love Deception* (henceforth referred to as the source novel) from which was taken the chapter that represents the source text (henceforth referred to as the ST) for the translation presented in Appendix B, underwent a peculiar publishing journey that allowed it to enter the literary system. Such a process will be briefly described hereafter.

Author Elena Armas independently published the source novel on February 23 of 2021 through the platform Kindle Direct Publishing (henceforth KDP), a publishing service provided by Amazon³⁹. Such a platform allows authors to have their works independently published without being subject to the constraints and/or having the support of a traditional publishing house. From 2016 Amazon began to offer authors the possibility to sell their works on its platform in hardback and paperback format through a service of print on demand (henceforth POD). As the name of the service might suggest, books are printed only once they are requested or purchased (Phalen and Harris 3), and as the service operates via digital printing, it is considered a cheaper solution with less environmental impact than the system supported by traditional offset printing. This being considered, not only POD allows a broader catalogue of titles to be available for readers (Fürst 484), but it is

³⁹ As mentioned in Chapter 1, Amazon KDP is just one among several services and distributors for independent authors.

also considered a means to avoid the risks of fluctuating demand for certain books (Phalen and Harris 8).

Nevertheless, POD should not be considered as a service used exclusively by independent authors, nor as a service solely provided by Amazon, as in Italy, platforms such as StreetLib⁴⁰ do offer it too. Moreover, the POD service provided by Amazon can also be employed by publishing houses to allow their books to reach a broader public when purchased through the Amazon website. Some notable publishing houses that use of such service include Gallery Books⁴¹, The Blue Box Press⁴², TOR Books⁴³ and Atria⁴⁴.

However, it must be pointed out that among the terms of KDP⁴⁵, there is an obligation for the digital version of the novel⁴⁶ to be sold exclusively through the Amazon platform (kdp.amazon.com, 2017). Additionally, authors who resort to this service can decide whether they want their work to be included in Kindle Unlimited⁴⁷.

In this regard, as illustrated in Chapter 1 and as reported by Waldfogel in his analysis of the digitalisation of media products, the moderate costs of production of

⁴⁰ Which allows authors to have their works listed on the online catalogues of Mondadori or LaFeltrinelli.

⁴¹ Is a division of Simon & Shuster that publishes bestselling authors such as Stephen King (author of *Gerald's Game*), Stephen Chbosky (author of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*), Anna Todd (author of *After*) and Christina Lauren (author duo of *The Unhoneymooners*).

⁴² It publishes bestselling authors such as Jennifer L. Armentrout (author of *From Blood and Ash*) and Lucinda Riley (author of *The Seven Sisters*).

⁴³ It is owned by Macmillan Publishers and publishes bestselling authors such as T.J Klune (author of *The House in the Cerulean Sea*), V.E. Schwab (author of *The Invisible life of Addie LaRue*) and Brendon Sanderson (author of *Mistborn*).

⁴⁴ Is a division of Simon & Shuster that publishes bestselling authors such as Coleen Hoover (author of *It ends with us*) and Taylor Jenkins Reid (author of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*).

⁴⁵ They will not be analysed in detail in this work, as they are not deemed relevant in their entirety.

⁴⁶ That is the e-book.

⁴⁷ It is a monthly subscription service offered by Amazon that allows readers unlimited access to a broad catalogue of digitalized titles.

digital and independent publishing allow authors to publish their works with more ease and freedom due to the democratization of the role of gatekeeping media companies as publishing houses (199). Therefore, the resulting liberalization of the publishing market allowed for what Waldfogel defined in general terms as a “golden age for consumers” (197) to rise, which is perfectly embodied by the subscription service mentioned above.

This alternative publishing service presents itself as both advantageous and disadvantageous for independent authors that decide to resort to it as an alternative to traditional publishing. On the one hand, authors have complete control over the integrity of their work, the overall publishing experience and the financial outcome. Still, on the other, they do not benefit from the strategic support of a publishing house, which includes services of editing, formatting and most importantly, marketing, among others (Phalen and Harris 7-8. Coker, 2009).

In addition, the exclusivity reserved for the digital versions of the novels to the Amazon platform limits the readership audience as novels are provided through the Kindle formats, which readers can access either through a Kindle device⁴⁸ or via the application with the same name (Guy 2017 and Attews 2015).

Having decided to publish her novel independently, Armas did not have the support of a publishing house. However, through her Instagram account she did have the chance to befriend an author whose work she had previously reviewed and who decided to support and guide her. It is important to point out that the crucial

⁴⁸The official brand of e-readers of Amazon.

technical and creative support was provided to Armas by Ella Maise⁴⁹, a well-established Washington Post and International Bestselling author. In addition, to ensure the quality of the novel she was set to publish Armas assigned the manuscript to the scrutiny of Jovana Shirly, an independent professional editor who she independently found.

Nevertheless, despite having had a dedicated book blog and a companion Instagram account, Armas did not have a broad and solid base of readers nor a professional marketing strategy as might have been provided by a traditional publishing house. Therefore, she did not expect her debut novel to have the success and resonance it had.

To be more precise, she promoted the source novel through different social media platforms⁵⁰, mainly Instagram and TikTok. She thus resorted to influential bloggers and public personas generally referred to as “influencers”, whose content was centred on books and who are commonly identified with the names of “Bookstagrammers” and “BookTokers” depending on the platform in which they operate⁵¹. Thus, to enhance public interest prior to the publication date, Armas provided a select group of Instagrammers, bloggers and BookTokers with some

⁴⁹ It must be stated that Armas did not reveal the identity of the author explicitly, but it could be inferred from the acknowledgements of the source novel. Moreover, some of the works by Maise have been published in Italy by Newton Compton Editori and Always Publishing with the translations of Elisabetta Giamporcaro and Edoardo Marini.

⁵⁰ A choice that was theoretically advised by Hess R. and qtd in Phalen and Harris (2017).

⁵¹ Both terms are to be considered examples of a specific jargon that is used within a defined group of people. The first term is a compound word composed by the name “book” and the name “Instagrammer” which, as defined by the Macmillan dictionary, identifies a “user of the Instagram social network” and is composed through affixation by the name “Instagram” followed by the suffix “-er” which, as stated by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, defines a “person occupationally connected or associated with” something. The latter term, similarly to the previous, presents a composite structure and it is formed by the name “book” followed by the second half of the name that identifies the social media platform “Tok” which is affixed by the suffix “-er”, that as previously mentioned suggests that a person is associated with something.

advanced readers copies of the source novel⁵², for them to read in advance and review on their platform.

Offering readers physical or digital beta versions of a book prior to its publication date is not a promotional practice used exclusively by independent authors. In fact, numerous major publishing houses such as Simon & Shuster and Penguin Random House resort to it through a dedicated website called NetGallery, which is used by publishers in countries like Germany and France as well. Also, it should be underlined that in Italy such a platform is not yet being used by publishers nor by independent authors since other complementary promotional practices are used instead⁵³.

Because of the interest and resonance created by social personas and creators who had been provided with an ARC by the author, on July 8 of 2021 the source novel entered the Amazon top 100-bestseller list. Furthermore it is also worth mentioning that the hashtag used to promote the book is reported by Deadline to have gained more than 100M views. The overwhelming success of the source novel led and allowed Armas to resign from the engineering firm in which she was employed and to dedicate herself to be a full-time author represented by literary agent Jessica Watterson from the literary agency Sandra Dijkstra. The success of the source novel did also contribute to draw the attention of several publishers, and as a result the publishing rights of *The Spanish Love Deception* and its companion, *The*

⁵² Which are commonly referred to with the acronym “ARCs”.

⁵³ For instance, the publisher Mondadori, through its campaign called “*Reclutamento recensori*” (Recruitment of Reviewers) for their series Oscar Vault, does offer limited quantities of digital ARCs to an equally limited amount of readers whose request is assessed to determine whether their blog or dedicated social network page might generate the required resonance and interest for the public.

American Roommate Experiment, were acquired at auction in August 2021 by editor Kaitlin Olson for the publishing house Atria. Subsequently, the independently published version of the source novel was rendered unavailable for purchase, as Simon & Shuster on October 28 of 2021 released its new printed version for the Australian and European markets with slight alterations of some elements of the “peritext” (Genette, *Paratexts*, 1997: 344). Atria released a new printed version of the source novel for the American market on February 8 of 2022 with slight alterations both on a text level and on the “peritext” (ibid).

As it can be easily inferred, the acquisition of the source novel by one of the biggest American publishing houses, such as Simon & Shuster, allowed for a broadening of the audience spectrum as readers could obtain it in different formats⁵⁴ and through different platforms, rather than from Amazon alone. As a result, as reported by Publishers Weekly, until February 18 of 2022, the source novel had sold almost 17.000 copies. Moreover, it entered the trade paper front list on February 21 of 2022 and despite some understandable fluctuations over time, was on the list for 23 consecutive weeks. A more general figure was provided by the Italian publishing house Newton Compton Editori, which reported that the source novel had sold more than 300.000 copies in the U.S. alone during the first weeks of publication. Consequentially, Armas rapidly became a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author when the source novel entered the dedicated list of the newspapers on February 17 and February 27 of 2022, respectively. Furthermore, the source novel was nominated for the Best Romance of the Year 2021 and with

⁵⁴ Namely its digital (e-book) format and its printed trade paperback format.

55.621 votes⁵⁵ won the category for the Debut Novel of the year of the Goodreads Choice Awards⁵⁶.

The success of the source novel was such that on June 16 of 2022, the author announced that the film rights for *The Spanish Love Deception* had been acquired by BDF Pictures, which in 2021 co-produced the movie adaptation of the novel *The Hating Game*, written by USA Today bestselling author Sally Thorne⁵⁷.

Moreover, the translation rights for the source novel were purchased for twenty-five languages, which included Italian. As mentioned in the Introduction of this work, the Italian translation of the source novel was published for the series *Anagramma*⁵⁸ by Newton Compton Editori with the title *Facciamo finta che mi ami* on May 30 of 2022, with the translation of Mariacristina Cesa. The novel did enter numerous best-selling lists in Italy as well and did hold its position for several consecutive weeks, as reported by the list of *Il Sole 24 Ore* and Newton Compton Editori itself. Nevertheless, it must be stated that the officially published translation does present significant problems, which will be briefly analysed in Chapter 3⁵⁹.

Considering what has been reported so far, it is safe to state that *The Spanish Love Deception* represents a notable example of the new tendency of the publishing industry in front of the democratization of the publishing market and literary system, hinted in Chapter 1. The publication journey of the source novel does in fact

⁵⁵ Out of 313.198 votes total.

⁵⁶ It is an annual award program promoted by Goodreads, a social cataloguing site dedicated to books and owned by Amazon.

⁵⁷ The novel was published in Italy with the title "*Ti odio, anzi no ti amo*" by Harper Collins Italia with the translation by Silvia Arienti.

⁵⁸ The series is dedicated to world fiction and the themes around which it is built are humour, love, friendship and life.

⁵⁹The analysis will be restricted to the contextual framework provided by the singular chapter presented in Appendix A.

demonstrate how publishing houses have recently intensified their attention towards independent authors and to the trends of social media groups, as for the book community of TikTok, which is notoriously identified with the name of “BookTok”⁶⁰.

However, it is also important to state that during the process of selection that was carried out to identify the source novel to be analysed within this work, other novels presented themselves as appreciable examples, but they were not as impactful and relevant as the one selected. For instance, other independent authors such as Raven Kennedy (author of *The Plated Prisoner* series)⁶¹, Scarlett St. Clair (bestselling author of *A Touch of Darkness*), Olivie Blake (bestselling author of *The Atlas Six*) and Emily McIntire (author of *The Never After* series) whose works were acquired by different notable publishing houses⁶² as a result of their success on various social media platforms were announced to be translated and published in Italy as well⁶³. Other independent authors whose works were considered for this work were Penelope Douglas (bestselling author of the *Devil’s Night* series), Mariana Zapata (bestselling author of *All Rhodes lead here*)⁶⁴ and Laura Thalassa

⁶⁰ Similarly to the term “BookTokers” which designates the users that are part of the book community of TikTok, the name “BookTok” is a compound word formed by the name “book” followed by the second half of the name of the social media platform, “Tok”. In this regard, publishing houses such as Newton Compton Editori and Little Brown, as well such as book retailers as Barnes & Nobles tend to market novels that were acquired from independent authors or that were found to be highly relevant in the social media platform under the category named: “TikTok made me buy it!” or “#BookTok Made me buy it”.

⁶¹ For the sake of clarity, it must be stated that on May 13, 2022, the publication rights for the series, were acquired by Penguin Books for the British and Australian markets. Moreover, on December 6 2022, it was announced by Deadline that the novel was set to be adapted for television.

⁶² Namely Penguin Books, Bloom Books and Tor Books.

⁶³ The translation rights were acquired respectably by Armenia, Queen Edizioni, VirgiBooks and Sperling & Kupfer.

⁶⁴ For the sake of clarity, it must be mentioned that the publication rights for the British market for some of her novels, including the one mentioned above, have been recently acquired by Headline Publishing Group for their series *Headline Eternal*. In addition, Avon Books, on December 2, 2022,

(author of *The Four Horsemen* series). However, these authors, differently from the ones mentioned above, had their novels acquired by different Italian publishers⁶⁵ despite not having been optioned by important publishing houses beforehand for their original language.

2.3 Information about the source novel

As was previously stated, the text chosen to be translated within this work is chapter twenty-one of the novel *The Spanish Love Deception*, thus as it represents a reduced portion of the book, a brief introduction to it is needed and will be provided hereafter. Furthermore, as the source novel has been acquired and published by both Simon & Shuster and Atria⁶⁶, the text considered as a reference for this work is the novel independently published by Armas on February 23 of 2021. Nevertheless, comments and references to the different editions published by Simon & Shuster and Atria will be made in Chapter 3 and will be signalled accordingly.

As was hinted in the previous section, the source novel was written by author Elena Armas during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 while still working full-time at an engineering firm. In several interviews with public personas and during recent promotional events, the author explained that the story sprung from her imagination due to the invitation to the wedding of one of her close cousins. As a result, after having been an active reader and contributor to the online book community for years, Armas felt the need to provide a genuine portrait of her native

recently acquired the publishing rights for the American market of “*The Wall of Winnipeg and me*” and “*All Rhodes lead here*”.

⁶⁵ Namely Newton Compton Editori and Hope Edizioni.

⁶⁶ As mentioned before, with slight text and “peritext” (Genette, *Paratexts*, 1997: 344) alterations.

culture within the romance genre. Thus, she decided to take the leap and write the source novel as she considered it an enticing story she would have personally read had it been published before by another author.

The title that Armas chose for the source novel, *The Spanish Love Deception*, underwent several modifications since, as she stated, it was initially intended to be “Love in Spanish is a four letter word”. Further considerations about the title of the source novel and its rendering for the Italian translation published by Newton Compton Editori, will be made in Chapter 3.

With regards to the structure of the novel, the narration provided in first person from the point of view of the female main character is composed of twenty-seven chapters of irregular length, and an additional epilogue set one year after the events narrated. However, the integrative content to the novel was released by the author through her social media accounts and newsletter as a part of a promotional campaign organized by the publishing houses and aimed to encourage readers to pre-order her next novel.⁶⁷ It should also be underlined that such supplementary content was not considered for this work as it was not part of the source novel in its original independent edition nor in the following editions published by Simon & Shuster and Atria. Moreover, the additional content mentioned is considered beyond the scope of the events that are narrated within the timeframe of the novel, and it qualifies as what is defined as “bonus content” or as “epitext material” (Genette, 1997: 344), which usually does not affect the plot.

⁶⁷ Titled *The American Roommate Experiment*.

Furthermore, although the native language of the author is Spanish, she did decide to write the source novel in English, which is her second language used as a vehicular language both for work-related purposes and leisure purposes associated with her involvement in the online book community.

It could be assumed that Armas opted for such a choice to ensure that her work would have been accessible to a broad audience. After all, English is considered to be a lingua franca and according to the data provided both by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States in its annual reference publication “The World Factbook”, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics in its yearly publication “Ethnologue”, it is the language that is most widely spoken in the world. However, the author declared that her choice was instead dictated by personal preferences.

As illustrated in section 2.1, Armas spent several years as an active part of the online book community both as a blogger and as a Bookstagrammer and has always used English as a vehicular language to communicate with other contributors and authors. Moreover, the novels Armas read were primarily in English, as she did prefer them to their translations in her native language. So, English was the language that the author associated most with literature. Nevertheless, the author mentioned that during the preliminary stages of her writing process, she attempted to narrate the story using her native language but eventually she found English to be most fitting both for her comfort and for the aim of the story itself.

2.3.1 The plot of the source novel

As was previously stated, the source text for this work is chapter twenty-one of the source novel, therefore as it represents an excerpt prior information regarding the plot is needed to provide a proper context to it.

The source novel is narrated in first person by the female main character named Catalina Martín, who however is often addressed to with the hypocorism “Lina”. She is an ambitious twenty-eight-year-old Spanish engineer who works in New York as a team leader at InTech, an engineering consulting firm, where at times she is the object of discrimination and sexist retorts due to her gender. Lina has left her home country in an attempt to start a new life and flee from her past; therefore, she hardly visits her eccentric and whimsical family back in Spain. However, she is forced to return to her small town as she is expected to be the maid of honour at the wedding of her sister. After having been told that the designated best man for the wedding and past boyfriend of hers is engaged to be married, Lina abruptly declares she will attend the ceremony with her American boyfriend, who however does not exist. Overwhelmed and unable to find a solution to the problem caused by her lie, she agrees to make a deal with Aaron Blackford, one of her insufferable and condescending colleagues who unexpectedly offered himself to help her. Lina has always hated the man with a passion from their first meeting the day he was hired as a team leader at the engineering firm. Nevertheless, surrounded by the warm and welcoming Spanish culture, as they are forced to deceive the loud and intrusive Martín family into thinking they are indeed enamoured with each other, the line between reality and deception begins to blur irrevocably. Lina must face the cause

and consequences of her lie as the secret that years prior had led her to flee her home country is slowly unravelled.

2.3.2 *The genre of the source novel*

As can be inferred from the title, *The Spanish Love Deception*, and the previous section regarding its plot, the source novel can be defined as a romance. However, its classification is not to be considered absolute.

If on the one hand, it cannot be denied that the prominent theme around which the story evolves and develops is centred on romance, on the other there are more elements and characteristics to be taken into consideration when determining to what genre a novel belongs.

Identifying with accuracy the genre and the potential subgenres to which a novel belongs is fundamental since during the process of translation there are specific communicative functions and features marked by a series of conventional rules that are to be accurately reproduced as they represent the source of the “horizon of expectations” (Jauss, 1982: 24) of the readership towards a specific text. Moreover, according to the Hallidayian model of language and discourse, the sociocultural environment in which the source text operates does partially condition genre, which is also fundamental to determine additional features of the framework of the text, as the functional variation of language that is to be used, therefore what Taylor defines quoting Hatim, as “genrelets” (144). However, the linguistic choices and structures that are considered peculiar to a specific genre will be further discussed in Chapter 3 where will be provided a brief analysis of the

readership as well as a textual analysis of the source novel and a more detailed textual analysis of the source text.

As mentioned above and as could be inferred from the requirements needed for the acquisition and submission of manuscripts to editors Kaitlin Olson and Molly Crawford⁶⁸, the source novel can be defined as belonging to the romance genre. Nevertheless, this classification is too general and therefore reductive, as there are further peculiar elements to consider besides the sole emotional aspect.

A more accurate and precise classification is represented by the term “contemporary romance” that, according to the Romance Writers of America association, defines the subgenres of romance novels whose time setting is placed between 1950 and the present day. An additional categorization is represented by the term “romantic comedy” often referred to with the blended form “rom-com”. Such term defines a subgenre of comedy that develops the romantic theme in a light-hearted and humorous manner.

After having analysed the dedicated pages of both the source novel and its official Italian translation in the most prominent book retail platforms⁶⁹ in addition to the existing catalogue pages of the British Library and the Library Congress, it was possible to note that the categorizations mentioned above were indeed the most prominent. However, it should be underlined that both on the page dedicated to the source novel in Amazon UK and on the one dedicated to the Italian edition in LaFeltrinelli, the source novel was categorized respectively as “erotic romance” and

⁶⁸ As hinted in section 2.2, Olson did acquire the publication rights of the source novel for Atria whereas Crawford did curate the Simon & Shuster edition of the source novel.

⁶⁹ Such as Amazon, Waterstones, Mondadori and LaFeltrinelli, among others.

as "*narrativa erotica*", which is to be considered a severe and misleading error of genre determination. Hence it is fundamental to specify that the term "erotic novel", as well as its direct Italian correspondent "*narrativa erotica*" refers to a novel in which recurrent explicit and graphic sexual interactions are the nucleus around which the story and its characters develop, as illustrated by the Romance Writers of America association. But such determination of genre is erroneous and not supported by the intrinsic premises of the term that identify the genre to which the source novel is said to belong.

The source novel does present a couple of scenes that depict an interaction of sexual nature between the two main characters. Nevertheless, this is not sufficient to classify it as an "erotic novel" as the narration is not rendered with excessive explicitness nor does it represent the focal point or the pinnacle of the development of the story and its characters. This classification is instead more appropriate and fitting if applied to other titles published by the publishing houses in question, such as *365 days* by Blanka Lipinska for Atria and *Io ti proteggerò* (Credence) by bestselling author Penelope Douglas, for Newton Compton Editori.

CHAPTER THREE

Commentary on the translation

3.1 Introduction to the commentary: the target public and the translation method

According to the categorization of the three main functions of language realized by Bühler (1934) and the subsequent classification performed by Reiss (1977/1989: 108-109), literary texts are the fulfilment and the representation of the “expressive function” of language and are defined as “creative compositions”. In this regard, authors use language as an aesthetic means to convey their message and evoke emotions through their narration. Thus, a proper translation of such text type should render and transmit the peculiar aesthetic of the ST by adapting what Reiss defines as the “identifying method” (1976: 20) while assuring that the information and the emotional component of the ST are accurately maintained. This was set to be the source of the translation method used for the TT, as the translated text must be “functionally adequate” considering its skopos (Veemeer, 189/2012: 221-232) and be characterized by the same pace and flow of the narration as the ST, as well as to evoke a comparable emotional response in the reader.

In addition, to provide a translation that complied both with the requirements set by the linguistic and cultural patterns of the target public and respected the criteria described above, it was essential to focus not only on the linguistic

information but also on the extra-linguistic information, which, as hinted in Chapter 2, contribute to set the expectations of the target public towards a text that belongs to a specific genre. Thus, so as to determine the most suitable translation method it was fundamental to identify and analyse the target readership that the translated text should have addressed. In this sense, the determination of the target public is strictly intertwined with the literary genre of a novel as it shapes and defines the expectations of the readership towards a specific text.

It is fundamental to make a few clarifications before briefly analysing the target readership for the translated text proposed in Appendix B. To be more precise, the subdivision of contemporary narrative performed by Cavagnoli (2019:55) places romance novels, thus the genre to which the source novel belongs, as a subcategory of escapist fiction. In her brief analysis of the translation approach recommended for these text types, she underlines a tendency towards a naturalizing and domesticating method due to the needs of the target readership. This approach is mainly applied to the translations of serial romances meant for the “romance newsstand fiction market”⁷⁰ that have a broad and heterogeneous readership that is adverse to foreignisms and uninterested in the stylistic peculiarities of the sources. However, this does not apply to the source novel for this work.

⁷⁰ The term “romance newsstand fiction” is a calque here introduced to refer to what in Italian is defined as “*narrativa rosa da edicola*”, which defines the romances that belong to low-level escapist fiction and are predominantly sold at newsstands or supermarkets. In Italian, it is also possible to define such novels using the proprietary eponym “Harmony”, which refers to the long-running series published by the joint venture between the publishers Mondadori and Harlequin.

If on the one hand, it cannot be denied that due to the genre, the source novel could be identified as escapist fiction; on the other, it is a romance novel as traditionally intended. This being considered, the target public, both for the original and for its Italian translation, is not the same as for “romance newsstand fiction”, therefore the translation approach and method to use should and can be different. As Cavagnoli herself underlines (2019:111) the approach and method that can be applied for the translation of traditionally intended novels⁷¹ can tend to foreignization since its target public is more welcoming towards foreignisms and a narrative style that deviates from the linguistic structures of their mother language.

Thus, as mentioned above, determining the hypothetical target public for the translation proposed in Appendix B was fundamental to define the translation approach. As was thoroughly illustrated in Chapter 2, the source novel had a peculiar publishing journey as it entered the literary system in a manner that may not be defined as traditional. The crucial role that both the platform TikTok and influencers like Booktokers and Bookstagrammers had for the initial success of the independently published source novel can also serve as a means to identify the intended target public. To be more precise, the platform and the online book community using it include a heterogeneous group of people united by their love for reading despite differences of age, gender, sexual orientation, native language or education. Even though the social platform in question is predominantly used by

⁷¹ It should be noted that Cavagnoli uses instead the term chick-lit, which, as stated by the Macmillan dictionary, defines “novels written for, about, or by young educated women”. This definition might seem fitting also to define the source novel; however, as stated in Chapter 2, the preferred denomination for it was “romantic comedy” since the term “chick-lit” was instead deemed to be an obsolete stereotypical and sexist reduction.

younger generations⁷², the success due to the online book community led the novel to be traditionally published via a well-established publishing house such as Simon & Shuster. As a consequence, as the distribution channels for the source novel broadened so did its readership. In this instance, it was determined that the hypothetical target public was highly similar to the original one and thus composed of an overall young heterogeneous group of readers.

As illustrated by Venuti (1998), discursive strategies are most conventionally used when translating bestsellers⁷³ and thus in instances with a higher possibility of cultural differences. At the same time, using such strategies to make a text more intelligible can appeal to the target mass readership on which bestsellers are produced and thrive (ibid). However, if on the one hand the use of discursive strategies in this instance would have allowed the narrative to be more immediately comprehensible and intelligible to the target public (Venuti, 1998: 126), on the other it would have significantly simplified the narration.

Thus, as hinted before, the translation approach used and the subsequent translation choices did not tend towards a simplistic approach as the one described above, but were the objectification of the skopos of the translation proposed, which was set to faithfully reproduce and reflect the aim of the source novel as intended by the author.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, author Elena Armas wrote the source novel to provide her intended readership with a more accurate portrait of her native culture as opposed to the one in other mainstream novels that she considered heavily

⁷² As argued in Chapter 2.

⁷³ Such as the source novel.

stereotyped. Therefore, considering the cultural aim and the intended readership, it was inappropriate to use a domesticating approach and strategy (Schleiermacher, 1813. Venuti, 1995/2008. House, 2009: 36-37) that to support domestic canons and provide a text that was culturally familiar to the target public would have resulted in a covert translation. Such translation would have not conveyed the intended cultural component and therefore would have not fulfilled the original skopos of the text. Hence, considering the target public and the arguments by Cavagnoli, it was more suitable to apply a foreignizing strategy (Schleiermacher, 1813. Venuti, 1995/2008. House, 2009: 26-37) that tended to an overt translation and therefore did not apply a “cultural filter” but instead valued the cultural components and the style of the author and accurately transposed them for the target public to appreciate fully.

3.2 The official translation of the title of the source novel

As can be seen in Appendix B, no translation for the title of the source novel *The Spanish Love Deception* was provided for the TT. This was because the ST presented was an extract, thus it was not deemed relevant or within the scope of this work to assign to it a title different from the chapter number given in the source novel. Nevertheless, a few considerations should be made, especially regarding the title that was assigned to the official translation published by Newton Compton Editori.

As mentioned before, Newton Compton Editori published the official translation of the source novel with the title “*Facciamo finta che mi ami*”, which could be literally translated in English as “Let’s pretend that you love me”.

The title proposed by the Italian publishing house does somewhat convey the idea of the false nature of the relationship between the two main characters. However, it does not fulfil the cultural purpose advocated by the author, as it does not transpose the cultural backdrop expressed by the original title. In addition, the loss of such information is not compensated on the front cover but instead a reference to Spain is made on the back cover in the advertising synopsis⁷⁴.

Although the implied meaning and register of the title in question are neither fitting nor representative of the novel, it is not a particularly problematic issue per se. What is problematic instead is the absence of the referent for the setting of the novel and its cultural backdrop, which in the original title were embodied by the adjective “Spanish”.

The mention of Spain in the epitext on the back cover and front flap of the translation published by Newton Compton Editori are an insufficient compensation due to the high relevance dissymmetry between a title and a word in a synopsis. It is interesting to note that the translations that were published in other languages instead maintained the cultural referent and traced the linguistic structure of the original title⁷⁵. Thus, the title proposed by Newton Compton Editori is a clear marker

⁷⁴ “*Una festa di matrimonio in Spagna/ un fidanzato per l’occasione/cosa potrebbe andare storto?*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022) which would be “A wedding celebration in Spain/a boyfriend for the occasion/what could go wrong?”

⁷⁵ Among the titles analysed, the only one that did not include the referent to the deception that takes place in the novel is the Romanian translation: *Din Spania, cu dragoste* (From Spain, with love), which however, as the rest of the titles listed as follows, does include the cultural referent. Spanish: *Farsa de amor a la española* (Spanish style love farce). Portugal Portuguese: *Ilusão de Amor à Espanhola* (Spanish love illusion). Brazilian Portuguese: *Uma Farsa de Amor na Espanha* (A farce of love in Spain). Bulgarian: *Испанска любовна измама* (Spanish love scam). Turkish: *İspanyol Aşk Aldatmacası* (Spanish love deception). German: *Spanish love deception - Manchmal führt die halbe Wahrheit zur ganz großen Liebe* (Spanish love deception – sometimes half the truth leads to the very big love). Hungarian: *Spanyol szerelmi átverés* (Spanish love scam). Dutch: *De Spaanse liefdesleugen* (The Spanish love lie). Danish: *Den spanske kærlighedsaffære* (The Spanish love affair). Slovenian: *Španska ljubezenska prevara* (Spanish love scam).

for a domesticating approach, which can also be identified in the synopsis of the novel located in the front flap of the book⁷⁶. This choice and approach might have been appropriate had the translation been meant for the “fiction newsstand market” since⁷⁷ this domesticating and naturalizing approach is suggested in that particular instance. However, this is not the case for the translation published by the Italian publishing house. It is important to remember that such translation was published for the series *Anagramma*, which is dedicated to world fiction and deals with themes as humour, love, life and friendship⁷⁸. *Anagramma* is not by any means destined to the “fiction newsstand market” thus, the method illustrated above should have not

⁷⁶ “*La regola non era che mentire è concesso solo se può aiutare a tirarti fuori dai guai? Per molti sì, ma non per l'imbranatissima Catalina Martín. Lei è riuscita a infilarsi in un pasticcio di proporzioni incalcolabili, e invece di uscirne sembra sprofondare sempre più giù. Per darsi la zappa sui piedi le è bastato sapere che il ex fidanzato, Daniel, il bastardo per cui è scappata a New York dalla minuscola città spagnola dove è cresciuta, farà da testimone di nozze all'imminente matrimonio di sua sorella... accompagnato dalla stupenda nuova fidanzata. Al telefono Catalina è riuscita soltanto a dire che anche lei si presenterà con il suo bellissimo e innamoratissimo fidanzato americano, peccato che lui... non esista! E adesso dove lo rimedia uno con cui fare colpo su parenti e amici e non vedersi umiliata davanti a tutta la sua famiglia? Le bugie sono come le ciliegie, una tira l'altra: così Catalina ha chiesto ad Aaron Blackford di fingersi il suo fidanzato in cambio di un viaggio in Spagna di tre giorni. Ma Aaron Blackford non è il collega avversario che in ufficio la mette sempre in difficoltà e che lei detesta amabilmente? Catalina, Catalina... possibile che tu no capisca che se un uomo sexy, bello e affascinante come Aaron decide di farti un piacere non è per guadagnarsi un posto in paradiso?” which would be “The rule was that lying is only allowed if it can help you get out of trouble, wasn't it? For many, yes [it was], but not for the [ridiculously] clumsy Catalina Martín. She's managed to get herself into a mess of incalculable proportions, and instead of getting out of it, she seems to be sinking lower and lower [in it]. All she needed to shoot herself in the foot was to learn that her ex-boyfriend, Daniel, the bastard for whom she ran away to New York from the tiny Spanish town she grew up in, will be [a] best man at her sister's upcoming wedding — accompanied by his stunning new fiancée. On the phone, Catalina was only able to say that she too will show up with her beautiful and very much in love American boyfriend — too bad he doesn't exist! Now where does she get one to impress [her] family and friends and not be humiliated in front of her whole family? Lies are like cherries, one pulls the other: so Catalina asked Aaron Blackford to pose as her boyfriend in exchange for a three-day trip to Spain. But isn't Aaron Blackford the colleague who is always giving her a hard time in the office and whom she amiably detests? Catalina, Catalina.... How do you not understand that if a sexy, handsome, charming man like Aaron decides to do you a favor, it is not to earn his place in heaven?”*

Although the synopsis in question is not an object of analysis for this work, it is worth mentioning that besides being an example of the general domesticating approach that characterizes the official transition that was published by the Italian publishing house, it cannot be considered a suitable synopsis as it is instead an inaccurate summary of the novel that reveals aspects from its plot in advance rather than entice the public to read.

⁷⁷ As mentioned in the Introduction of this chapter.

⁷⁸ As defined by Newton Compton Editori.

been used, as it was not fitting for the expectations of the target public nor for the source novel.

The target readership Newton Compton Editori addressed through its series *Anagramma* was general but a specific portion of it was significantly similar to the original one. This specific and strategic targeting was prompted and realized by promoting the Italian translation with the slogan: “TikTok made me buy it!”⁷⁹. Consequently, the domesticating approach⁸⁰ chosen by the Italian publishing house is in complete discordance with what is required both by the literary genre and by the target readership.

In conclusion, to comply with an approach that valued the cultural element, as was the one undertaken to translate the TT, it would have been more appropriate to provide a title that retraced the original one, as was the case for the examples provided in note 7. Therefore, in light of this considerations, a possible example of an alternative title that might be fitting for the purpose and the requirements expressed above, is “*L’inganno d’amore spagnolo*”.

3.3 Text analysis

When the object of a translation is a novel or an excerpt of it as in this work, it is essential to peruse the source text in its entirety, as the intricate net of denotative

⁷⁹ The expression refers to the great commercial influence of the online platform that lead the source novel to its success, as illustrated in Chapter 2.

⁸⁰ As mentioned above, it can be detected both from the title and its synopsis but it will be more prominent throughout the analysis provided later in the commentary.

and connotative constructions realized by the expressive function and aesthetic use of language can make it rather complex (Taylor, 1998: 117).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the determination of the genre of the source text is fundamental, as there are conventional narrative patterns marked by a series of literary techniques and linguistic choices that must be maintained. Another element besides the plot that allowed the source novel to be classified within the romance genre and its rom-com subgenre was the analysis of the narrative and its structure.

The source novel does indeed comply with the three acts structure that defines the organic composition of novels illustrated by Brody (2018)⁸¹. According to such scheme, the three acts can be further divided into beats or plot points⁸² (24) to develop the content of each act individually. However, according to the interpretation realized by Hayes (2016) that applies such structure to romance novels, two of the plot points that follow the midpoint of the second act⁸³ are merged to create a transitional act that Hayes defines as “retreating for love” (22). Moreover, according to Hayes, the third act, which she defines as “fighting for love” (22) does include the last plot point of the second act, thus what Brody defines as “the dark night of the soul” (26), as a means of introduction to the process that will lead to the resolution of the story.

Thus, according to the structural scheme proposed above, the chapter presented in Appendix A is to be placed in the second act, just before the peak of the

⁸¹ Based on the methodological theory for screenwriting elaborated by Snyder (2005).

⁸² The First Act is composed by the following plot points: opening image, theme stated, setup, catalyst, debate. The Second Act consists of: break into 2, b story, fun and games, midpoint, bad guy close in, all is lost, dark night of the soul. The Third Act is divided in: break into 3, finale, final image.

⁸³ Thus what Brody defines as: “the bad guys close in and all is lost” (25, 26).

midpoint. This implies that the external plot (Hayes, 2016:13), represented by the premises of the novel illustrated in Chapter 2, is in the process of being resolved, whereas the internal plot, which is the emotion-driven core of the novel, is on the verge of its climax and is therefore still forming and developing.

At this point of the narration, the main, the supporting, and the antagonistic characters have already been thoroughly delineated in terms of manners, mannerisms, personality traits and overall being. However, it is also important to note that the main characters have additional room for development, which is reached through the fulfilment of the inner plot in the third act. Therefore, what is presented in the ST and subsequently in the TT, is a snapshot of the core characteristics of the characters, the dynamic and the theme of the novel.

Being an expressive text, the source novel represents the objectification of the stylistic and aesthetic choices of the author realized through the means of creative writing. In this specific case, as was hinted in Chapter 2, the style of narration was influenced by the authors Armas used read before the publication of her debut novel. It is possible to state that Armas drew little or no inspiration from other authors in terms of themes and main narrative plot points besides the recurrent tropes of the romance genre. Instated it is safe to state that the pace of the narration and the writing style were mildly influenced by author Mariana Zapata, whom Armas referred to as a role model. However, the considerations on the writing style of Armas are not absolute, as the source novel is her debut and therefore it is possible for her writing style to be subject to significant change.

Nevertheless, the first-person narration of the source novel presents itself as a witty and fresh insight on the events narrated and allows “readers to immerse

themselves in the affective worlds of the protagonists” (Cheyne, 2019: 155) as well as providing an accurate characterization of the female main character.

More specifically, the narration is characterized by a general dominance of paratactical structures and in a reduced form by hypotactical structures. The first ones occasionally are split into shorter sentences to describe actions and convey the confused thoughts and observations of the main character, as well as provide a good pace to the narration. Medium-long subordinate sentences are instead used to express more accurately the flow of the inner thoughts of the main character, as well as to provide brief descriptions of the setting of the scenes.

Furthermore, throughout the novel the author frequently uses Spanish lexicon as well as idiomatic and fixed expressions, both in English and in Spanish, as a means to convey the cultural abstraction of the bilingual main character⁸⁴, convey local colour⁸⁵ and fulfil the cultural skopos.

Moreover, the first-person narration allows vulgar exclamations and interjections to be present both in English and in Spanish since they belong to the idiolect of the main character and are key elements for delineating her personality. According to the time set parameters of contemporary romance, the temporal context of the narration should be set between 1950 and the present day. In this instance, the narration does not provide a specific time mark that determines the exact temporal context of the story. Nevertheless, it is possible to deduce that it might be set around the year 2020⁸⁶ since in a conversational context the main

⁸⁴ Particularly in the first and third acts of the narration.

⁸⁵ Particularly in the second acts of the narration.

⁸⁶ It is important to consider that the assumption for which the story might be presumably set in the year 2020 is not supported by any mention to the global COVID-19 pandemic that marked said year.

character mentions to the date when the last episode of the television series “Game of Thrones” aired⁸⁷.

The geographical setting of the story is split, as the first and the third act of the narration develop in New York, whereas the second act⁸⁸, is set in the northern part of Spain. This division is significantly important for the linguistic structures used by the author to depict the characters that appear in those acts. Such consideration is indeed fundamental for the characters in act two who communicate with the male main character in English, despite it not being their native language and/or not possessing a high level of proficiency in said language.

3.4 Lexicogrammatical analysis and strategies used

English and Italian present an extensive share of differences in terms of grammatical and lexical rules. Considering the strict relationship between the two aspects, it was fundamental to perform slight structural changes to comply with the set of grammatical rules of the target language, as dissymmetry might have occurred upon handling various notions or expressing different aspects of the experiences narrated. Moreover, so as not to cause dissymmetry in the information content conveyed it was necessary to examine numerous lexical items and constructions that might have posed as problematic for translation. Furthermore, special attention

However, such inconsistency is to be justified as the novel, being a work of fiction, is not bound to present and provide a faithful representation of real events.

⁸⁷ “Exactly. In the same way that I haven’t forgotten what David Benioff and D.B. Weiss did to us on May 19, 2019.” [...]. “Didn’t Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, First of Her Name deserve better than that?” (Armas, 2021: 69).

⁸⁸ From which the ST was taken.

was to be paid to the same grammatical and lexical parameters that appeared in the ST in Spanish.

3.4.1 Punctuation

If on one hand rules of punctuation differ between English and Italian, it is important to underline that its use represents the creative use of language of an author and thus is an authorial choice that reflects a specific style that needs to be transposed in the TT. Moreover, punctuation contributes to set the rhythm and pace of literary prose, therefore its translation should not deform nor rearrange the sequence of sentences according to different ideas and interpretations of the discourse (Cavagnoli, 2017: 11).

Thus, as to faithfully report the expressive use of language of the author, preserve the pace of the ST and the characterizing use of the level of complexity of sentences, little changes were operated in the TT to comply with the grammatical rules of the target language. As the few cases presented as follows show.

“My parents had insisted we order wine even if the wedding was tomorrow— where alcohol would certainly flow in rivers of *sidra*, wine, *cava*, and whatnot.” (lines 29-30) was rendered as “*I miei genitori avevano insistito nell’ordinare il vino nonostante il matrimonio fosse il giorno dopo — e lì l’alcool sarebbe scorso a fiumi di sidra, vino, cava, e via dicendo.*” (lines 30-32). In this instance, the Em dash was maintained⁸⁹ as it did not substitute a colon but was an indicator that marked that additional information was provided with a direct intervention of the first-person

⁸⁹ The punctuation mark was rendered in the same way in other cases in the TT, as in lines: 57-58, 70, 73, 77, 296 and 462.

narrator. Therefore, it was necessary to distinguish such indicative contribution to the narration and not reduce it to simple additional textual information marked by commas, as instead was rendered in the official translation published by Newton Compton Editori⁹⁰ (henceforth referred to as OT). Nevertheless, it should be noted that in other instances the OT⁹¹ did maintain the Em dash as a marker of the intrusion of the narrator; therefore, no explanation can be given with regard to the supposed reasoning or strategy behind the choice to render the Em dash as a comma⁹².

It is important to underline that when the Em dash was used in the ST as a marker for interrupted speech and hesitation, in the TT was substituted with ellipsis as to comply with the parameters set by the literary conventions of the target language, as in the example that follows: “[...] I told him with a sigh, “just let it go—” (line 132), was rendered as “[...] *dissi con un sospiro, «lascia perdere...»*” (line 139).

Speech utterances in the ST were signalled by inverted commas, which could have been used in the TT too as they are an accepted punctuation form for the context. However, it was deemed more appropriate to introduce speech

⁹⁰“*I miei genitori avevano insistito nell’ordinare il vino nonostante fosse il giorno prima del matrimonio, dove di certo ci sarebbero stati fiumi di alcol tra ‘sidra’, ‘cava’ e via dicendo*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 289).

⁹¹ Due to space constraints, what follows is to be considered as a restricted selection of the instances where the OT did maintain the Em dash as a punctuation mark as intended by the author. “*Daniel – che era venuto da solo perché i genitori sarebbero arrivati l’indomani mattina presto – aveva lo sguardo basso sul telefono, come se contenesse i segreti del cosmo*”. (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 289). “*Praticamente quasi tutte le studentesse – e anche qualche ragazzo – subivano il fascino di quella fossetta sulla guancia e della sicurezza con cui si muoveva per l’aula*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 305).

⁹² Due to space constraints, what follows is a restricted selection of the instances where the OT did not maintain the Em dash as a punctuation mark intended by the author “*Avevo atteso a lungo quelle scuse e forse era perfino troppo tardi, ma perlomeno erano arrivate*”. (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 296). “*Mia sorella cominciò a parlare di qualcosa, ma non riuscii a capire cosa dicesse.*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 301).

interventions using guillemet to avoid confusion when inverted commas were used to report specifications or fragments of past dialogues that were rendered in italics, as in line 471 of the TT *“Solo per noi’, sembrava rassicurarmi”*.

3.4.2 The structure of the sentences: between equation and rationalization

As mentioned in the section above, the ST is characterized by a larger use of paratactical constructions marked and signalled by the use of punctuation.

The OT did present an inconsistent pattern of “rationalization” (Cavagnoli, 2017: 14) of the style of the author with regards to general punctuation and the syntactic rendering of the different level of complexity of sentences of the ST. As mentioned in the section above, the author resorts to short and simple sentences and long and complex sentences as a means to delineate different aspects of the narration and shift the focus of attention of the reader.

Throughout the ST, the full stop was regularly used to mark declarative sentences or to end sentences, but in some instances it was employed to create double focus through “syntactic chopping”⁹³ (Faini, 2004: 67) which emphasised the communicative item in the first sentence, as well as the one belonging to the second sentence. Therefore, short syntactical constructions separated from another string of sentence were rendered and maintained as such in the TT, for they represented an element that characterised the style of narration and served an emphasizing

⁹³ The term in Faini is *“triturazione sintattica”*.

purpose although for prescriptive grammar they should have belonged to the same construction⁹⁴.

The OT instead complied with the norms of prescriptive grammar and normalized the use of the full stop, causing the original fragmentation to lose its connotative meaning⁹⁵.

Contrary to the OT, in the TT the “syntactic chopping” of the sentences was transposed maintaining their separate structure as mentioned above and as the examples that follow show. “So, she can be too much to handle. Often” (line 135) which was rendered as “*Perciò, può essere troppo da gestire. Spesso.*” (line 142).

Furthermore, the author tends to render some of the actions and gestures of the characters through active structures where the agent is a limb or a body part rather than the character who performs such action⁹⁶. This linguistic choice, which provides a clear image of the perception of the main character, can also be interpreted as a means to hint that oftentimes due to the irrational and emotional

⁹⁴ The following is only a restricted selection of examples: “All right. That was actually not that bad.” (line 134), “So, she can be too much to handle. Often” (line 135), “That’s what makes her our Lina. Our little ‘terremoto’” (line 140). “His voice reached my skin like a caress. Pushing my heart to bang against my chest walls, wanting out as much as I didn’t want to hear whatever was to come” (lines 195-196), “Raw honesty. Conviction. Faith. Reliance. A pledge. All of that looked at me from Aaron’s eyes. Demanding to be acknowledged.” (lines 209-211), “but I was too busy running. Being a complete chickenshit again [...]” (lines 236-237), “[...] I repeated, those two emotions turning into something else. Something that tasted a lot more bitter” (lines 314-315). “His expression assembled into one that was meant to impose. To convey authority” (line 354).

⁹⁵ The following is only a restricted selection of examples of the instances where the OT did not preserve the structure as intended by the author. “*Quindi spesso è molto pericoloso maneggiarla*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 292), “*Ecco com’è la nostra Lina. Il nostro piccolo terremoto*” (ibid), “*Pura sincerità. Convinzione. Fede. Affidabilità. Una supplica. Tutto questo mi comunicavano gli occhi di Aaron. Cose che pretendevano di essere riconosciute*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 294), “[...] *ribadii mentre le due emozioni mescolate si tramutavano in qualcosa di diverso, dal sapore molto più amaro*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 297). “*La sua faccia assunse un’espressione che voleva essere impositiva, autoritaria*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 298)

⁹⁶ Some examples of such construction are to be found in lines: 24, 43, 46, 118, 148, 157-158, 165, 417, 510, 514, 518 among others.

drive that characterize each character in specific moments of the narration, actions and gestures are not strictly bound to the conscious will of the character. For this reason, in the ST was important to maintain the structure as intended by the author, as the following example demonstrate. “I watched my hand reaching for Aaron’s. As if it no longer conceived not being held in his” (lines 157-158) which was rendered as “*osservai la mia mano ricercare quella di Aaron. Come se non concepisse più l’idea di non essere stratta nella sua*” (lines 164-165).

The OT instead displayed an undefined and irregular pattern of translation, as in the majority of the cases it did not maintain the structures as intended by the author and rendered the actions as mere reports that did not convey their original connotative meaning⁹⁷. It is possible to assume, that this choice might have been dictated by the will of the translator to disambiguate what might have been erroneously considered as tension between syntactic and communicative functions in the sentences in question. Considering the procedure of inversion and voice change that these sentences seem to have undergone in the OT, it is safe to state that

⁹⁷ “My eyebrows bunched at the audacity” (line 22) was rendered as “*Aggrottai la fronte per la sua audacia*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 288). “My head whipped in his direction” (line 118) was rendered as “*Mi girai di scatto verso di lui.*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 291). “*A quel punto avevo gli occhi colmi di lacrime*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 292). “I watched my hand reaching for Aaron’s. As if it no longer conceived not being held in his” (lines 157-158) was rendered as “*Quando tornai al mio posto mi sorpresi a cercare la mano di Aaron, come se non concepissi più non averla nella mia*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 293). “Aaron’s fingers gripped mine a little tighter” (line 183) was rendered as “*Aaron aumentò la stretta sulla mia mano*” (ibid). As mentioned above, the OT did present an irregular pattern with regards to the translation of the structures in question, since in some instances it did indeed maintain the structure intended by the author as in “*Due occhi azzurri mi individuarono all’istante*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 301) which despite being an incorrect translation of the original sentence “A pair of blue eyes immediately found mine” (line 417) does maintain the original structure as does “*ma le mie labbra si curvarono in modo sbagliato [...]*” (ibid) for “my lips probably curled the wrong way” (line 430) and “*Il mio corpo voleva girarsi*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 305) for “My body wanted to turn” (line 555).

was applied the modulation or reordering strategy at a structural level, as the examples given in the previous footnote show.

If on one hand the constructions as the ones in question tend to be re-ordered or modulated into syntactic units that comply with more familiar patterns of the target language through the use of the ricategorization strategy; on the other the strategy applied by the OT can be used only when such structures are not objectifications of semantic and stylistic choices operated by the author. Hence, in this specific case, modulation or reordering was possible, as no linguistic constraints in the target language did oppose to it, and no coherence issues with the ST could have arisen as a result of its application. However, despite the possibility of using this strategy its actual employment was not advisable so as not to overlook the intent of the author expressed above, which as mentioned before, was one of the reasons why it was not applied in the TT.

3.4.3 The preservation of idiolects: between equation and neutralization

Due to its strict relation with culture, language poses itself as a means and a tool that on one hand constructs and shapes the identity of the individuals who use it and that on the other, individuals use to determine and express their peculiarity in relation with others. Consequently, the linguistic choices operated by the author were intended to define the idiolect, the personalities and peculiarities of the characters. Hence, the linguistic constructions that presented themselves as means to fulfil this purpose were rendered accordingly so as not to provide a distorted image of the characters and respect the style of the author.

As illustrated before, throughout the source novel, the female main character makes use of various vulgar exclamations and interjections both in Spanish and in English that due to their importance for her idiolect and personality were to be rendered with equivalent expressions in the TT.

For instance, the adjective “chickenshit” (line 237) was used with its figurative meaning of “coward”. Thus, being an idiom it was not to be borrowed and literally translated in source language. Similarly, it was not possible to render it in the target language with the term “*pollo*”, which on one hand might have preserved both the form and the theme, but as it designates a gullible person, had a dissimilar figurative meaning.

A more suitable strategy for translating the adjective in question was to render it with one of similar form and meaning, thus it was advisable to apply the equation strategy. With this regards a possible solution was using “*coniglio*”, the direct equivalent in the target language for the connotative meaning expressed by the original idiom. However, it was deemed that the animal correspondence did not represent a relevant information regarding the idiolect of the main character, as instead did the vulgar aspect of the term.

Thus, an alternative way of applying the equation strategy was to focus both on the implications of the idiom on the idiolect of the character who uttered it and on its meaning. As a consequence, the original adjective was rendered with the coined cognate “*cacasotto*” (line 248) which maintained both the vulgar tone of the ST as well as the theme expressed by the noun “shit”, in addition to also maintaining the original meaning intended.

The equation strategy could not be applied in the same manner to the interjection “*Mierda*” (line 244), as being an Hispanism it acted primarily as a cultural marker but at the same time defined the idiolect of the character in the same way the case above did. Considering the cultural importance of such interjection, it was impossible to disambiguate its meaning and sociolinguistic function by translating it with its true cognate in the target language “*merda*”.

Therefore, so as to adhere to the foreignizing approach set for the translation of TT⁹⁸ and to comply with the requirements expressed above and maintain the same foreignizing effect of the OT for the target public in the TT, the expression was maintained in its original form using the loan strategy⁹⁹. Moreover, a brief analysis of the situational context further suggests that the interjection cannot be transposed in the target language for coherence reasons. To be more specific, in the context of utterance the interjection “*mierda*” was used to express surprise after the main character bumps into someone unknown, who considering the location in which the fact occurs, she assumes to be Spanish, as the only person in the restaurant who she knows speaks primarily English did not follow her. Therefore, as stated above, rendering the expression with a direct correspondent in the target language as “*merda*” was not advisable.

The OT presented an evident tendency of censorship caused by the unjustified use of the neutralization strategy to deal with the transposition of vulgar interjections uttered by the female main character. Since the loss was not

⁹⁸ Illustrated in the introduction of this chapter.

⁹⁹ It is interesting to note that the term in question, as well as every other Spanish expression used in the source novel, is an example of loan strategy in the ST as stylistic means instead.

compensated otherwise, the female main character appeared as somewhat prudish and with a different personality from the description made by other characters in the source novel¹⁰⁰.

Nevertheless, as interjections represented a fundamental part of the idiolect of the female main character it is important to analyse them properly within the framework of the approach that was set to be followed for the TT. Thus, as mentioned before, the strategy that was most prominently used was the equation strategy as the examples that will follow demonstrate.

“Dammit” (lines 125 and 558) was in both cases rendered with the interjection “*dannazione*” (lines 132 and 594) as was used as to express annoyance mildly and therefore did not require a strong imprecation as “*maledizione*”, “*cazzo*” or “*cacchio*”. Moreover, it was impossible to render the interjection using the true cognates “*accidenti*” or “*cavolo*”, as being weaker forms were inconsistent with the idiolect of the character.

The expression “what the hell had happened” (line 425) was rendered as “*che diamine fosse successo*” (line 449) and similarly, the interjection “hell” (line 427) was

¹⁰⁰ The following are examples of the censorship and neutralization of the OT, with regards to the vulgar expressions that are to be found in the ST: “Being a complete chickenshit” (line 237) was rendered as “*A fare di nuovo la parte del coniglio*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 295) perhaps to mistakenly maintain the animal component of the original expression as suggested above. “[...]that it had been very fucking stupid” (line 307) was rendered as “[...]mi resi conto, di che follia fosse stata” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 297), as stated above, the vulgar adverb does hold a connotative meaning beyond its emphasising function, thus rendering it with the name “*follia*” is not a suitable solution for the context. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me, Daniel.” (line 353) was rendered with the expression “*Mi prendi per i fondelli, Daniel?*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 299) despite holding the same meaning of the original expression and being used in informal and colloquial contexts, the form proposed by the OT does not provide the same emotional charge of the original marked by a vulgar tone. “Every single fucking thing between us” (lines 556-557) was rendered as “*Ogni singola cosa tra noi, maledizione*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 305), the exclamation does not reflect the true emotional state of the main character in the context in which it was uttered, nor does it present the same emotional charge as the original.

rendered as “*diamine*” (line 451) as both instances needed an equivalent that was not too strong as “*cacchio*” or bland as “*cavolo*”. Moreover, this choice was additionally made to provide a consistent and coherent linguistic image of the female main character.

The same approach was used in the TT when dealing with specific lexical items that posed themselves as representative of the idiolect of the female main character, such as the following examples.

The term “college” (lines 562 and 604) refers to an institution that offers a specialized or professional education that may lead to a bachelor’s degree that is considered of a lower level than the ones earned in universities¹⁰¹. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the female main character works as an engineer, therefore it is possible to deduce that she held a bachelor’s degree in engineering. Such degree cannot be issued by a college but rather by a university as it represents a qualification for an undergraduate program. Considering the textual and the extra-textual information, it might be safe to argue that the term has been misused and that the correct term should have been “university”. However, it is possible to assume that the misuse of the term was instead a representation of the idiolect of the female main character that thus, was transposed in the TT using the calque strategy.

With regards to the different idiolects and characterization of the characters, in the ST the structure of the questions formulated by the male main character do

¹⁰¹ It is important to note that the term does not share the same meaning with British English as it indicates instead a place that provides the skills needed to perform a particular job and its qualifications are not equivalent to a bachelor’s degree.

not comply with the grammatical rules of the source language, as they lack auxiliaries, as can be noted in line 16, 21, 502 and 512¹⁰². This aspect does not suggest that the character possesses an inferior education or a low proficiency in his native language, but instead marks his idiolect and personality. Therefore, so as not to provide a distorted version of the character, such linguistic characterization¹⁰³ was adapted and transposed to the target language.

The OT instead applied the re-categorization strategy by means of diffusion. Not only it added the missing auxiliaries in the interrogative structures in question but frequently added adverbs as well¹⁰⁴. The incorrect use of such strategy is accompanied by the use¹⁰⁵ of the neutralization strategy, as the peculiar characteristics of the idiolect of the male main character were standardized.

The same characterizing purpose of the linguistic peculiarities of the character is displayed through a conversation that involves primarily characters that do not speak English as their native language¹⁰⁶. As it was fundamental to maintain the degree of characterization required by such structures, the equation strategy was applied by avoiding complex grammatical structures and lexical items. To be more precise, utterances presented slight syntactical imperfections and elements of

¹⁰² Some examples will be provided as follows: "Cold?" should have been uttered as "Are you cold?" instead. "No place for dessert?" should have been "Don't you have place for dessert?". "Understand?" should have been rendered as "Did you understand?" and "Sound like a plan?" should have been rendered as "Does it sound like a plan?".

¹⁰³ "Freddo?" (line 18), "Niente spazio per il dolce?" (line 24), "Capito?" (line 536).

¹⁰⁴ "Hai freddo?" (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 288), "Non hai posto per il dolce?", (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 288), "Non essere così carina" (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 289), "Altrimenti la prossima volta farò ben altro che darti un pizzocotto" (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 289), "Hai capito?" (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 303)

¹⁰⁵ Which in this case might be collateral.

¹⁰⁶ The father of the female main character is said to be a university history professor who fluently speaks English, whereas the mother of the female main character is said to be a nurse who does not possess the same level of proficiency of the language as her husband (Armas, 2020:222).

diasthathy that were reported in the TT. Special attention should be given to diasthathy, which was expressed through the presence of the determiner “the” before the proper nouns Netflix and Google: “[...] just like one of those movies we watch on ‘the Netflix’” (line 77), “‘Claro, usa el Google, Javier.’ Use ‘the’ Google, Javier” (line 131). In the ST, the determiner was graphically marked with the use of italics that therefore was transposed to the TT to convey the same emphasizing effect.

It is important to underline that, being a sociolinguistic indicator, the mistake cannot be classified as a marker of influence of the Spanish sentence structure, as the parameters of its grammar do not require a determiner¹⁰⁷ in both instances. This sociolinguistic variable, allows to roughly classify the speaker within the age range of Baby Boomers or Generation X, the generations preceding the one of the female main character.

The equation strategy was used to maintain the characterizing connotative meaning of this morphosyntactic trait. Such strategy could be correctly applied as the allomorphy of the article marks dyatopic and diasthathic variants of the Italian language too¹⁰⁸. Therefore, it was possible to maintain in the TT both the original connotative meaning and the original referent: “*proprio come uno di quei film che guardiamo ‘sul Netflix’*” (lines 82-83) and “‘Claro, usa el Google, Javier’, Usa ‘il’ Google, Javier” (line 138).

¹⁰⁷ Had the utterances in English been influenced by the native language of the speaker, it would have been rendered as a structural calque instead: “[...] just like the movies we watch ‘in Netflix’” since the correct Spanish sentence is: “*como las películas que vemos en Netflix*” thus the determiner in the ST, should have been instead “in”, the corresponding preposition of the Spanish “*en*”.

¹⁰⁸ Other examples are to be considered: “lo/il swatch” or “lo/il handout” or “l’internet”.

In the OT the idiolect was not transposed as once again the neutralization strategy was employed. To be more precise, both the indicators for a middle level of proficiency in the English language and the diastrathyc traits displayed by the mother of the female main character were standardized and rendered as standard Italian utterances. As no compensation nor error dislocation was provided in the OT, the characterizing idiolect of the character was not rendered¹⁰⁹, and thus was provided a distorted and flattened image of yet another character, disregarding an element that could have been considered a source of irony.

In this regard, it is interesting to mention that the use of the neutralization strategy and the rationalizing approach to the idiolect of the mother of the female main character was not shared by other translations of the source novel. Instead, such transitions did correctly render the linguistic characteristics of the

¹⁰⁹ *“Isabel ci ha raccontato”* (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 290), the original verb “explain” was corrected and rendered with the verb “raccontare” thus “told”. *“La storia che hai raccontato”* (ibid), the determiner “that” was rendered with the definite article “la” which corresponds to the determiner “the”. *“È così romantica, sembra proprio uno di quel film che danno su Netflix. [...] Appunto, quello è Netflix, ‘mamá’”* (ibid), the translation proposed by the OT not only did not transpose the diastrathyc variant represented by the determiner “the” but did also display a lack of comprehension of the ST. It could have been possible to interpret the prepositional verb that was chosen: “dare su”, as an attempt to render the diastrathyc variant in question, since its direct English correspondent is “broadcast” and it references to television programming, thus suggesting that the speaker believed that the subscription streaming service operated as a normal broadcasting television channel. However, it could not be considered as a suitable solution as the comment made by the female main character to the statement of her mother: *“Appunto, quello è Netflix, ‘mamá’”* (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 290), is not a remark about the nature of the streaming service but is rather a statement that underlines that the woman is mistakenly comparing her life to movies. This suggests an incorrect interpretation of the adverb “just” which, had the meaning been the one proposed by the OT, would have been graphically rendered in the ST in italics as a means to emphasize it as the determiner “the” was. In *“Claro, usa el Google, Javier”* (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 292) the Spanish utterance was reported as in the ST but the subsequent portion of the text (use ‘the’ Google, Javier) was not transposed. In this instance not only did the OT not rendered in a suitable manner the idiolect of the speaker but in doing so it automatically marked the Spanish utterance as correct when it was not, due to the presence of the determiner “el” before the proper noun.

utterances¹¹⁰ using the equation strategy and further demonstrating the inaccuracy of OT and its general disregard towards the ST and the style of the author.

3.4.4 *The transposition of the irony: between equation and generalization*

Overall, the first-person narration is characterized by a fluctuating level of irony directly related to the emotional state of the female main character in the situational context in which is used and can be detected. However, the level of irony that was displayed in ST is subtler than in other parts of the source novel. An example is represented by the sentence “I was sure something had just popped in the vicinity of my female reproductive parts” (lines 47-48) which is to be considered as an altered version of the internet slang expression, “[...] my ovaries just exploded”.

The original expression does not refer to a medical distress, but is rather used by women to denote that something or someone causes a strong pleasurable sensation that leads to the production of high levels of oestrogens and thus to some degree of sexual attraction. Therefore, in the context of use, the irony in the ST was provided both by the reference to the internet lingo and by its alteration with the more general construction “female reproductive parts”.

¹¹⁰ The Portuguese translation rendered the utterances as follows: “*Parece tão romântica, como os filmes que a gente assiste no Netflix. [...] É ‘na’ Netflix, mamá*” (Editora Arqueiro, 2022: 318) “*Claro, usa ‘el Google’, Javier*” (Editora Arqueiro, 2022: 319) was not rendered with its supposed corresponding Portuguese form “*Claro, utiliza o/a Google, Javier*” perhaps due to the linguistic symmetry between the two languages. The Turkish translation rendered the utterances as follows: “*Çok romantik bir hikâyeymiş, The Netflix’te izlediğimiz filmlerdeki gibi. [...] Sadece Netflix, Mamâ.*” (Yabancı, 2022: 357) and “*‘Claro, usa el Google, Javier’. Doğru, ‘The’ Google’ı kullan, Javier*” (Yabancı, 2022: 358). The Hungarian translation rendered the utterances as follows: “*Olyan romantikusan hangzott, mint azok a filmek, amiket a Netflixen nézünk. [...] Az Netflix, ‘mamá’*” (21 Század Kiadó, 2022: 431) and “*‘Claro, usa el Google, Javier’. Használd a Google-t, Javier*” (21 Század Kiadó, 2022: 433).

It was necessary to provide a suitable translation that transposed the multi-level irony as in the ST, since it was a narrative and stylistic means that served as an identification trait of the character.

As the original referent was not to be found in Italian, it was not possible to apply fully the equation strategy. Therefore, during the transposition it was inevitable for a collateral loss of the connotative reference to occur, as the irony was rendered only on its level concerning the word choice for the context: “[...] *ebbi la certezza che qualcosa fosse appena esploso in prossimità delle mie parti riproduttive femminili*” (lines 50-51).

The OT instead displayed a complete disregard for the irony expressed in the ST by misapplying the particularization strategy. To be more precise, the original phrase was rendered with the expression “*zone erogene*”¹¹¹ which did also sexualize the statement when not intended to be. Moreover, the expression proposed as a particularization of the original is improper and ambiguous considering that erogenous zones are deeply subjective, contextually and culturally bound areas that do not allow the term to be a fitting synonym for the female reproductive system. If the expression chosen by the OT were to be further particularized and disambiguated and thus replaced with a supposed hyponym or rather one of the areas considered as erogenous as: lips, neck or nipples, not only will the sentence

¹¹¹ “[...] *ebbi la netta sensazione di un’esplosione improvvisa dalle parti delle mie zone erogene*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 289).

lose its original connotative meaning and its irony but will not make sense, proving once again the inaccuracy of the OT¹¹².

3.4.5 The uses of italics and its rendering

The differences in the graphic rendering of the text are indicators regarding the peculiar stylistic choices operated by the author, therefore it is important to analyse and define its uses and variations, as well as the adjustments made in the TT. In this regard, is important to illustrate the different manners in which italics was employed in the ST by the author.

One of the main uses was to mark Spanish linguistic and cultural elements like utterances as: “*Qué maravilloso!*”¹¹³ (line 102), names that designated general parental ties¹¹⁴ as: “*abuela*”¹¹⁵ (line 50), affective names as: “*osito*”¹¹⁶ (line 22), or names of local products as: “*sidra*”¹¹⁷ (line 30) and “*cava*”¹¹⁸ (line 30). Therefore, using the loan strategy, the lexical items were preserved and the original marking purpose was rendered in italics in the same way as in the ST, as in “*abuela*” (line 53) and “*Ay!*” (line 117).

This approach could not be maintained for the Spanish term “*terremoto*” (line 140) which was rendered in italics as in the ST to mark it as foreign, despite both its

¹¹² For instance: “[...] *ebbi la netta sensazione di un’esplosione improvvisa dalle parti delle mie labbra*” or “[...] *ebbi la netta sensazione di un’esplosione improvvisa dalle parti dei miei capezzoli*” or again “[...] *ebbi la netta sensazione di un’esplosione improvvisa dalle parti del mio collo*” or, as a list “[...] *ebbi la netta sensazione di un’esplosione improvvisa dalle parti di collo, labbra e capezzoli*”.

¹¹³ How wonderful!

¹¹⁴ It is important to note that in the ST, “*abuela*” was graphically rendered in italics only when used to describe the general parental relationship, whereas when it was used as an appellative, it was capitalized and not rendered in italics. The same applies to the appellatives referred to the parents of the female main character: “*Mamá*” (line 79) and “*Papá*” (line 132).

¹¹⁵ Grandma.

¹¹⁶ Sweetie.

¹¹⁷ Spanish typical cider also know as ‘*vino de manzana*’ (apple wine).

¹¹⁸ Spanish sparkling wine, similar to French *Champagne* and Italian *Spumante*.

spelling and its meaning being shared by the target language. Consequently, due to the possible redundancy issues, it was necessary to use the deletion strategy. Thus the explanatory sentence that followed the term, needed in the ST due to the linguistic dissymmetry between Spanish and English¹¹⁹ was not transposed.

With regards to the specific use of italics illustrated above, the OT marked Spanish utterances¹²⁰, interjections¹²¹ and affective names¹²². Still, it did not render the italics for “*abuela*” when used as a general parental name, nor did it comply with the grammatical requirements of the target language reporting the correct capitalized name when used as a proper noun for the person to whom the term referred¹²³.

In addition, italics was also employed in the ST as a means of emphasis with phonological implications as in: “I wasn’t *fine*” (line 19) and “To see you like *this*” (line 165). As in the previous instance, it was necessary to render the emphasis and the changes in the tone of voice of the characters as intended by the author to

¹¹⁹ “Our little *earthquake*” (lines 141-142)

¹²⁰ “Qué maravilloso” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 291).

¹²¹ “*Oye!*” (ibid). However, it should be noted that the interjection “*Ay*” was not graphically rendered in italics (ibid).

¹²² “*Osito*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022:288).

¹²³ What follows are only a few examples: “Then, she translated what Aaron had said for Abuela[...]” (line of 104) rendered as “*Quindi tradusse ad abuela quanto detto da Aaron[...]*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 291). “What have you been doing here for so long, *cariño*? Abuela asked” (line 389) was rendered as “*«Che fine avevi fatto, ‘cariño’?», mi chiese abuela*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 300). This choice would seem to be based on the incorrect consideration of the term “*abuela*” as a loan for its direct Italian correspondent “*nonna*”. However, as “*abuela*” is not graphically marked as a foreign term, the OT assumes the readership to know its meaning which, despite the evident linguistic symmetry between Spanish and Italian, cannot be considered a correct assumption. Moreover, the only instances in which the appellative is correctly rendered with the capital letter is when it represents the first word of a new sentence, as in: “[...] *lo avesse sentito. Abuela era ancora concentrata [...]*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 289), “*«Ah, sì?»./ Abuela mi diede dei colpetti sul braccio [...]*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 300). It should also be noted that the OT in one instance (within the ST) did also render the appellatives “*Abuela*” and “*Mamá*” with its direct Italian correspondants “*nonna*” and “*madre*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 291 and 293).

transpose a narration that did reflect the narrative voice of the female main character and to convey the emotional ramifications of certain lexical items. Therefore, italics was rendered in the same way in the TT, as for example in: “*Non stavo bene*” (line 22).

The OT instead did not render the portions of the ST marked for emphasis nor did compensate and render in some other way the alterations of the tone of voice. Thus, it once again provided a flattened narration that did not convey the necessary markers for the narrative tone¹²⁴.

Furthermore, it also is important to underline that in the TT italics was used as an emphasis means to deal with different lexical issues. To be more precise, the adjective “lonely” (line 191) could not be rendered with its direct correspondent “*sola*” as the term had already been used for the adjective “alone” (line 190). Therefore the difference in meaning expressed by the two adjectives in the ST was transposed using the paraphrasis strategy and the meaning of “lonely” was clarified. The resulting expression was rendered in italics as to emphasize the difference: “*Non abbiamo mai pensato che saresti rimasta sola, Lina. Ma avevamo il terrore che ‘ti saresti sentita sola’*” (lines 197-198).

As hinted in the section regarding punctuation, italics was also used in the ST as a means to indicate that fragments of previous conversations had been inserted in the narration and as to signal the thoughts and personal considerations of the

¹²⁴ “*Per ‘lui?’*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022:308) was the only instance (within the chapter analysed) in which the OT did accurately render emphasis using italics. It is also important to note that the only case in which the change in in tone of voice could be detected was in “*A fare cosa?!*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 289) which was not marked graphically but was rather rendered by adding the exclamation point after the repeated interrogative sentence.

female main character as in: “*I talked her into believing[...]*” (lines 83-84) and “*Does he feel that pull too?[...]*” (lines 203-204) and “*Wowie*” (line 26).

As a means to conclude this section, it is important to remember that another notable use of italics in this context is represented by the marking of the incorrect use of the determiner “the” and its direct Spanish correspondent “*el*” in the utterances previously analysed. As mentioned in the dedicated section, both instances were rendered accordingly in the TT, whereas as the OT did not render the diastrathic variation, italics was not employed.

3.4.6 *The transposition of specific verbal structures*

As to comply with the past tense that was used for the translation, time adverbs and time indicators, save for the ones that appeared within utterances¹²⁵, were adapted and transposed for coherence purposes and time continuity. Thus expression as: “[...] even if the wedding was tomorrow [...]” (line 9) and “[...] this one dinner [...]” (line 5) were rendered as “[...] *nonostante il matrimonio fosse il giorno dopo* [...]” (line 31) and “*Quell’unica cena*” (line 5).

Furthermore, it was fundamental to analyse the connotative and idiomatic meanings of verbs and verbal constructions to render them accordingly in the TT, as different strategies might have been used. Some examples will be provided as follows.

In the sentence “[...]the food I had inhaled” (line 8) the verb “inhaled” could not be directly transposed as its meaning was not the one of “breathing” but it was

¹²⁵ As for instance, “She’s here now, and she’s okay” (line 150) and “You are getting married tomorrow.” (lines 186-186).

used figuratively as a less informal synonym of “scarf down”, to express that the female main character had eaten her dinner very quickly. Therefore, it was necessary to apply the equation strategy and render the original verb with the verb “*spazzolare*” which was deemed more appropriate than “*scofanare*”, “*mangiare velocemente*” and “*divorare*”, that were either too informal or too general for the context.

It would seem that the OT applied the equation strategy too, as it rendered the verb as “*ingerire*” in “[...] *[il] cibo che avevo ingerito*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022:288). However, the solution proposed is not the result of the use of the equation strategy but is instead another example of generalization as the verb chosen did not maintain the figurative aspect of the original verb of the ST.

The sentence “the questions [...] knotting together my heartstrings” (line 217) is to be considered an alteration of the idiom “to tug/pull at somebody’s heartstrings” and was therefore to be rendered properly as to maintain the reference to the image provided by the author and its contextual meaning.

The compound term “heartstrings” refers to deep emotions and feelings, however the direct correspondent in the target language, “*sentimenti*”, does not include the element of “strings” that could have allowed the equation strategy to be applied to maintain the image suggested by the author. In addition, neither was it possible to render the term with its direct medical correspondent: “*corde tendinee*”, as it was not fitted for the context.

Thus, as no reference to a similar idiomatic expression to “to tug/pull at somebody’s heartstrings” could be found in the target language to be modified in a similar manner as in the ST and transposed in the TT, it was deemed more important

to focus on the meaning it conveyed. Therefore, as to convey accurately the state of confusion and the feelings of the female main character expressed in the ST, it was useful to use the paraphrasis strategy to disambiguate the meaning of the term. Thus, the expression was rendered as: *“le domande [...] che mi ingarbugliavano i sentimenti [...]”* (lines 224-225).

The OT instead translated the expression as: *“ingarbugliandomi il cuore”* (Newton Compton Editori, 2022:294) and it might be considered as the result of the use of two different strategies. To be more precise, the term *“cuore”* (heart) was used as a synonym or a hypernym for “feelings” but it might have been also used as to express an abstract metonymic link with “feelings”. Despite the strategy that was used in this instance, the solution proposed in the OT is an odd collocation that provided an equally odd image due to the dissymmetry between the connotative meaning of the terms “heart” and “feelings” and their nature.

The two sentences in lines 487-490¹²⁶ posed as problematic with regards to the visual image and metaphor provided by the ST as they needed to be accordingly rendered in the TT. The expression “cocktail of emotions” was used with its figurative meaning of “confused combination of” however, it does also maintain its denotative meaning of “drink” as the author refers to emotions as a metaphoric cocktail.

Therefore, the verb construction in the first sentence “had slowly been assembling” could not be rendered by using the literal translation strategy as *“aveva*

¹²⁶ “That cocktail of emotions and memories and questions that had slowly been assembling in my head. The one I had brought back to the apartment, and that I knew if I so much as opened my mouth, it would burst and spill right out of me.”

iniziato lentamente ad assemblarsi” since drinks are not assembled but created or mixed. Thus it was more appropriate to use the equation strategy and render the verb as *“mescolare”* to maintain the theme of the metaphorical construction.

In the second sentence, the expression “would burst and spill right out me” is an alteration bound to the context of the fixed expression “spill your guts”. The sentence suggests that the female main character did indeed consume the cocktail mentioned in the sentence previously analysed. It was fundamental to maintain the metaphorical image in addition to the connotative meaning of the verb “spill” within the context. Hence, the equation strategy was used in this instance too, and the sentence was rendered as: *“Quello che avevo riportato all'appartamento, e che sapevo che se avessi anche solo aperto bocca, avrei rigurgitato”* (lines 523-524) . The verb *“rigurgitare”* chosen for the relative clause was deemed to be the most fitting as its meaning applies both to liquids that pour from their containers and to the bodily function that could be associated as a consequence of alcohol intake.

Similarly, the equation strategy was applied when dealing with the sentence “when she passed [...]” (line 529). In this particular instance, the phrasal verb “pass away/on” is used without either one of the adverbs that typically compose it. It is important to underline that when a euphemism or an alternative verb is used to refer to death it should be accurately transposed with an equivalent expression so as to maintain the emotion implied that lead the character to censorship. Therefore, the expression in question was rendered by using the equivalent euphemism *“venire a mancare”* which was rendered in the sentence: *“Quando è mancata [...]”* (line 563).

The OT instead used the particularization strategy and in so doing ignored the deliberate censorship and the connotation of the verb in question by rendering it with the explicit “*morta*”¹²⁷.

In the sentence, “The whore who slept around with her professors [...]” (line 602) the phrasal verb “sleep around” carries a strong derogatory promiscuous meaning that reinforces and is reinforced by the vulgar term “whore” preceding it. As no direct equivalent could convey the original intrinsic meaning of promiscuity, the verb was rendered through equation with the reflexive verb “*farsi*” which in the context assumes a highly colloquial trait and was considered the most suitable due to its vulgar connotation.

Seemingly, in this instance the OT did too apply the equation strategy as the sentence was rendered as “*La puttana che va a letto con i professori [...]*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2020:307). However, the verbal construction chosen “*andare a letto con*”, thus “to sleep with someone” neutralizes the intrinsic derogatory meaning as the original phrasal verb.

In the sentence “[...] disgusting photos that someone had Photoshopped with my face [...]” (line 610), the verb “photoshopped” is a proprietary eponym of the software used for photo manipulation and edits. According to the definition provided by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it is used as a general verb to express that a photo has been deliberately modified with the aim to deceive its viewers¹²⁸.

¹²⁷ “*Quando è morta [...]*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 304)

¹²⁸ Which can also be inferred from the context in which the verb appears, as the students in question modified the photos with a clear malicious intent.

The verb in question could not have been transposed using the generalizing strategy with a verb that could have disambiguated its meaning as “*ritoccare*”, “*truccare*” or “*modificare*” since they would have not reflected the idiolect of the female main character. Therefore, to preserve the peculiar linguistic choice was necessary to use the calque strategy and the verb was rendered as “*fotoschoppare*”¹²⁹ which is composed by the adapted form of the name of the software “*fotoshop*” to which was added the Italian verb suffix ‘-are’¹³⁰.

It is interesting to note that the OT did use the paraphrasis strategy¹³¹ instead. However, the solution proposed as a result did not consider the fact that the linguistic choice of the ST was a subtle marker of the idiolect of the character and that the photographs in question may not necessarily have been made using the Photoshop software.

3.4.7 The transposition of specific lexical items

As mentioned in the sections above, Spanish linguistic and cultural elements were not translated into the target language as they were both culturally bound and did perform a fundamental role of cultural identification which could not be neutralized. However, it is important to analyse a few lexical items that posed as rather problematic and the translation strategies employed to resolve them.

¹²⁹ It should be noted that according to the Treccani, the verb “*fotoschoppare*” can also be found as “*fotoscioppare*” which orthographically adapts the sound of the morpheme ‘-sch’ with the corresponding Italian ‘sc’.

¹³⁰ In this regards, it is important to note that the verb cannot be considered as a compound between the name “photo” and the verb “shop” as the resulting meaning would not be the one provided in the context. Likewise, it is not possible to consider the loan verb “shoppare”, as it conveys the same meaning as the English verb ‘to shop’, which is not required by the context in question.

¹³¹ “ [...] *foto disgustose in cui con Photoshop avevano incollato la mia faccia* [...]” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 307).

The informal term “food coma” (line 51) refers to the state of sleepiness experienced after the consumption of a large meal. Considering both the context of usage of the term and the informality of the term itself it was not possible to use the literal translation strategy and translate it as “*coma da cibo*”, as it would have not made sense. Likewise, it was not possible to use the particularization strategy and render it with its corresponding scientific term “*sonnolenza postprandiale*” as its register did not fit the context. Therefore, to maintain the informal aspect of the term it was necessary to use the equation strategy. As a result, the term was rendered as “*abbiocco*” a noun that originated as a diatopic expression that refers to the same state of lethargy indicated by the original term.

The OT instead used the particularization strategy and rendered the term as “*coma glicemico*”¹³² supposedly to maintain the “coma” reference. However, using such strategy was not advisable since the proposed solution is neither appropriate nor fit for the context. To be more precise, the term proposed in the OT refers to a specific medical condition, also known as “*coma diabetico*” (diabetic coma), that may affect people suffering from diabetes. Furthermore, taking into consideration the situational context, it is safe to state that the OT used the term “*coma glicemico*” as unbound from its medical meaning, thus not only is an incorrect solution for the context but it can also be considered an inappropriate ironic remark that did not belong to the ST.

The term “escort” (line 61) refers to a person hired to accompany someone to a social event but it can also be used to politely refer to prostitutes. As the term did

¹³² “[...] *probabilmente per coma glicemico* [...]” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 289).

appear in Chapter one¹³³ and its dual meaning was the source of a misunderstanding between two characters, it was important to render it in the TT in a way that would have been suitable both for the context of the ST and for the conversation that took place in the first chapter of the source novel. It should be noted that in the target language the term “escort” shares the same dual meaning with the source language. Nevertheless, the term in Italian tends to focus more on the sexual nature of the service provided by the person to which it is referred. That being considered, it was possible to apply the equation strategy and maintain the original term as it would have allowed the misunderstanding in Chapter one to take place and made more plausible the naïve belief of the female main character in that instance.

The OT did similarly apply the equation strategy, but the term was rendered with the noun “*gigolò*”¹³⁴ which is an incorrect solution for the context. To be more precise, the term proposed refers exclusively to a male who provides sexual services, thus its use disambiguates the meaning of the original term¹³⁵.

Thus, it is clear that in this instance, the misunderstanding that occurs in Chapter one¹³⁶ of the OT is not possible as the nature of the services of the person

¹³³ “I’ll get a professional escort.” [...] “You’d take a male prostitute to your sister’s wedding before taking me?” [...] “I’m not looking for that kind of service. I just need a companion. That’s all they do. They escort you to events” (Armas, 2021: 12).

¹³⁴ “ [...] magari il famoso gigolò che avevo per un attimo pensato di ingaggiare” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 290).

¹³⁵ Moreover, according to the Treccani “gigolò” could be used as a correspondent for the English terms “toy boy” and partially for the male “sugar baby” that refers to a young man who has a seemingly romantic relationship and/or a sexual relationship with an older woman in return for benefits.

¹³⁶ “Prenderò un gigolò professionista” [...] “Porteresti al matrimonio di tua sorella un tizio che si prostituisce pur di non portare me?” [...] “Non sto cercando quel genere di servizio. Mi serve solo un accompagnatore. È quello che fanno. Ti accompagnano agli eventi e basta” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 16).

that the female main character claims to need, are the only ones covered by the definition of the term “*gigolò*” proposed by the OT.

In the expression “They treated me as damaged goods” (line 659) the term “damaged goods” is used with its figurative meaning to refer to a person who is considered to be flawed and not particularly stable both psychologically and emotionally. Therefore, it was not possible to use the literal translation strategy and render the term as “*merce danneggiata*” since it would have referenced to the literal meaning referred to products that had been either harmed or spoiled.

The term could have been rendered with the adjective “*esaurita*”, “*stressata*” or “*provata*” which refer to the psychologically debilitated state suggested by the original term. Nevertheless, in the sentence “I’m not broken, Aaron” (line 674) the female main character uses the term “broken” as a reference to the literal meaning of the term “damaged goods” of the expression in question. In light of this consideration, the equation strategy was applied and the term was rendered as “*essere a pezzi*” which took into account both the literal and the figurative meaning.

Differently from what was advisable, the OT erroneously used the literal translation strategy and rendered the term as “*merce danneggiata*”¹³⁷.

The term “cougar” (line 619) is used figuratively to define, oftentimes in a derogatory way, an attractive older woman who either has a sexual-romantic relationship with a younger man or seeks to have one. The term could have been transposed using the loan strategy in its original form as the term “cougar”¹³⁸ is considered a neologism. However, it was more appropriate to use the substitution

¹³⁷ “*Mi trattavano come merce danneggiata*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 308).

¹³⁸ As reported by the Treccani.

strategy and select the correct equivalent form. Despite the animal dissymmetry between English and Italian, the term was transposed as “*panterona*” (line 658) since it was more intelligible than the loan word from the ST.

The OT did mistakenly use the emphatization strategy and rendered the term with the construction “*vecchia assatanata*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 307), which is incorrect and ineffective since does not convey the meaning intended by the original term. To be more precise, the connotative meaning of “cougar” is applied to an attractive middle-aged woman, whereas the same connotative sense cannot be applied to the adjective “*vecchia*” (old woman), which is used with its literal meaning. The adjective “*assatanata*” is used figuratively to refer to a person in a state of agitation or visible erotic arousal, therefore provides a distorted and unnecessarily excessive image of the meaning originally intended.

3.5 Cultural and semantic-pragmatic analysis and strategies used

As illustrated by Baker, culturally specific concepts, whether they may be abstract or concrete, pose as a cause for non-equivalence at a word level (Baker, 2018:19), thus strictly on a level concerning lexical units. However, translation problems may also arise above word level, thus on a level concerning recurrent lexical patterns. Depending on the context, such patterns are to be thoroughly analysed to determine a suitable solution that may convey both the meaning expresses and comply with the lexical pattern of the target language.

One of the cultural bound linguistic elements that posed as rather problematic were idioms and fixed expressions as they carried an evocative meaning bound to

the context of use that was to be identified and rendered accordingly in the target language.

3.5.1 *The translation of idioms and fixed expressions: different strategies*

As stated by Baker (2018: 77), there are various strategies that may be used when translating idioms or fixed expressions. Depending on the cases, it might be possible to use the substitution strategy in various declinations, for example use an idiom that in the target language has a similar meaning and form, or use an idiom that has a similar meaning but dissimilar form. Additionally, it might be possible to use the calque strategy and borrow the source language idiom, or use the paraphrasis strategy and disambiguate the intended meaning, or the deletion strategy can be applied to omit the idiom and compensate for the loss in an alternative way. As follows, a detailed analysis of the most prominent problematic cases within the TT will be presented alongside with the specific strategy that were used to provide a suitable solution in the target language.

The expression “it could cloud your judgment” (line 9) was the only instance in which it was possible to apply the substitution strategy and rendered it the TT by using an expression of similar meaning and form in the target language, namely “*Riusciva ad offuscare il giudizio*” (line 9).

The fixed expression “wrap my head around” (line 69) is used as a way to express that the female main character comprehends something she initially considered quite challenging and confusing. In this instance, it was possible to use the substitution strategy and render the expression with one that in the target language had a similar meaning but a dissimilar form as “*farmene una ragione*” (line

73). Although the expression proposed in the TT tends to indicate that someone has accepted an unpleasant situation, it is still appropriate since it takes into account the extra-textual information of the source novel.

Similarly to the case above, in the sentence “you dropped me like a hot potato” (line 363), the expression “drop someone like a hot potato” was not used to convey a specific metaphorical image with its literal meaning. Instead, it was used as an idiom to refer to the abrupt interruption of a relationship between two people because one perceives the other as unlikeable or to be the source of foreseeable problems. Both in the target language and the source language the figurative meaning of the term ‘hot potato’, “*patata bollente*” refers to a difficult issue that may involve unpleasant consequences and that therefore people try to avoid facing. Despite the symmetry of meaning, the figurative sense of the expression is not shared by the target language. Therefore, it was inappropriate to borrow the idiom of the source language and render it as “*far cadere come una patata bollente*” since in the target language the connection between the literal and the figurative meaning of the term “*patata bollente*” is blurred. However, this was the strategy that was erroneously applied in the OT: “*mi hai mollato come una patata bollente [...]*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 299).

In the TT instead the substitution strategy was used to render the figurative meaning of the idiom in question with one of dissimilar form but similar meaning: “*mi hai piantata in asso [...]*” (line 379). In fact, the expression “*piantare in asso*”¹³⁹ indicates that someone has been abruptly abandoned by someone else and

¹³⁹ Or its mythological variant “*piantare in Nasso*”.

sometimes left in a difficult situation, which is indeed what happened to the female main character in the context of use.

In the sentence “It was clear as a cloudless summer day” (line 423), the expression “to be clear as a cloudless summer day” is a slightly altered version of the idiom “to be clear as day” which is used to express that something is very clear and easy to see or understand. “Cloudless summer day” is used as a euphemistic means to express that what is to be seen in the context is exceedingly easy to perceive.

Thus the substitution strategy was used and the idiom was rendered with one of similar meaning but different form. Moreover, to it added the adjective “*d'estate*” which served as a euphemistic means. As a result, to the direct corresponding Italian idiom “*chiaro come il sole*” was rendered in the TT as “*Era chiaro come il sole d'estate*” (line 447).

If on one hand the OT rendered the idiom with the same metaphorical form as in the TT, on the other the euphemistic meaning was not transposed and such loss was not compensated¹⁴⁰, thus the expression was neutralized.

In the sentence “my average went down the drain” (line 628), the idiom “to go down the drain” is used to define that something has failed or was ruined and became worthless. As in previous cases, it was impossible to render the same image suggested in the ST with an idiom of similar form and meaning. Therefore, the substitution strategy was applied by rendering the idiom in the TT with one that in the target language shared the same meaning but had a different form. Although “*andare a farsi benedire*” (line 668) can be used as the equivalent interjection for “go

¹⁴⁰ “*era chiaro come il sole*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 301).

to hell”, it also indicates that something is ruined and worthless, which is precisely the figurative meaning expressed by the original idiom.

The OT too applied the substitution strategy and the idiom was rendered as “[...]le prestazioni cominciarono a calare e la mia media è finita nel secchio[.]” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022:307). The idiom “*finire nel secchio*”¹⁴¹ provides an accurate alternative as it indicates that something has been lost and surrendered for good or that someone has given up on something¹⁴².

In the sentence, “throwing me off my game in the blink of an eye” (lines 39-40), the idiom “throw one off one’s game” is a sports allusion used figuratively to refer that a person or a situation negatively interferes with the ability of another person to act to their usual standards.

In this context, it was not advisable to use the structural calque strategy and render the idiom as “*buttandomi fuori gioco*” as the allusion would have not been effective for the context. Thus, the idiom was transposed using the substitution strategy with an expression of dissimilar form but similar meaning, namely “*farmi perdere la bussola*” (line 42), which literally translates as “make me lose my compass”. In this context, the expression detaches from its objective meaning and refers to the confused state of a person.

The OT instead applied the condensation strategy and rendered the expression as “[...]sbalestrandomi in un battito di ciglia.” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 298). The original meaning was preserved and conveyed in a reduced form

¹⁴¹ A literal translation in English of such expression might be “to end up in the bucket”.

¹⁴² It is possible that its figurative meaning derives from the bucket that once was used to collect water from wells and oftentimes would end up at the bottom of the it. Another possible origin of its meaning is represented from the chamber pot once used before indoor plumbing.

with the term “*sbalestrare*” which refers precisely to a situation that causes a person to be physically and psychologically discombobulated.

A different strategy was used for the idiom “you snooze, you lose” (line 38) which usually stresses that attention and quickness are fundamental to get the best out of a situation. It could have been transposed using the substitution strategy with one of similar meaning but dissimilar form as “*chi dorme non piglia pesci*” (he who sleeps doesn’t catch a fish). However, the connotative meaning implied by this proverb is not fitting for the situational context¹⁴³. The male main character does not quickly reject a wine refill and thus is given one regardless of his wishes, hence the positive outcome of being ‘quick’ is represented by an empty glass rather than a full one.

Therefore, it was deemed more appropriate to resort to the discursive creation strategy (Hurtado Albir, 2011:270) and render the idiom with an expression that was adapted to the situational context: “*chi dorme, piglia vino*” (line 40) (he who sleeps gets wine). As can be inferred, the expression proposed is the alteration of “*chi dorme non piglia pesci*” which maintains the verbal symmetry with the original idiom and disambiguates the ‘win-lose’ situation¹⁴⁴ by explicating its results.

The OT applied instead the substitution strategy and rendered the idiom using one of similar meaning but dissimilar form: “*chi si ferma è perduto*”. However, this idiom is typically used to refer to the state of stasis someone experiences when firmly believing a situation to be irremediable. Thus, its connotative meaning is not

¹⁴³ Despite the idiom, “*chi dorme non piglia pesci*”, displays verbal symmetry between “snooze” and “*dormire*” its meaning is more fitting for the idiom “early bird catches the worm”.

¹⁴⁴ As it might be considered the one in question, where the loser is the person with the glass refilled and the winner is the person whose glass is still empty.

fitting for the context of the ST and ‘the situation’ represented by the wine refill. Moreover, the feeling suggested by the word “*perduto*” (lost) is not related to a situation involving a loser and a winner and its figurative meaning focuses rather on the mental state of the person to whom the expression refers.

The expression “want to open a hole in the ground and plunge myself in” (lines 3-4) might be wrongly interpreted as an alteration of the fixed expression “wish the ground would open up and swallow one”. Such misinterpretation might lead to use the condensation strategy and render the expression using one of similar meaning, as the OT did: “[...] *desiderio di sprofondare sottoterra [...]*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 288).

Nevertheless, the sentence in question is not a fixed expression but a simple lexical construction that needed to be rendered as such to maintain the connotative meaning and the image suggested by the author. Hence, in the TT it was translated as “[...] *mi avessero fatto venire voglia di scavare una buca e tuffarmi dentro*” (lines 3-4) using the literal translation strategy combined with adaptation.

The idiom “come back from the dead” (lines 112-113) was unbound from its figurate meaning and used literally as the referent was compared to a dead person rising to life again. It might have been possible to transpose it using the condensation strategy as “*resuscitata*” since it maintains both of the meanings of the original. However, this solution would have resulted in an incorrect simplification. Therefore it was deemed more appropriate to use the literal translation strategy and render the expression with the same structure in the TT as “*tornata [...] dal regno dei morti*” (line 120).

The OT used the same strategy however, the expression proposed “*tornata [...] dal mondo dei morti viventi*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 291) was unnecessarily amplified. Besides being superfluous, the adjective “*viventi*” (living) displays a fundamental lack of logic. “*morti viventi*” (undead) refers to a mythological anthropomorphic figure that is deceased but appears to be alive¹⁴⁵. Thus, such expression is not suitable nor relevant for the situational context.

The idiom “for one’s own good” (lines 403 and 404) refers to a quality that might harm the person to whom the expression is referred or cause a disadvantage.

In the context, the idiom underlines that the handsomeness of the male main character is considered as a source of possible problems both for him and for the female main character. Hence, the structural calque was used to maintain such shade of meaning in the TT and the expressions were rendered as “*È troppo bello per il suo bene*” (line 425) and “*Lo era — anche per il mio bene*” (line 423).

The OT instead applied the modulation strategy both on a lexical and structural level. Thus, the idiom was rendered as “*È troppo bello, beato lui*” and “*Lo era... beata me, anche*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 300) and the expression in question was substituted with the adjective “*beato*”.

Nevertheless, the structures proposed in the OT do not convey the subtextual meaning intended and illustrated above but are instead suitable translations for the interjection “Lucky, you/me!”¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴⁵ As in the case of mummies, vampires and zombies that have already been subject to a process of reanimation that lead them to become what they are, thus “unded”.

¹⁴⁶ Besides being the translation of an interjection that is not used in the ST, in the context, the structures proposed in the OT convey a subtle and inappropriate feeling of envy of the quality praised.

Moreover, the alteration of the expression in the OT provided once more a version of the female main character that does not conform to the original one. As illustrated above, the feeling that the female main character suggests with her comment is that she considers the “beauty” of the male main character as a quality that might be a source of problems for her. Thus, it should have been fundamental to analyse properly the situational context provided by the ST. The translator of the OT should have known that due to her troubled past in Spain, the female main character finds terrifying the idea of being romantically involved with someone that might cover a higher job position than hers. Therefore, considering the general information provided by the source novel, the “beauty” of the male main character is not a quality the female main character envies but one that reminds her of the disadvantageous position in which she will find herself if they will ever be romantically involved.

The expression “push the panic button” (line 302) defines the sudden and often exaggerated reaction to an event that may have frightened or surprised someone. In the TT, the figurative meaning was disambiguated and rendered through a paraphrase as “*ciò che mi aveva fatto andare nel panico*” (lines 314-315).

The OT did not consider the meaning dissymmetry between English and Italian with regard to the idiom in question and used the literal translation strategy. Therefore, the expression proposed “*cosa aveva premuto il pulsante del panico*” (Newton Compton Editori, 2022: 297) is incorrect as it conveys the literal meaning instead of the figurative one.

3.6 A brief overview on the macro strategies used

As mentioned in the Introduction of this work, the translation proposed in Appendix B aimed to provide an alternative to the official translation of the same portion of text published by Newton Compton Editori. Such translation was in fact deemed overall inaccurate and superficial due to its preponderant naturalizing and neutralizing approach, that were underlined in detail in the previous sections.

Instead, as illustrated before, the approach that was undertaken during the process of translation for this work was that of foreignization. Such approach also determined the translation strategies that were used to provide an accurate and faithful translation and transmit the purpose and the cultural aim of the source novel as intended by the author.

In this regard, as follows will be provided a brief overview of the macro strategies that were used more frequently and that were mentioned in the preceding sections. It is important to underline that the use of a specific strategy is not to be considered absolute since a secondary one might have supported it. Thus, the overview proposed hereafter is to be intended as such since additional secondary strategies will not be included. Furthermore, the overview will not include nor reference the supposed strategies applied in the OT as in this instance their analysis is not considered relevant.

3.6.1 Equation strategy

As proved in the preceding sections, the strategy most predominantly used was equation. It was fundamental for dealing with lexical-grammatical problems, thus with the preservation of the idiolects of the characters, for the transposition of irony

and verbal and lexical units. Moreover, the strategy proved itself to be essential also in a few instances regarding cultural and semantic problems.

As stated by Taylor (1998:48) in his analysis of the strategies proposed by Malone, such denomination provides for various declinations. In this sense, as reported by Hurtado Albir (2011: 270-271), the equation strategy¹⁴⁷ includes what usually are defined as separate strategies. More specifically, it can be said to include the loan and the calque strategy with its structural and lexical declinations.

As reported in the preceding sections, both of those strategies were used during the process of translation to deal with different issues. Lexical calques¹⁴⁸ were taken into consideration specifically when dealing with peculiar problems as the sentence “Of course she’s the first of her promotion” (lines 602-603) or the transposition of the verb “photoshopped” (line 610).

Instead, the structural calque sub-strategy¹⁴⁹, was taken into consideration when dealing with the diastrophic trait expressed in the sentence “[...] just like one of those movies we watch on ‘the Netflix’” (line 77) and applied to render expressions such as “come back from the dead” (lines 112-113) and “He’s too beautiful for his own good” (line 403).

The loan strategy was the most valuable means to preserve and convey the cultural peculiarity and tone of the source novel, as well as being one of the main strategies for applying the foreignizing approach. As illustrated in the analysis

¹⁴⁷ Which suggests a form of automatic transposition.

¹⁴⁸ Words that were directly adapted in the target language to its morpho-phonological parameters.

¹⁴⁹ The direct reproduction of a semantic structure from the source language to the target language,

presented above in the dedicated section, the lexical calque was employed for Hispanisms as “*Mierda*” (line 244) and “*sidra*” (line 30), among other cases.

As mentioned before, the equation strategy includes different sub-strategies that might be considered independent, but are not only limited to the ones described above. As stated by Taylor (1998:49), equation also include the one-to-one translation strategy, which is applied if there are not compelling semantic, pragmatic or stylistic motivations to resort to other strategies. The use of such sub-strategy in the TT was not reported in the dedicated section as true cognates¹⁵⁰ represent the default strategy by which a text is to be translated; therefore it was not essential to report every instance in which it was employed. However, it is important to remember the analysis of the diastrophic traits expressed within the utterances of the male main character and the mother of the female main character.

Moreover, according to the interpretation of the equation strategy performed by Taylor, equation may also include the word-for-word or literal translation strategy, which can be applied inasmuch as the rules of the target language allow it. This sub-strategy was taken into consideration when analysing the most suitable translation for “chickenshit” (line 237), “food coma” (line 51) or the sentence “[...] that had slowly been assembling in my head” (line 488), above others. It was actively applied to render the sentence “come back from the dead” (lines 112-113) or “[...] questions that made me want to open a hole in the ground and plunge myself in” (lines 3-4).

¹⁵⁰ The means through which, as stated by Taylor (1998:49), the one-to-one translation is realized.

3.6.2 Substitution strategy

As could be deduced from the previous sections another widely employed strategy was substitution, the antithesis of equation and its declinations illustrated above.

To be more specific, substitution¹⁵¹ is used when the morpho-syntactic, semantic and cultural relationship between the source language and the target language is not strictly bound. In other words, substitution is employed when no exact equivalent form in the target language is found and thus is extensively used for cultural elements. As the name suggests, the application of such strategy requires the substitution of a cultural element with an equivalent or similar one that belongs to the target language and culture.

The substitution strategy was mostly applied so as to transpose idioms and was delineated in various ways. To be more precise, it involved using an idiom that in the target language had a similar meaning and form as for “it could cloud your judgment” (line 9); or using an idiom that had a similar meaning but dissimilar form as for “throwing me off my game” (lines 39) and “my average went down the drain” (line 628), among others.

3.6.3 Additional strategies

As mentioned in the introduction of this paragraph, during the process of translation were applied various minor translation strategies besides the most important ones mentioned above.

¹⁵¹ In the analysis of the translation strategies performed by Hurtado Albir is defined instead as “adaptación” (2011: 269, thus adaptation).

For instance, condensation¹⁵² was considered for sentences like “[...] questions that made me want to open a hole in the ground and plunge myself in” (lines 3-4) or “come back from the dead” (lines 112-113) but was actively used only to transpose the idiom “lost in thought” (line 254).

Another secondary strategy used, was paraphrasing¹⁵³, which requires the original message and meaning to be rendered in the target text through the situational equivalence that implies the use of alternative constructions that may provide the same information. To be more specific, in the TT this strategy was used as to render sentences as “the questions [...] knotting together my heartstrings” (line 217), “go up in smoke” (line 681) and “what had made me push the panic button” (line 302).

One more minor strategy that was employed was divergence. Because its use is defined and implies a process of evaluation and selection of a specific term from a wide range of alternatives, the strategy can be defined as a collateral and subordinate means for the application of the equation. For example its use was implied but not stated in some instances referred to the transposition of specific lexical items and verbal structures as “damaged goods” (line 659) and “inhaled” (line 8). Divergence was instead the main strategy used for “I can promise you that much” (line 194) and “I’m lucky to have you” (line 182).

¹⁵² It consists in the reproduction of a message through a more concise linguistic form. Moreover, in the analysis of the translation strategies performed by Hurtado Albir is defined instead as “*compresión lingüística*” (2011: 270) thus linguistic compression.

¹⁵³ It requires the original message and meaning to be rendered through a situational equivalence that implies using alternative constructions that may provide the same information.

To conclude this section, another strategy with limited use was discursive creation, which was employed only to render the idiom “you snooze, you lose” (line 38). Proposed by Delisle (1993) and further analyzed by Hurtado Albir (2011:270), it entails the creation of an ephemeral equivalence that would be unpredictable and meaningless out of the context of use.

Conclusions

Through the analysis of the publication process of the case study novel *The Spanish Love Deception*, this work briefly showed how the literary system has drastically changed over the years amid the digitalisation of entertainment means. In order to understand better the change within the power ramifications and roles involved in the literary system, the latter was conceived as intended by the Polysystem Theory. In this sense, the literary system is not limited to textual factors but is defined as the complex conjunct of relations between the systemic literary activities performed by the parts that constitute the system (Even-Zohar, 1990:28 and 31). Such parts interrelate based on a hierarchy and include: institutions, repertoire, producers, consumers, markets and products. Each one of them is regarded as a heterogeneous conjunct or group that fulfils a precise role within the system. Therefore, the literary products that consumers can enjoy after acquiring from the market are produced by producers according to a legitimized repertoire determined and safeguarded by the institution. Based on this structure, the literary system is controlled by two groups that function as cultural gatekeepers. Publishing houses fall precisely under such a group since, until digitalisation and self-publishing, they held the exclusive power to decide what literary products were deemed worthy to be published and thus enter the literary system.

New technologies gave rise to a process of digitalisation of various kinds of information, among which are to be placed entertainment means such as literary

products. Consequentially, the overall reduction of marginal costs allowed new digital publishing options¹⁵⁴, such as self-publishing, to become the main means available to producers to circumvent the power of gatekeepers as publishing houses and publish their literary products without the involvement of the latter. It is clear that digitalisation and self-publishing had a major impact on the literary system as they allowed the democratisation of its gatekeeping powers, resulting in a transformation that led to a “golden age” both for consumers and for the literary system¹⁵⁵ (Fürst: 2019:48 and Waldfogel, 2017:199, 200, 210). This transformation might be wrongly interpreted as an antiauthoritarian threat to the stability of the system as it changed its power balance. However, as per the theoretical precepts of the polysystem theory, change within the system can endanger it only if it is not controlled or properly managed and not if the position holders see their power shift or threatened (Even-Zohar, 1990:27). The change produced by digitalisation and self-publishing was not absolute and did not completely deprive gatekeepers, as publishing houses, of their powers. In fact, self-published producers and gatekeepers can coexist and cooperate in the literary system. Publishing houses indeed have adapted to the new competitive situation by improving the assessment of the manuscripts that are submitted to them and by using the market trend of self-published literary products to locate the titles and authors that can grant them success (Hviid et al. 2016. Pâquet, 2021: 12).

¹⁵⁴ As online publishing and distribution services offered by: Amazon, Apple, Author Solutions, BookBaby, Draft2Digital, CreateSpace, Enterprise, Inscribe Digital Lulu, NookPress, Scribd and Smashwords (Poletti, 2005:9. Waldfogel, 2015:52. Hviid et al. 2016:9-10).

¹⁵⁵ Since the number of products significantly increased.

The novel *The Spanish Love Deception* written by the Spanish author Elena Armas entered the literary system precisely in this fashion. On February 23 of 2021, the novel was independently published via the online publishing service offered by Amazon¹⁵⁶ and distributed through the same retail channel thanks to the service of print on demand¹⁵⁷. Having decided to self-publish her novel, Armas did not have the support of a publishing house but she found it in the online book community of which she had been part for several years¹⁵⁸. Thanks to influential public personas within the online book community, such as Bookstagrammers and BookTokers, who shared their positive opinion on the novel, *The Spanish Love Deception* quickly gained success among readers worldwide. As a consequence, it was acquired at auction by Atria and Simon & Shuster to be traditionally published¹⁵⁹, and rapidly became a New York and USA Today bestselling novel, winning the category for the Debut Novel of the year of the Goodreads Choice Awards. The success of the case study novel was such that BDF Pictures acquired the film rights, and translation rights were sold for twenty-five languages.

The Italian translation was published by Newton Compton Editori with the title *Facciamo finta che mi ami* on May 30 of 2022. Considering the original cultural skopos of the novel, its genre and its target public, the naturalizing and neutralizing approach endorsed by the Italian publishing house were improper. The resulting literary product that entered the Italian literary system is a distorted and superficial

¹⁵⁶ Kindle Direct Publishing.

¹⁵⁷ Also known with the acronym POD.

¹⁵⁸ Armas used both the WordPress platform and her Instagram page “thebiblioteque” to write her blog dedicated to books and reviews and thus connect with other book lovers and authors.

¹⁵⁹ The newly printed versions were published respectively on October 28 of 2021, and February 8 of 2022.

representation of the original since it presents nine of the twelve negative analytics theorized by Berman (1985). In this sense, it would have been more suitable to use a foreignizing strategy that did not apply a cultural filter but instead valued the cultural components and the style of the author and accurately transposed them for the target public to appreciate fully as other foreign translations did. Nevertheless, despite the obvious and significant faults in the official Italian translation, it was very well received by consumers as it entered numerous best-selling lists and held its position for several consecutive weeks, as reported by the list of *Il Sole 24 Ore* and Newton Compton Editori.

As mentioned in the Introduction, this work focused its theoretical analysis on the restricted framework of literary products written in English. Hence, it is not yet certain whether the implications of self-publishing for power redistribution within other literary systems will follow the international trend of literary products written in English. A clear and easily confirmable hypothesis for such a trend is that the wide use of self-publishing for those literary products is owed precisely to the language in which they are written, as English being a lingua franca allows them to reach a broader public than any other national language could. Future research should therefore be addressed to the thorough analysis of literary systems of other languages, such as the Italian one, where it seems publishing houses still hold tight to their gatekeeping power and favour the publication of already successful foreign literary products as opposed to original manuscripts or self-published ones. This situation could be tentatively explained, as publishers in Italy would seem to prefer the application of the “Wait-and-See” strategy (Hviid et al., 2016:25) to literary products self-published through a series of online-based platforms that do not

involve the presence of a market in the traditional sense¹⁶⁰. Additionally, self-publishing would not seem the designated choice for authors in Italy, who might still consider it in a stigmatised manner and instead perceive traditional publishing as the solution that might grant them recognition and prestige. Nevertheless, these argumentations should be further developed by future research as they represent just general assumptions and prompts.

Further investigation might also focus on the implications of digitalisation and the overall democratisation of publishing for translation practices. The chance that alternative translation practices have to follow the democratisation trail initiated by digitalisation within the literary system would seem dim, due to the constraints represented by copyright laws that safeguard the intellectual property of authors. Therefore in this sense, a future that sees translation as democratised and thus unbound from the powers involved in the literary system would seem unethical. In this regard, during the research process for this work, it was identified a tentative step towards such democratisation by the hands of a community of independent translators called Dreaming Books¹⁶¹. By eluding copyright laws, such a community provided users of different online platforms¹⁶² with the Spanish “fan translation”

¹⁶⁰ As the platform Wattpad, from which publishing houses such as Sperling & Kupfer, Magazzini Salani and Leggereditore (part of Fanucci Editore) found successful novels such as *La sindrome di Didone* by Christina Mikaelson, *Il fabbricante di Lacrime* by Erin Doom, and *My dilemma is you* by Cristina Chiperi, and acquired them for publication.

¹⁶¹ It should be noted that no information regarding the people involved in such a community could be found as they refer to themselves via pseudonyms since they knowingly elude copyright laws. Nevertheless, it could be assumed that such a community is formed by amateurs and non-professional translators.

¹⁶² Such as Anna's Archive, Zlibrary and VKontakte.

(Evans, 2019: 3) of the case study novel¹⁶³, as well as many others¹⁶⁴. A different approach to the tentative democratisation of translation practices within the literary system is instead represented by Dark Ink Publishing¹⁶⁵, which commissioned the translation of their works into several languages to professional translators. Hence, Peckham and Valenti claimed power to themselves by self-publishing their novels and by autonomously deciding to address a broader public via self-issued translations¹⁶⁶ rather than waiting for a foreign publishing house to purchase the translation rights.

Thus, future research might focus on the above themes and possibly venture under the legal surface of both the literary system and translations and investigate how practices that advocate for the democratisation of entertainment means¹⁶⁷, in the long term, might influence and further shift the power balance within the literary system.

¹⁶³ Prior to the publication of the official Spanish translation on July 1, 2022 by VR Europa with the title *Farsa de amor a la española*.

¹⁶⁴ Other titles include for example: *The Mistletoe Motive* by Chloe Liese, *Terms and Conditions* by Lauren Asher and *The Off Limits Rule* by Sarah Adams.

¹⁶⁵ Caroline Peckham and Susanne Valenti, the self-published duo of authors of the successful series *Zodiac Academy*.

¹⁶⁶ The translations in question have not been published yet.

¹⁶⁷ Such as the example of collaborative translations realised by Dreaming Books.

Appendix A

The Source Text

THE SPANISH LOVE DECEPTION – CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Surprisingly, everything was going smoothly. So far, no awkward or embarrassing moments had made me regret all my life choices, and no one had dropped any inappropriate questions that made me want to open a hole in the ground and plunge myself in.

5 With a little luck, I would even be able to get through this one dinner, unscathed. And I really thought I would.

I hoped this sense of contentment humming satisfactorily under my skin wasn't a by-product of the food I had inhaled. Because that was what a Spanish feast could do to you. It could cloud your judgment.

10 We were all sitting around a round table on the terrace of a restaurant that faced the sea. The sun was setting on the horizon, about to reach the thin line where the ocean and the sky met, and the only sound filling the air around us besides the low chatter was the crashing of the waves against the rocks lining the coast.

To put it in a simple way, it was perfect.

15 The soft touch of a hand on my arm sent a handful of shivers rolling down my spine. "Cold?" a deep voice I had come to anticipate in ways that made my breath hitch asked close to my ear.

Shaking my head, I faced him. Only a few inches separated us. Our lips.

“No, I’m fine.” I wasn’t *fine*. I had learned that when Aaron came this close, I was
20 everything but fine. “Just full. I might have overdone it.”

“No place for dessert?”

My eyebrows bunched at the audacity. “Don’t be ridiculous, *osito*. I always have
space for dessert. Always.”

Aaron’s lips curled up, and his smile reached the corners of his eyes, transforming
25 his whole face.

Wowie. I hadn’t been prepared for it if the butterflies in my stomach were any
indication.

“Lina, Aaron, more wine?” my dad asked from the other side of the table.

My parents had insisted we order wine even if the wedding was tomorrow—where
30 alcohol would certainly flow in rivers of *sidra*, wine, *cava*, and whatnot. Nobody had
tried to complain. Not even Isabel or Gonzalo, whose faces displayed the
repercussions of our almost all-nighter. But in the land of wine, one simply didn’t go
to dinner and not order a bottle.

“No, thanks. I think I’m going to save myself for tomorrow,” I answered, removing
35 my glass from my dad’s reach. The bottle had already been hovering midair.

Unlike me, Aaron was too slow. So, before he could muster his answer, my dad was
already refilling his glass.

“You snooze, you lose,” I whispered, leaning in his direction.

That bright smile that had taken his face returned, throwing me off my game in the
40 blink of an eye. And then the arm that had been around the back of my seat stretched,
and he playfully pinched my side.

I jumped in my seat, almost knocking a few glasses off the table.

Aaron's other hand reached for his wine, bringing it to his lips. "Don't be cute," he said over his glass, pinning me with a look that made me shift in my chair. Then, he
45 dipped his head and lowered his voice. "Next time, I'll do more than just pinch you."
His lips finally met the glass, taking a sip.

Keeping my eyes on his lips for a few intense seconds, I was sure something had just popped in the vicinity of my female reproductive parts.

Cheeks flushed, I swiveled my head, searching for any evidence that someone at the
50 table had heard that. My *abuela* was still busy cleaning her plate off. Gonzalo and Isabel seemed about to pass out from exhaustion and most likely a food coma by the time we reached dessert. My parents chitchatted animatedly with a waiter I hadn't even realized was standing by our table. And Daniel—who had come alone because his and Gonzalo's parents were arriving early tomorrow—was looking down at his
55 phone like it held the secrets of the universe.

That day weeks ago, when I had untruthfully declared that I was dating a man after being told that Daniel was engaged and happier than ever, I had done it in panic after picturing a scene almost identical to the one we'd found ourselves in. Except that the chair next to me would have been empty. Or occupied by someone else like my
60 *abuela* or Daniel's fiancée, knowing my luck. Or hey, maybe it would have been that escort I had briefly considered hiring.

But either way, it would have been someone who didn't make my heart race with nothing more than a look or my belly tumble with one of those smiles that I was beginning to covet just for myself.

65 So, as I looked in Daniel's direction, I realized a few things. First and foremost, my gut reaction to lie and thrust myself—and Aaron—into this ludicrous plan had been,

perhaps, a little excessive. Then, there was the fact that despite being excessive, having Aaron with me had made everything easier in a way that I would never have fathomed. And last—and I struggled with wrapping my head around this one—there
70 was a considerably large part of me, one that I was trying really hard to ignore but failing at it, that didn't regret any of it.

And that was extremely dumb of me. Because the man I found myself flushing around—and not regretting having by my side—would soon become my boss.

“So, Aaron,” my mother said, returning me back to the present, “Isabel explained
75 how you two met and started dating.” Her eyes sparkled, and I bet it had to do more with the wine. “That story you told them last night in the *sidrería*. It sounded so romantic, just like one of those movies we watch on *the Netflix*.”

Of course, my mother would veer the conversation in that direction.

“It's just Netflix, Mamá,” I muttered, playing with my hands on the table. “And yeah.
80 A proper office romance, just like in the movies, right?”

“Only this one is real,” Aaron said.

Real.

His words came rushing back into my mind. “*I talked her into believing that she needed me. Then, I showed her—proved to her—that she did.*”

85 My heart tumbled down my chest.

“So, how much do you two actually work together?” My mother's gaze was directed at Aaron, an inquisitive smile on her lips that told me she was dying to know everything there was to know.

“We both lead different teams, and we don't work on the same projects, but we see
90 each other often.” He sent me a side-glance. “And if we don't, I make sure we do. I try

to catch her on her break, steal a glance or two in the hallways, pass by her office without having an excuse. Anything that will put me in her head for just a few moments a day.”

I dipped my head, staring at my empty plate. Was that true? Aaron had had a way of
95 popping up out of thin air. But had that been intentional? Even if it was to get on my nerves. I was beginning to struggle with something as simple as telling apart what was real from what wasn't. Everything that left Aaron's mouth was based on reality—us working together, us knowing each other for almost two years. And then it had a part of deceit—us dating, being in love. But everything else, everything that
100 somehow lay between those two sides—all those ornaments he hung off both truth and deceit—belonged to a gray area I did not know how to define.

“*Qué maravilloso.*” My mother beamed.

Then, she translated what Aaron had said for Abuela, and the old woman I owed my slightly frizzy hair to beamed too. Honestly, Abuela had been charmed by Aaron
105 since the moment he had greeted her with two kisses and told her how proud she must be of her granddaughter. Which, in turn, had turned me into a beaming idiot too.

“You know,” my dad chipped in, “not everyone is able to handle our Lina. She has the biggest heart in the family, but she can be a little ...” He trailed off, one of his
110 eyebrows rising on his forehead. “Ay, what's the word in English?” My dad paused, his lips puckered with frustration. “She can be—”

“A total dork?” suggested Isabel, who had just—very conveniently— come back from the dead.

“Oye!” I exclaimed.

115 At the same time, my dad answered, “No. Not that one.” He scratched the side of his head.

“Short?” offered Gonzalo. “Clumsy?”

My head whipped in his direction.

Aaron hummed. “Ridiculously stubborn?”

120 Not bothering to turn toward him, I rammed my elbow into his side. He gently grabbed my arm and laced our fingers together, placing them on top of the table. I stared at our linked hands, all outrage immediately vanished.

Then, Aaron dipped his head and told me in a low voice, “I didn’t want to be left out.”

I looked over at him and found yet another of those smiles that made me weak in the
125 knees. Something fluttered low in my belly. *Dammit.*

“*Gracias*, all of you,” I murmured.

My dad kept searching his mind for whatever word he didn’t seem to remember. “It isn’t any of those words. Just let me think.”

Daniel cleared his throat, finally taking part in the conversation. “What if you tell us
130 the word in Spanish, and we can translate it, Javier?” he suggested.

My mom nodded her head. “*Claro, usa el Google, Javier.*” Use *the* Google, Javier.

“Papá,” I told him with a sigh, “just let it go—”

“Firecracker,” he blurted out. “Our Lina is a little firecracker.”

All right. That was actually not that bad.

135 “So, she can be too much to handle. Often.”

Oh. I deflated a little in my chair, my hand remaining in Aaron’s.

“She’s always chattering like she has too much to say and not enough time to do so.

Or laughing like she doesn’t care she’ll wake up the half of the world that’s sleeping.

She can also be a little defiant, and God knows she is stubborn as they come. But
140 that's all fire. Passion. That's what makes her our Lina. Our little *terremoto*." Our
little *earthquake*.

My dad's eyes started shining under the light of the few lamps that had switched on
as we entered the night. Something in my chest constricted.

"And for a while there, it wasn't like that. All that lightness faded out, and seeing my
145 daughter going through something like that wasn't easy. It broke our hearts. Then,
she left, and even if we knew it was what she wanted and needed to do, our hearts
broke a little further."

Tears were rushing to my eyes by then, the pressure behind them increasing with
every word from my father. With every memory he unearthed.

150 "But that's in the past. She's here now, and she's okay. Happy." My mom reached out,
taking my dad's hand in hers.

Not able to hold myself any longer, I stood up on shaky legs and walked around the
table. When I reached my dad, I wrapped him in a hug and kissed his cheek. "*Te
quiero, Papá.*" Then, I did the same with my mother. "*A ti también, tonta.*" All the
155 while, I held my tears in as if my life depended on it. I wouldn't cry. I refused. "Now,
stop it, okay? Both of you. Save something for tomorrow."

When I returned to my seat, I watched my hand reaching for Aaron's. As if it no
longer conceived not being held in his. Absorbed by my own gesture, my heart
flopped in my chest when his hand met mine midway, linking our fingers and
160 bringing them to his mouth to brush his lips over the back of my hand. It was all so
fast that by the time it was over and our linked hand rested on top of the table, I

wouldn't have known it had really happened if not for the scorching imprint of his lips on my skin.

My mother spoke next, returning my attention to her, "It makes me so happy to have
165 you home, *cariño*." Then, her eyes landed on Aaron. "To see you like *this*." Her smile widened, the sadness vanishing.

A pang of guilt sliced my gut, followed by something sultry and dense. Something that tasted like regret and hope.

"For a moment there, I thought she wouldn't really bring you, Aaron. I even
170 questioned if you were real." She chuckled, and I swore my lungs stopped working for a heartbeat. Her gaze met mine, a light smile on her face. "Don't look at me like that. You've never talked about anyone you were seeing or brought anyone home from New York the few times you came back. And it was all so... sudden."

"Honestly, *hermanita*," Isabel pitched in, sounding suspiciously interested, "we
175 thought you'd end up like one of those old ladies who dedicated their life to a bunch of cats. But instead of cats, it would have to be fish. Or like ... geckos because you are allergic to cat fur." She snickered. "We constantly talked about it in family gatherings."

"Thanks for the faith," I muttered and then stuck my tongue out in my sister's
180 direction. I couldn't believe they were saying that kind of stuff with someone they believed I was dating at the table. Or better yet, with someone they knew I had dated sitting right there. "I'm lucky to have you."

Aaron's fingers gripped mine a little tighter, and I felt mine returning the gesture.

“No, we did not talk about such things,” my mother firmly denied, shooting her other
185 daughter a look. “Stop teasing your sister, Isabel. You are getting married
tomorrow.”

Isabel frowned. “What does that have to do with any—” Mamá sliced her hand
through the air, dismissing my sibling. I snickered, watching her cross her arms over
her chest.

190 “We never thought you’d end up alone, Lina. But we were terrified you would be
lonely.” She looked over at Aaron, her eyes softening. “And knowing that you’re not,
that you have someone to lean on and to return home to, maybe someone to call
home one day, makes me sleep a little better at night.”

The man beside me didn’t hesitate when he spoke, “I can promise you that much.”
195 His voice reached my skin like a caress. Pushing my heart to bang against my chest
walls, wanting out as much as I didn’t want to hear whatever was to come. “She’ll
always have me.” His thumb caressed the back of my hand. “She doesn’t know it yet,
but she is stuck with me.”

I couldn’t *not* look over at him. After that, I couldn’t *not* want to search his handsome
200 face. At this point, it shouldn’t have surprised me all that much. Aaron held that kind
of power over me. So, I did exactly that. I allowed myself to turn. His eyes had already
been on me.

*Does he feel that pull too? That urge to search my face for whatever answers he thinks
he’ll find?*

205 Trying to get my heart under control, I peered into that ocean blue with trepidation.
With anticipation too. And I found something utterly terrifying. Something that
shouldn’t—couldn’t—have been there, considering that this was supposed to be a

farce so therefore his statement was not true. But I struggled to deny what was in front of me, that those emotions *were* really there, radiating off his gaze. Raw
210 honesty. Conviction. Faith. Reliance. A pledge. All of that looked at me from Aaron's eyes. Demanding to be acknowledged.

As if he was making *me* the promise and not my mother.

As if what he had just proclaimed wasn't part of our game in deception.

But I couldn't accept that. As much as my body shook with effort to restrain myself
215 from wrapping my arms around his neck and begging him for answers or to tell me exactly where in the gray area we found ourselves, I wouldn't allow myself to play with the questions spinning in my head and knotting together all my heartstrings.

Because perhaps I didn't really want to hear any of the answers to questions like: Had we gone from coworkers to deal associates to friends? Were we friends who
220 vowed to be there for each other now? Friends who almost kissed and shared soft brushes of their lips? Was that promise really true, like his eyes pleaded with me to believe? Or was that nothing more than an ornament? And if it was, then why would he say something like that? Had he no disregard for my poor heart? Didn't he see that I was no longer able to discern one thing from the other? But if it wasn't a simple
225 embellishment of the truth—an act, a tool in this farce—then what in the world was he doing? What were *we* doing?

Not able to remain under everything that looked at me from Aaron's gaze anymore or to process all the questions and doubts cramming my head, I straightened my legs with a brisk motion, and my hand let go of his. The chair underneath me screeched
230 across the floor.

"I need to use the ladies' room," I rushed out, snagging my gaze off Aaron.

Then, I walked away as fast as I could without looking back. I did not turn. Not once. Not even after I heard my sister say, "So, now that she's gone, can we talk about me? I am the bride, and I'm supposed to be the center of attention. I'm feeling neglected."

235 Had my head not been a mess, I would have laughed. Probably gone back and tugged at her hair for being a pompous, self-centered brat, but I was too busy running. Being a complete chickenshit again, which at this rate, I'd probably master by the time the weekend was over.

I went through the motions of washing my hands and splashing some water on my
240 face while I thought about nothing and everything, feeling completely overwhelmed by my own stupidity.

That was probably why when I exited the bathroom, I didn't realize there had been someone on the way until I was collapsing against a male chest with an *oomph*.

"Mierda," I muttered under my breath, going back a couple of steps. "*Lo siento mucho*," I added right before noticing who was in front of me. "Oh, Daniel."
245

Brushing a few strands of hair off my face, I inwardly cringed.

My ex didn't show any sign of feeling as awkward as I did. "Are you okay?" he asked me in Spanish.

Now that it was just us and Aaron wasn't around, I answered in Spanish too, "Yeah, I'm fine. It was nothing. Just a little bump." Clearing my throat, I dusted off imaginary specks of dirt off my pleated skirt. "Sorry again. It was really my fault. I was a little
250 distracted."

"It's all good, Lina." That dimple in his cheek made an appearance.

I stared at it, a little lost in thought. And to think that all those years ago, it was that
255 dimple that had set everything into motion. Now, I couldn't even bring myself to feel
the slightest hint of warmth when I looked at it.

"I think I shouldn't have come tonight," Daniel confessed out of the blue, returning
me to the present.

I nodded slowly, trying to come to terms with the odd sense of sympathy I suddenly
260 felt toward him. He wasn't wrong. All throughout dinner, he had been nothing but a
ghost. No one had really addressed him—something I could understand, considering
our history—and he hadn't talked on his own. Putting myself in his shoes, I didn't
think I would have accepted coming myself.

"No, coming was the right thing to do if you believed you had to be here." I clasped
265 my hands together, keeping them from fumbling. "You did it for Gonzalo, and that's
very brave of you."

He laughed with bitterness. "I don't think anyone at that table would agree with you.
Except maybe Gonzalo, and he wouldn't use the word *brave*." His hands slipped into
the pockets of his slacks.

270 Again, he wasn't wrong about that either. My parents had always been polite even if
distant, but just for Gonzalo's sake. For Isabel's sake too. They knew how important
Daniel was to him and how, without him, they wouldn't have Gonzalo in their lives,
and they loved him to pieces. But I still didn't have a doubt that they'd never forgive
Daniel for breaking my heart all that time ago. For having a part in what I had gone
275 through.

"Listen," Daniel said before releasing a breath. "I know it's probably too late for this,
but I wanted to tell you that I am sorry. I don't think I ever did."

No, he had never apologized.

280 “But I never meant for everything that went down to happen. I never even imagined it was a possibility.”

Of course he hadn’t, and hadn’t that been part of the problem? He dragged me along, and when things started looking ugly, he fled the ship. Leaving me there to sink with it. And that had been exactly what I did; I had been pulled under the surface, and I’d had to fight my way up. Alone.

285 His apology was long overdue—perhaps it was even too late—but at least I was finally getting one. And that counted for something.

290 “It’s water under the bridge,” I told him, and I meant it. Even though a little part of me would always remember that he had been a big player in something that left a scar I’d always carry around. “Don’t worry about what my dad said, by the way. He’s a little emotional.” I waved my hand in front of us, stopping myself the moment I realized I didn’t owe Daniel a single thing. I shouldn’t have been trying to make him feel better. I cleared my throat. “You know how weddings bring out the best and worst of us.”

I was the living proof of that, my fake boyfriend sitting at a table with my family, 295 finally facing my newly engaged ex.

Although the problem with coming back home for Isabel’s wedding— single, dateless—had never been about seeing Daniel. It was about facing everyone else while doing that. It was the anticipation, the idea, of having every single person who had seen me grow up, fall in love, get my heart broken, lose a little part of myself for 300 a while, and then flee to a different country. It was about facing a man who had

clearly put his life back together when I hadn't. That was what had set this whole thing into motion, exactly what had made me push the panic button.

And how stupid had that been? How dumb had it been to let something like that drive me to lie? To create and sell them this ridiculous and wholesome image of myself that I'd thought would make me complete and happy in their eyes?

I realized now, as I stood in front of the catalyst of this whole mess, that it had been very fucking stupid.

"I hope you mean that, Lina. This whole thing is better left in the past anyway."

Daniel looked at the ground for a moment and then nodded his head. "Are you happy now? With your life? With him?" He tilted his head. "You don't look completely happy."

My throat dried, my eyes widening, as I tried to process his words. "Of course I am," I said, but it came out in a breathless way. Pure shock swirled in my body, mixing with stupid fear at being called out on my lie. "I'm happy, Daniel," I repeated, those two emotions turning into something else. Something that tasted a lot more bitter.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked calmly, in a confident and patronizing way that had me rearing my head back. "He seems like a stand- up guy, this Aaron. Although he looks a little ... dry. Stuffy," Daniel continued, and my eyes fluttered closed for a fraction of a second, a strong sense of protectiveness washing over me. "But I guess he's good to you. He has been stuck to your side since the moment I met him." He chuckled. "Not my style, this guard-dog vibe, but I could understand the appeal."

My lips parted as I found it hard to believe the words leaving my ex's mouth.

“But are you really happy, Lina? I know you, and this is not the carefree Lina you are. You have been on edge in the short time you’ve been here, and I’ll be honest, I can’t help but be concerned.”

Concerned? I blinked. Then, I did it again. And again and again.

Had I been on edge? I could believe that. I had certainly felt that way more than once. But ... whether what he thought was true or not wasn’t important. It was the fact that he believed he had any right to deny something I was telling him myself.

Oblivious to my growing outrage, Daniel kept going, “It could be coming back home. That must be a lot of pressure for you. Or maybe it’s that Isabel is getting married and you aren’t.”

A breath got stuck in my throat.

“Or maybe it’s *him*. I don’t know, but—”

“Stop,” I hissed. Something lit up inside of me. Like a bonfire. I could even hear the flames crackling and sizzling. Burning away the remains of my patience. “Don’t you dare do that, Daniel.”

His brows wrinkled together, his expression one of confusion. “Do what?”

“*Do what?*” I repeated, my voice going up an octave. Closing my eyes, I tried my best to get back my composure. “Do not pretend that you care or that you even know me anymore. You have no right to judge or doubt my happiness.”

The pace at which my breath entered and left my lungs increased, my anger not receding. “So, stop throwing in my face whatever it is you think you know or see. You lost that right a long time ago.”

He shook his head, sighing loudly. “I’ve always cared about you, Lina. And I always will. That’s why I’m worried about you. Why I’m trying to have a conversation.”

“You’ve always cared about me? You’ll *always* care?”

“Of course,” he puffed out. “You are like a little sister to me. We are about to become family.”

350 Something deep inside of me turned to ice. The marrow in my bones freezing, rooting me to the spot.

“I’m like a little sister to you now?” His statement tasted like something tart in my mouth. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me, Daniel.”

His expression assembled into one that was meant to impose. To convey authority.

355 I had been well acquainted with that face when I used to sit across from him in his classroom. “Don’t be like that, Lina.”

“Like what?”

He tsked, bathing me in condensation. “Don’t be a child. We are both adults now. You can talk and act like one.”

360 *Now*. He had said *now*. Opposed to what? To when we had dated?

“Had I been a child when we were together, Daniel? When you dated me? Made me feel special? Told me you loved me?” I watched his jaw press into a tight line. “Is that all that I was to you when you dropped me like a hot potato after you so much as sniffed a little trouble coming your way? I guess that would explain everything. Why

365 I’m only getting an apology now that you deem me worthy of one, having finally turned into an adult.”

I took a step back, hearing my heart drumming in my ears as I watched him remain very still.

“You know what? I’m over this.” Shaking my head, I laughed bitterly. “I don’t owe

370 you a single thing. And you don’t owe me anything either. You never cared about me,

Daniel. Not enough at least. Otherwise, you wouldn't have let them eat me alive." I swallowed, pushing all those memories away as much as they banged and screamed, demanding to be let out. "I really wish you hadn't said all this. I really do. Because these last few minutes have wiped out the little respect I had for you."

375 Watching him as he stood in front of me, barely moving, I took another step back.

His mouth fell open, but no words came out besides, "Lina."

"It's okay," I told him. "I don't expect anything from you. As I told you, it's water under the bridge now."

His lips snapped closed, his shoulders falling in what I hoped was acceptance.

380 "But I can tell you this much: I *am* happy."

And I *was*. Confused too, if I was being honest. Yes, my heart was mixed up and disoriented. Terrified on top of all that. But there was a force that seemed to tear the shell of fear that covered that poor and beat-up organ, seeping through the cracks and wanting to obliterate all those doubts if I let it. Promising safety and comfort.

385 But that wasn't a conversation I owed to Daniel. I did to someone else. Someone I needed to make my way back to.

I was about to turn in my heels and do exactly that when someone who always managed to put a smile on my face turned around the corner.

"What have you been doing here for so long, *cariño*?" Abuela asked in Spanish, 390 looking over at Daniel. "Oh, I see now." She shot him a sideways glance and ignored him altogether. When she looked back at me, her lips were tugging up, mischief written all over her face. "That boyfriend of yours is sitting on that table, looking like an abandoned puppy." She linked her arm with mine, and I felt a little lighter already.

“He ordered you dessert, you know? And he keeps staring at where you left, like he
395 is holding himself from coming to get you.”

My belly flopped, a fluttering sensation taking over. “He is?”

Abuela patted my arm. “Of course he is, *boba*.” She clicked her tongue, pulling us
back to the restaurant. “He didn’t even ask for two spoons, so he knows that getting
you to share is fruitless.” She snickered, and I tried to ignore how the flutter was
400 now spreading to my chest.

“He... he’s pretty perfect,” I murmured, surprising myself.

“Yes,” she said without thinking much about it. “That’s why you shouldn’t leave him
sitting alone for so long. He’s too beautiful for his own good.”

He was—for my own good too.

405 “You think he will save me a dance tomorrow?”

“I think he will.” I didn’t have a doubt in my mind he would. “Only if you ask nicely,
Abuela.”

She giggled, and I knew without a doubt that I’d probably have to fight my own
grandmother over my fake boyfriend’s attention.

410 Then, the woman who had snuck chocolate after bedtime more than a million times
guided us back to where the rest of the family was, chatting animatedly.

Right before reaching the table, she lowered her voice. “They didn’t make men like
that back in my day. Abuelo was handsome but not like that. Although it wasn’t his
looks that won me over.” She winked. “You know what I mean.”

415 “*Abuela!*” I loud-whispered.

She patted my arm. “Don’t play coy around me. I’m old. I know better. Now, go.”

A pair of blue eyes immediately found mine. They bounced to Abuela and then somewhere behind me. Looking around, I noticed Daniel was a few steps behind us. After parting ways with my grandmother, I let my gaze fall back on my fake date as
420 I made my way to him. I could see the unease edged in Aaron's handsome face. His jaw was clenched, and his forehead was bunched. When his gaze met mine once more, his eyes held questions and that protectiveness I had felt a few minutes ago when Daniel had mentioned his name. It was clear as a cloudless summer day.

Aaron was worried. He was holding himself back from meeting me halfway and
425 asking me what the hell had happened. He *cared*. He cared about me.

And he'd shield me, hold me, or just stand by my side if I so much as opened my mouth to ask. I knew. Hell, he would even if I didn't ask.

Honest, genuine concern. Contrary to whatever Daniel had claimed.

Letting myself fall delicately on my chair, I took a moment to plaster a calm smile on
430 my face. A neutral expression. But my lips probably curled the wrong way, my features displaying everything still churning inside of me after my exchange with Daniel because when I turned and faced Aaron, his eyes flared more intensely.

I willed my lips to inch higher, and a muscle in his jaw twitched.

My sister started chattering about something—what exactly, I couldn't tell. My head
435 was somewhere else.

My hands were in my lap when I felt Aaron's palm fall against them. For the second time tonight, he interlaced our hands. Our fingers weaved together, each and every one of them. But this time, he kept our linked hands right where they were—on the top of my thigh. As if he was trying to tell me, this way—with them below the table,

440 hidden from everyone else—meant that *this* was just for us. Not a part of the
charade.

He squeezed my hand with purpose, his fingers tightening around mine, his palm
warm against my skin. *Just for us*, it seemed to reassure me. To promise me.

445

THERE WAS something lodged right in between my ribs that felt a lot like a ticking
bomb.

“I can hear the gears in your head spinning,” Aaron said as he crossed the room in
that pair of pajama pants, which was doing mad things to my belly again. Same went

450 for the T-shirt. He was wearing the one he had slept in yesterday.

At least he was *wearing* one. I didn’t think I could take shirtless Aaron right now.

“I’m okay,” I lied, my head throbbing with every replay of my conversation with
Daniel. It had been on a loop since we left the restaurant. “Just going through
everything I need to get done before the big day tomorrow.”

455 Which was what I *should* have been busy doing.

Clad in my sleeping clothes too, I aligned the two pairs of heels—the ones I’d wear
and the backup—on the floor. Right against the wall. Meticulously leaving the same
space between them.

I stepped back, admiring my work. *Nope*.

460 Unconvinced, I knelt and rearranged them.

When I had something in my mind, I did one of two things. I compulsively ate or
organized. And considering we had just had dinner and seeing the pile of neatly

stacked clothes and perfectly in line items displayed on top of the dresser, it seemed that this one time, it was the latter.

465 Out of the corner of my eye, I sensed Aaron plopping himself on the bed with an ease and finesse no one his size should have.

“There’s smoke coming out of your ears.” He rested his back on the headboard, and the wood complained under his weight.

I reached for the shoes again, moving them an inch to the right. “I don’t think so,” I
470 said in a clipped tone. Then, I moved the two pairs half an inch to the left. “For that, I would need to be overthinking something. And I’m not doing that.”

“Oh, but you are,” he said from his position on the bed. “Talk to me.”

I didn’t bother answering him. Hearing his sigh, I kept my focus on my task.

Maybe if they face the wall—

475 “Catalina,” Aaron called.

And the way he had said it made me turn around and face him.

“Come here.” He patted the bed with his hand.

Brows bunched, I sent him a look.

“Sit with me for a little while, and then you can go back to torturing those shoes into
480 perfection,” he told me with a sigh. “Just for a few minutes.” Then, he placed his palm on the comforter again.

When I didn’t say anything or move, he added very softly, like it would break his heart if I didn’t give him this one thing, “Please.”

That *please*, that freaking please and the way he had said it, launched my legs
485 forward.

Before I knew what I was doing, my ass was on the bed, right beside his hip. I knew what he wanted to talk about. That cocktail of emotions and memories and questions that had slowly been assembling in my head. The one I had brought back to the apartment, and that I knew if I so much as opened my mouth, it would burst
490 and spill right out of me. But that meant completely confiding in Aaron. Telling him about a part of my past that I didn't find any joy in revisiting. Giving him a key that would help him understand—know—me better. And did I want to do that? Could I do it without wanting to tuck my head in his chest and look for comfort in him?

"I don't want to bore you with the melodramatics of my life, Aaron," I sighed, and I
495 meant it. What I didn't tell him was that beneath all that, there was only fear. "You don't need to worry—"

In one smooth motion, Aaron picked me up and placed me between his open legs. Another sigh left my parted lips, but this one had nothing to do with exhaustion or whatever was brewing in my head.

500 "Anything that bothers you matters to me, and I want to hear about it," he said from his position behind me. "Nothing about you is boring or doesn't interest me—ever. Understand?"

I felt myself nod and perhaps mutter a quiet, "Yes," too. My heart drummed too loudly in my ears to know.

505 Aaron continued, "If you want to talk about whatever happened, then we'll do that." His hands fell on my shoulders with a tenderness that disarmed me. Then, he brushed my hair to the side, and his fingers traveled to the back of my neck. "And if you don't, then we'll talk about something else. But I want you to relax. Just for a few minutes."

510 He paused, and his thumbs started massaging along the line of my spine. I had to hold back from whimpering like a stricken animal. Only I wasn't in pain.

"Sound like a plan?"

"Yes," I answered, incapable of not melting into his touch.

There was a beat of silence, and Aaron's fingers trailed up the back of my neck, gently
515 kneading the muscles there. Another sound rose in my throat, almost leaving my lips. But I held it in.

"What your dad said during dinner made me think of something my mom used to tell me when I was a little kid." Aaron's fingertips kept working my skin, easing more than the tension in my shoulders. Turning me into softened butter as I listened to
520 his deep voice taking me out of my head. Trusting me with yet another piece of himself. "Back then, I didn't really understand or care about it. I didn't until I was older and she was diagnosed and the possibility of her leaving us became real. But she used to tell me how the moment I was born, she knew she had found her light in the dark. That one lighthouse that, no matter what, was always up. Lighting up the
525 night and signaling her way *home*. And as a kid, I thought that was either corny or very dramatic." A low and humorless chuckle left him.

My heart broke all over again for him, hurting and begging me to turn around and give him any comfort I could. But I stayed put. "You must miss her so much."

"I do, every day. When she passed and my nights got a little darker, I started to
530 understand what she'd meant."

That was a loss I hoped I wouldn't experience in a long time.

"But what your dad said—about you having this fire inside, that lightness and life, and how it dulled for a period of time..." He paused, and I swore I heard him swallow.

“It just ...” He trailed off, as if he was scared of his next words. And Aaron never
535 feared speaking his mind. Aaron was never scared. “You are all that, Catalina. You
are light. And passion. Your laughter alone can lift my mood and effortlessly turn my
day around in a matter of seconds. Even when it’s not aimed at me. You ... can light
up entire rooms, Catalina. You hold that kind of power. And it’s because of all the
different things that make you who you are. Each and every one of them, even the
540 ones that drive me crazy in ways you can’t imagine. You should never forget that.”

My heart skipped a beat. Then another one. And then one more. Until no air was
getting in or out and I could tell my heart had stopped beating completely. For the
longest of moments, I remained suspended in time, thinking I’d never bounce back
from this because my heart was not functioning anymore, but hey, if those were the
545 parting words I had to leave this earth with, then I’d be happy.

And when my heart resumed, I wasn’t relieved. I simply couldn’t be when it started
thrashing against the cavity of my chest with a wildness I had never experienced.

Some people claimed that the most beautiful thing anyone had ever done for them
was writing them a poem, composing a song, or confessing their undying love in an
550 epic gesture. But right then, as I was cocooned in Aaron’s long legs, his fingers
delicately massaging my neck simply because I’d looked tense, I realized I didn’t
need or want any of that. If I never got my epic declaration, I’d be fine. Because his
words were, without a doubt in my mind, the most beautiful thing I would ever hear
said about me. *To me. And for me.*

555 My body wanted to turn, screamed at my head to allow it. But I knew that if I did,
whatever he saw on my face would change *everything*. Every single fucking thing
between us.

I'd... dammit. *This man*. He kept showing me how perfect he was. Kept unveiling all these beautiful parts of him that made me giddy and dizzy and hungry for more.

560 But I still felt like I was standing on the edge of a cliff, looking down at an ocean that whirled in the same deep blue that colored his eyes. Would I dare to jump?

"I fell in love with Daniel in my second year in college," I said without turning. Not daring to free-fall. Not completely. "I was nineteen. He was my Physics professor. He was younger than any other member of the faculty, so he stood out. Was popular
565 among the body of students—the female section of it particularly.

At first, it was a dumb crush. I'd anticipate his lectures. I'd maybe put a little extra care into what I wore and sit in the first row. But I wasn't the only one. Pretty much every other girl—and a few of the guys— had been charmed by the dimple in his cheek and the confidence with which he strolled across the room. Even when his
570 course was one of the hardest we'd ever had to study for."

Aaron continued working the tension out of the muscles that corded along my neck and shoulders. He remained quiet, and it felt almost as if—except for his fingers—he had grown still too.

So, I continued, "Imagine my surprise when I started noticing that his gaze would
575 rest on me for a moment, just a little longer than on anybody else. Or that his dimple would come out a little more often when it was me he was watching." My eyes closed as Aaron's hands drifted lower, traveling down my spine.

"Throughout that year, it all built up to a point where we would sneak a few innocent touches in between classes or during tutoring sessions. It was so... exciting.
580 Exhilarating almost. He made me feel special, like I wasn't one more of the students

pinning for him.” I heard my voice drifting lower, lost in the memory, so I tried to bring my tone back up.

“Anyway, we didn’t start dating until the moment I was through with the two semesters his course lasted. Officially, publicly dating. Not on campus or anything
585 like that, but we’d go out like any other couple. He introduced Gonzalo and Isabel, and they fell desperately in love in the span of a heated look.”

A real smile tugged my lips up at the thought of the moment Isabel and Gonzalo had locked eyes; it had seemed as if they had been waiting for that to happen. As if they had unknowingly been waiting for the other.

590 Aaron’s legs shifted, cocooning me further into his lap. Or perhaps it was me who kept bending into him. I didn’t know, but I wouldn’t complain or move away.

“And I was in love too. After one year of daydreaming about something I couldn’t have, hoping for it, I was blinded by the joy at finally being able to have him. To call him mine.”

595 His fingers stopped briefly, as if they hesitated their next move. Then, they resumed and continued kneading at my shoulders.

“It lasted a few months. Then, I heard the first whisper, the first ugly and poisonous rumor that blackened all that happiness. And after that one, many more followed. Whispers turned into loud gossip, which traveled along the corridors on campus.

600 There were Facebook posts, too, and threads on Twitter as well. Never directed at me, but about me. At least in the beginning.” I brought my knees to my chest and hugged them. “*The whore who slept around with her professors, they said. Of course she’s the first of her promotion. That’s how she aced Physics when more than half the students fell through. She fucked him, and she’ll fuck her way through college.*”

605 I heard Aaron's exhale. Felt it on the back of my neck. His fingers tensing and halting very briefly.

"It was all so hurtful." My voice sounded different—void and bitter. And it reminded me of a Lina I didn't want to remember. Or ever be again. "The things that were said about me quickly turned into pointed fingers and into disgusting photos that
610 someone had Photoshopped with my face. Into... really ugly stuff."

Aaron's touch turned into just brushes of his skin against mine, soothing me, moving me forward, telling me, *I'm here. I got you.*

"It was all turned into this despicable tale, where I was the cunning, dirty woman who seduced professors for grades. All the hard work and the long nights I had
615 studied were brought down simply because... I don't know. To this day, I don't know the reason or the motivation. Jealousy? A laugh? But I know that if I had been one of my male classmates and Daniel had been a female professor, perhaps I wouldn't have gone through that. It would have been the professor. *She* would have been accused of being a cougar, and the student would have gotten a few high fives.
620 Instead, I was almost harassed into dropping out. I didn't want to attend any lectures. I didn't want to leave the house. I was still living with my parents because I could drive to campus from their house, and I didn't even want to talk to them. I deleted my profiles on all of the social media sites. I closed myself off from every single person in my life, even my sister and even those few who had remained my
625 friends." I focused on the soothing circles Aaron was drawing on my skin, grounding and rooting me to him and to the present. "It was all too much. I just felt... ashamed. Worthless. I felt like everything I had done was worth nothing. Consequently, when

my grades and performance sank, my average went down the drain. And I didn't even care."

630 A beat of silence that seemed to stretch too long made me realize Aaron hadn't spoken a word. I knew he wouldn't judge me, but I wondered what he thought. If the way he saw me had now changed.

"What did he do?" he finally said. His voice sounded rocky, rough. "What did Daniel do about everything that was being done to you?"

635 "Well, things started looking a little bad for him. There was no rule that stopped him from dating a former student. But everything that was going down got to be too much for him."

"For *him*?" he repeated, a new edge to his voice.

640 "Yeah. And so, he broke things off, told me it was too complicated and relationships shouldn't be that hard or messy."

Aaron's fingers halted, not moving any longer. Simply hovering above my skin.

"He thought that we weren't supposed to make each other trip and fall and that the moment we did, then it didn't make sense to be together. And I... I think he was right. I guess he was."

645 Aaron didn't say anything. Not a word left his lips, but I could tell there was something wrong with him. I could feel it in the way his breath had quickened, deepened. And the way his hands remained frozen above my shoulders.

650 "I often wonder how I managed to graduate, but I did. At some point after the breakup, I woke up. Showed up to the exams and passed. Then, I somehow put together an application for an international master's program and left for the US."

Aaron's palms resumed. Very gently, but I felt them move along my shoulders. Nothing like before, but at least he was touching me again. And I needed that, more than I cared to admit.

655 "I wasn't escaping him, you know? Everybody thought I was, but I wasn't. Daniel had bruised my heart, but I wasn't running away from that. It was everything else. Everybody looked at me differently. Like I had changed or something had changed in the way they saw me. As if I were this broken thing now. Dropped by Daniel, harassed, made fun of. Everybody whispered, *Oh, poor thing. How is she going to bounce back from this?* They treated me as damaged goods. They still do. Every time
660 I came back home alone, they look at me with pity. Every time I said I'm still single, they nod and smile sadly." Shaking my head, I released all the air in my lungs. "I hate it, Aaron." I could hear the emotion in my voice choking my words because I did hate it. "That's why I came back as little as I did."

But then I also hated how much I feared that a part of it was perhaps true. Why
665 hadn't I been able to trust anybody with my heart otherwise?

"Everything that had happened hurt me, left a scar, but it didn't break me." I swallowed the lump in my throat, wanting to believe my own words. "It didn't."

A sound, deep and husky and pained, came from behind me. Before I knew what was happening, Aaron's arms came around my shoulders, and I was engulfed by him.
670 Wrapped into his chest. Warm and hard and safe and... a lot less alone. A lot more complete than I had been seconds before.

Aaron buried his head in the nook of my neck from behind, and I felt the urge to comfort him. So, I did.

“I’m not broken, Aaron,” I told him in a whisper, although perhaps it was for my own
675 reassurance. “I can’t be.”

“You are not,” he said on my skin. Tightening his hold on me. Bringing me closer.

“And I know that even if something did break you—because that’s life and no one is
invincible—you’d still put the pieces back together and remain the brightest thing
I’d ever seen.”

680 My hands went around that pair of arms wrapped around my shoulders, which
pulled me into his chest, as if he were scared I’d go up in smoke if he didn’t. And I
hung on to him equally desperately. As if my next breath depended on it.

We remained that way for a long while. And slowly, very slowly, our bodies relaxed
into each other. They melted together. I focused on Aaron’s breath, on the
685 earnestness of the moment, on his heartbeat against my back, his strength. On all the
things that he’d kept handing to me so freely, like they were nothing. Like he was
supposed to give them away and I was entitled to take them from him.

Neither of us said anything as time stretched, our holds gradually loosening as we
lost the battle to sleep.

690 My eyelids eventually fluttered shut, but right before darkness engulfed me, I
thought I heard Aaron whisper, “You feel complete in my arms. You feel like my
home.”

Appendix B

The Target Text

THE SPANISH LOVE DECEPTION – CAPITOLO VENTUNO

Sorprendentemente, stava filando tutto liscio. Fino ad allora non c'era stato nessun momento difficile o imbarazzante che mi avessero fatto rimpiangere tutte le mie scelte di vita, né domande inopportune che mi avessero fatto venire voglia di scavare una buca e tuffarmi dentro.

5 Con un pizzico di fortuna, sarei riuscita persino superare illeso quell'unica cena. E lo pensavo davvero.

Sperai che quel senso di soddisfazione che mi ferveva sottopelle non fosse un effetto collaterale del cibo che mi ero spazzolata. Perché era proprio questo che riusciva a fare un banchetto spagnolo. Riusciva ad offuscare il giudizio.

10 Sedevamo tutti ad un tavolo rotondo sulla terrazza di un ristorante che si affacciava sul mare. All'orizzonte, il sole stava tramontando avvicinandosi alla sottile linea in cui si incontravano cielo e oceano, e l'unico suono che riempiva l'aria intorno a noi oltre il chiacchiericcio, era lo scrosciare delle onde contro gli scogli che delimitavano la costa.

15 In poche parole, era tutto perfetto.

Una carezza delicata sul mio braccio mi fece correre qualche brivido lungo la schiena.

«Freddo?», mi chiese all'orecchio una voce profonda che ero arrivata ad attendere con trepidazione e in modi che mi toglievano il fiato.

20 Scuotendo la testa, mi voltai verso di lui. C'erano solo pochi millimetri a separarci. A separare le nostre labbra.

«No, sto bene». Non stavo *bene*. Ormai avevo imparato che quando Aaron era così vicino, stavo tutt'altro che bene. «Sono solo piena. Forse ho esagerato un po'».

«Niente spazio per il dolce?».

25 Le mie sopracciglia si corruugarono per la sua audacia. «Non essere ridicolo, *osito*. Ho sempre spazio per il dolce. Sempre».

Le labbra di Aaron si curvarono verso l'alto e il sorriso raggiunse gli angoli degli occhi, trasformando il suo intero volto.

W.O.W. Non ero preparata e le farfalle nel mio stomaco ne erano la prova.

30 «Lina, Aaron, altro vino?», chiese mio padre dall'altra parte del tavolo. I miei genitori avevano insistito nell'ordinare il vino nonostante il matrimonio fosse il giorno dopo — e lì l'alcool sarebbe scorso a fiumi di *sidra*, vino, *cava*, e via dicendo. Nessuno aveva osato protestare. Nemmeno Isabel o Gonzalo, che portavano sul volto i segni della nostra nottata quasi insonne. Ma nella terra del vino, non si usciva a cena senza
35 ordinarne una bottiglia.

«No, grazie. Credo che mi risparmierei per domani», risposi, allontanando il mio bicchiere dalla portata di mio padre, che aveva già la bottiglia a mezz'aria.

A differenza mia, Aaron fu troppo lento. Perciò, prima che potesse formulare la sua risposta, mio padre gli stava già riempiendo il bicchiere.

40 «Chi dorme, piglia vino», bisbigliai, sporgendomi verso di lui.

Quel sorriso luminoso che gli aveva conquistato il volto ritornò, facendomi perdere la bussola in un batter d'occhio. Poi il braccio che fino a quel momento aveva avvolto lo schienale della mia sedia, si allungò e Aaron mi pizzicò scherzosamente il fianco.

Sobbalzai sulla sedia e rischiai di far cadere dal tavolo qualche bicchiere.

45 Con l'altra mano Aaron afferrò il suo vino e se lo portò alle labbra. «Non essere carina», disse da sopra il bordo, fissandomi con uno sguardo che mi fece fremere sulla sedia. Poi, chinò la testa e abbassò la voce. «La prossima volta, non mi limiterò a pizzicarti». Finalmente, le sue labbra si posarono sul bicchiere e sorseggiò il vino. Mantenendo lo sguardo sulle sue labbra per qualche intenso secondo, ebbi la
50 certezza che qualcosa fosse appena esploso in prossimità delle mie parti riproduttive femminili.

Con le guance arrossate, girai il capo in cerca di qualsiasi segno che qualcuno al tavolo l'avesse sentito. La mia *abuela* era ancora impegnata a ripulire il suo piatto. Al momento del dolce, Gonzalo e Isabel sembravano sul punto di perdere i sensi per
55 lo sfinimento e molto probabilmente per l'abbiocco. I miei genitori chiacchieravano animatamente con un cameriere che non mi ero nemmeno accorta si trovasse accanto al nostro tavolo. E Daniel — che era venuto da solo perché i suoi genitori e quelli di Gonzalo sarebbero arrivati di buon'ora il giorno successivo — teneva lo sguardo abbassato sul cellulare come se questo custodisse i segreti dell'universo.

60 Quando settimane prima mi era stato riferito che Daniel era fidanzato e più felice che mai, nel panico avevo falsamente dichiarato di frequentare un uomo, dopo essermi immaginata una scena quasi identica a quella in cui ci trovavamo. Solo che la sedia accanto a me sarebbe stata vuota. Oppure occupata da qualcun altro come la mia *abuela* o la fidanzata di Daniel, con la mia fortuna. O chissà, forse sarebbe stato
65 quell'escort che avevo pensato per un attimo di ingaggiare.

In ogni caso, si sarebbe trattato di qualcuno che non mi avrebbe fatto battere il cuore con un semplice sguardo o stringere lo stomaco con uno di quei sorrisi che cominciavo a bramare solo per me.

E così, guardando verso Daniel, capii un paio di cose. Prima di tutto, la mia reazione
70 istintiva che mia aveva portata a mentire ed imbarcarmi – con Aaron – in quel piano
assurdo, forse era stata un tantino eccessiva. Poi, c'era il fatto che, pur essendo
eccessivo, avere Aaron con me aveva reso tutto più facile, come mai avrei
immaginato. Infine – e mi fu difficile farmene una ragione – c'era una grandissima
parte di me, una parte che stavo cercando di ignorare con tutte le mie forze senza
75 riuscirci, che non si pentiva di nulla.

E questo era estremamente stupido da parte mia. Perché l'uomo che mi faceva
arrossire – e che non mi pentivo di avere al mio fianco – sarebbe presto diventato
il mio capo.

«Allora, Aaron», esordì mia madre, riportandomi al presente, «Isabel ha spiegato
80 come vi siete conosciuti e avete iniziato a frequentarvi ufficialmente». I suoi occhi
scintillavano, e scommetto che fosse più che altro dovuto al vino. «Quella storia che
gli hai raccontato ieri sera alla *sidrería*. Sembrava così romantica, proprio come uno
di quei film che guardiamo *sul Netflix*».

C'era da immaginarselo che mia madre avrebbe dirottato la conversazione in quella
85 direzione.

«*Su Netflix, Mamá*», bofonchiai, giocherellando con le mani sul tavolo. «È già, una
vera e propria storia d'amore nata in ufficio, proprio come nei film, no?».

«Solo che questa è reale», disse Aaron.

Reale.

90 Improvvisamente mi ritornarono in mente le sue parole: *“L’ho convinta che avesse bisogno di me. Poi, le ho dimostrato – le ho provato – che era così”*.

Il cuore mi fece un capitombolo nel petto.

«Ma quanto spesso lavorate insieme?». Lo sguardo di mia madre era rivolto verso Aaron, un sorriso curioso sulle labbra che mi diceva che moriva dalla voglia di sapere

95 tutto.

«Entrambi coordiniamo team diversi, non lavoriamo agli stessi progetti, ma ci vediamo spesso». Mi lanciò un’occhiata di sfuggita. «E se non lo facciamo, mi assicuro che sia così. Cerco di incrociarla durante la sua pausa, rubarle uno o due sguardi nei corridoi, passare davanti al suo ufficio senza una scusa. Qualunque cosa

100 mi permetta di entrarle in testa anche solo per qualche istante al giorno».

Abbassai la testa e fissai il mio piatto vuoto. Era così? Aaron aveva l’abitudine di comparire dal nulla. Ma era una cosa intenzionale? Anche se era per darmi sui nervi.

Iniziavo a trovare difficile qualcosa di così semplice come distinguere ciò che era

reale da ciò che non lo era. Tutto ciò che era uscito dalla bocca di Aaron si basava

105 sulla realtà – lavorare insieme, conoscerci da quasi due anni. E poi c’era una parte

di inganno – frequentarci, essere innamorati. Ma tutto il resto, tutto ciò che in

qualche modo si trovava nel mezzo – l’insieme di decorazioni di verità e inganno

che aveva affisso – apparteneva a una zona grigia che non riuscivo a definire.

«*Qué maravilloso*», commentò raggianti mia madre.

110 Poi, tradusse ad Abuela ciò che Aaron aveva detto, e la vecchietta alla quale dovevo

i miei capelli leggermente crespi, a sua volta, sorrise radiosa. A dire la verità, Abuela

era rimasta affascinata da Aaron dal momento in cui l’aveva salutata con due baci e

le aveva detto quanto dovesse essere orgogliosa di sua nipote. Il che, aveva trasformato anche me in un'idiota con un sorriso raggianti.

115 «Sai», si intromise mio padre, «non tutti sono in grado di gestire la nostra Lina. In famiglia è quella che ha il cuore più grande, ma può essere...», si interruppe e un sopracciglio gli rimbalzò in alto sulla fronte. «Ay, come si dice in inglese?», mio padre si interruppe, le sue labbra si incresparono per la frustrazione. «A volte può essere...»

120 «Una completa idiota?», suggerì Isabel, tornata giusto in tempo dal regno dei morti. «Oye!», protestai.

Contemporaneamente mio padre rispose, «No. Non quello». Si grattò un lato della testa.

«Bassa?», propose Gonzalo. «Imbranata?».

125 La mia testa si voltò di scatto verso di lui.

Aaron mormorò. «Estremamente testarda?».

Senza preoccuparmi di voltarmi verso di lui, gli rifilai una gomitata nel fianco. Aaron mi prese delicatamente il braccio e intrecciò le nostre dita, poggiandole sul tavolo. Fissai le nostre mani congiunte e l'offesa svanì immediatamente.

130 Poi, Aaron abbassò la testa e mi sussurrò: «Non volevo essere escluso».

Rivolsi lo sguardo verso di lui e trovai un altro di quei sorrisi che mi facevano cedere le ginocchia. Qualcosa sfarfallò nel mio basso ventre. *Dannazione.*

«*Gracias*, a tutti», borbottai.

Mio padre continuava a cercare la parola che sembrava proprio non venirgli in mente. «Non è nessuna di quelle. Lasciatemi pensare».

135

Daniel si schiarì la gola, prendendo finalmente parte alla conversazione. «E se ci dicessi la parola in spagnolo e noi la traducessimo, Javier?», suggerì.

Mia madre annuì. «*Claro, usa el Google, Javier*», Usa il Google, Javier.

«Papá», dissi con un sospiro, «lascia perdere...».

140 «Petardo!», esclamò. «La nostra Lina è un piccolo petardo».

Ok. Non era poi così male.

«Perciò, può essere troppo da gestire. Spesso».

Oh. Mi afflosciai un po' sulla sedia, la mia mano rimase in quella di Aaron.

145 «Chicchera sempre come se avesse troppe cose da dire e non abbastanza tempo per farlo. O ride come se non le importasse di svegliare la metà del mondo che dorme. Può essere un po' ribelle e Dio solo sa quanto è testarda. Ma è tutto fuoco. Passione. È ciò che la rende la nostra Lina. Il nostro piccolo *terremoto*».

Gli occhi di mio padre iniziarono a scintillare sotto la luce delle poche lampade che si erano accese con l'avanzare della notte. Qualcosa mi si strinse nel petto.

150 «E per un po' di tempo non è stato così. Tutta quella luce si era affievolita, e vedere mia figlia affrontare una cosa del genere non è stato facile. Ci ha spezzato il cuore. Poi se n'è andata e nonostante sapessimo che fosse ciò che voleva e doveva fare, il nostro cuore si è spezzato ancora di più».

155 Ormai sentivo le lacrime salirmi agli occhi, la pressione sulle palpebre aumentava ad ogni parola di mio padre. Ad ogni ricordo che dissotterrava.

«Ma questo è nel passato. Ora è qui, e sta bene. È felice». Mia madre allungò una mano, prendendo quella di mio padre nella sua.

Non riuscendo più a trattenermi, mi alzai sulle mie gambe tremolanti e girai intorno al tavolo. Quando raggiunsi mio padre, lo avolsi in un abbraccio e gli baciai una

160 guancia. «*Te quiero, Papá*». Poi, feci lo stesso con mia madre. «*A ti también, tonta*». Per tutto il tempo, trattenni le lacrime come se ne valesse della mia stessa vita. Non avrei pianto. Mi rifiutavo. «Ora smettetela, va bene? Entrambi. Conservate qualcosa per domani».

Quanto ritornai al mio posto, osservai la mia mano ricercare quella di Aaron. Come
165 se non concepisse più l'idea di non essere stratta nella sua. Assorta dal mio gesto, sentii il cuore sussultare quando la sua mano incontrò la mia a metà strada. Intrecciò le nostre dita e sfiorò il dorso della mia mano con le labbra. Fu un gesto così rapido che quando le nostre mani intrecciate si posarono sul tavolo, avrei dubitato fosse successo davvero se non fosse stato per l'impronta ardente delle sue labbra sulla
170 mia pelle.

Poi intervenne mia madre, riportando la mia attenzione su di lei, «Mi fa davvero felice averti a casa, *cariño*». Poi, i suoi occhi si posarono su Aaron. «Vederti *così*». Il suo sorriso si allargò e la tristezza scomparve.

Il senso di colpa mi squarciò lo stomaco, seguito da qualcosa di languido e denso.
175 Qualcosa che aveva il sapore di rimorso e di speranza.

«Per un attimo, ho quasi pensato che non ti avrebbe portato davvero, Aaron. Mi sono persino chiesta se fossi reale». Ridacchiò, e giurai che i miei polmoni avessero smesso di funzionare per un attimo. Con un leggero sorriso sulle labbra, mia madre incontrò il mio sguardo. «Non guardarmi così. Non hai mai parlato di nessuno che
180 stavi frequentando, e non hai mai portato a casa nessuno da New York le poche volte che sei tornata. Ed è stato tutto molto... improvviso».

«Ad essere sincera, *hermanita*», si intromise Isabel, con un'aria sospettosamente interessata, «pensavamo saresti finita come una di quelle vecchiette che dedicano la

loro vita a un mucchio di gatti. Ma invece di gatti, dovrebbero essere pesci. O tipo...
185 gechi dato che sei allergica al pelo di gatto». Sogghignò. «Ne abbiamo parlato di continuo agli incontri di famiglia».

«Grazie della fiducia», borbottai e poi feci la linguaccia a mia sorella. Non riesco a credere che stessero dicendo quel genere di cose in presenza di qualcuno che credevano stessi frequentando. O meglio ancora, con qualcuno che sapevano avessi
190 frequentato, seduto proprio a quel tavolo. «Per fortuna ho voi».

Le dita di Aaron si strinsero ancora un po' alle mie e sentii le mie ricambiare.

«No, non abbiamo parlato di questo genere di cose», negò con fermezza mia madre, lanciando un'occhiata alla sua seconda figlia. «Smettila di prendere in giro tua sorella, Isabel. Domani ti sposi».

195 Isabel si accigliò. «Ma cosa c'entra questo con...». Mamá la liquidò con un gesto secco della mano. Ridendo sotto i baffi, la vidi incrociare le braccia al petto.

«Non abbiamo mai pensato che saresti rimasta sola, Lina. Ma avevamo il terrore che *ti saresti sentita sola*». Guardò Aaron e i suoi occhi si addolcirono. «E sapere che non lo sei, che hai qualcuno a cui poterti appoggiare e da cui tornare a casa, forse
200 qualcuno che un giorno potrai chiamare *casa*, mi fa dormire più serena la notte».

L'uomo al mio fianco aggiunse senza esitazione: «Questo posso promettertelo». La sua voce fu come una carezza sulla mia pelle e spinse il mio cuore a sbattere contro le costole. Voleva scapparsene quasi quanto io non volessi sentire qualsiasi cosa sarebbe seguita. «Lei avrà sempre me». Il suo pollice mi accarezzò il dorso della
205 mano. «Ancora non lo sa, ma non si libererà di me».

Non potevo *non* guardarlo. Dopo quel che aveva detto, non potevo *non* voler ricercare il suo bel viso. Ormai, la cosa non avrebbe dovuto sorprendermi così tanto.

Aaron aveva quel genere di potere su di me. Quindi fu esattamente ciò che feci. Mi permisi di voltarmi. I suoi occhi erano già su di me.

210 *Sente anche lui questa attrazione? L'impulso di guardare il mio volto in cerca di qualsiasi risposta pensi di trovare?*

Cercando di tenere sotto controllo il mio cuore, scrutai quel blu oceano con trepidazione. Con aspettativa persino. E vi trovai qualcosa di assolutamente terrificante. Qualcosa che non avrebbe dovuto — potuto — esserci, considerando che
215 questa doveva essere una farsa che e perciò la sua affermazione non era vera. Ma mi fu difficile negare ciò che avevo davanti, che quelle emozioni fossero *davvero* lì, irradiate dal suo sguardo. Pura sincerità. Convinzione. Fede. Affidabilità. Una supplica. Mi fissavano dagli occhi di Aaron. Esigendo di essere riconosciute.

Come se la promessa stesse facendo a *me* e non a mia madre.

220 Come se ciò che aveva appena dichiarato non facesse parte del nostro inganno.

Ma non potevo accettarlo. Quasi tremando per lo sforzo di trattenermi dall'avvolgergli le braccia al collo ed implorarlo di darmi delle risposte o dirmi esattamente in quale zona grigia ci trovassimo, decisi che non mi sarei permessa di
giocherellare con le domande che mi frullavano in testa e mi ingarbugliavano i
225 sentimenti.

Forse perché non volevo davvero sentire nessuna delle risposte a domande come: eravamo passati dall'essere colleghi di lavoro a soci in un accordo ad amici? Eravamo amici che si erano promessi di sostenersi a vicenda ora? Amici che si erano quasi baciati e si erano sfiorati delicatamente le labbra? Quella promessa era
230 davvero reale come i suoi occhi mi supplicavano di credere? O non era altro che una decorazione? E se lo era, perché avrebbe dovuto dire una cosa del genere? Non aveva

alcun riguardo per il mio povero cuore? Non riusciva a vedere che non ero più in grado di distinguere una cosa dall'altra? Ma se non si trattava di un semplice abbellimento della verità – una messinscena, uno strumento di quella farsa – allora
235 che cosa cavolo stava facendo? Cosa *stavamo* facendo?

Incapace di rimanere ancora sotto lo sguardo di ciò che mi fissava dagli occhi di Aaron, o elaborare tutte le domande e i dubbi che mi affollavano la mente, drizzai in piedi con un movimento brusco e la mia mano lasciò andare la sua. La sedia sotto di me stridette sul pavimento.

240 «Devo andare alla toilette», mi affrettai a dire, distogliendo lo sguardo da Aaron.

Poi, mi allontanai più velocemente possibile senza guardarmi indietro. Non mi voltai. Nemmeno una volta.

Nemmeno dopo aver sentito mia sorella dire: «Allora, adesso che se n'è andata, possiamo parlare di me? Sono la sposa, dovrei essere al centro dell'attenzione. Mi
245 sento trascurata».

Se la mia mente non fosse stata un casino, avrei riso. Forse sarei tornata indietro e le avrei tirato i capelli per essere una ragazzina viziata, egocentrica e presuntuosa, ma ero troppo occupata a correre. Ad essere ancora una completa cacasotto, cosa di cui di quel passo, sarei diventata campionessa entro la fine del weekend.

250 Mi lavai le mani e mi spruzzai un po' d'acqua sul viso mentre pensavo a tutto e a niente, sentendomi completamente sopraffatta dalla mia stessa stupidità.

Forse fu proprio per quello che uscendo dal bagno, non mi accorsi che stava sopraggiungendo qualcuno finché non andai a sbattere contro il petto di un uomo, con un *umpf*.

255 «*Mierda*», imprecai sottovoce, indietreggiando di qualche passo. «*Lo siento mucho*», aggiunsi un attimo prima di notare chi avevo davanti. «Oh, Daniel».

Scostandomi qualche ciocca di capelli dal viso, mi sentii sprofondare.

Il mio ex non mostrava alcun segno di sentirsi in imbarazzo quanto me. «Tutto bene?», mi chiese in spagnolo.

260 Dato che eravamo solo noi e Aaron non c'era, risposi anche io in spagnolo, «Sì, sto bene. È stata solo una botta». Mi schiarì la gola e mi spazzai via dalla gonna plissetta dei granelli di sporco immaginari. «Scusami ancora. È stata tutta colpa mia. Ero un po' distratta».

«È tutto a posto, Lina». La fossetta sulla sua guancia fece la sua comparsa.

265 La fissai, un po' sovrappensiero. E pensare che, tanti anni prima, era stata proprio quella fossetta a innescare tutto. In quel momento, a guardarla, non riuscivo a sentire nemmeno il minimo accenno di calore.

«Forse non sarei dovuto venire stasera», confessò Daniel di punto in bianco, riportandomi al presente.

270 Annuii lentamente, cercando di venire a patti con quello strano senso di compassione che di colpo provai nei suoi confronti. Non aveva torto. Per tutta la cena, non era stato altro che un fantasma. Nessuno si era rivolto davvero a lui – cosa che potevo capire, considerando i nostri trascorsi – e lui dal canto suo non aveva parlato. Nei suoi panni, non credo mi sarei presentata.

275 «No, venire è stata la cosa giusta se credevi di doverci essere». Strinsi le mani tra loro, per evitare di giocherellarci. «L'hai fatto per Gonzalo, ed è molto coraggioso da parte tua».

Rise con amarezza. «Penso che nessuno a quel tavolo sarebbe d'accordo con te. Eccetto forse Gonzalo, e non userebbe il termine *coraggioso*». Le sue mani
280 scivolarono nelle tasche dei pantaloni.

Anche in questo caso, non aveva torto. I miei genitori erano sempre stati gentili ma distaccati con lui, e solo per amore di Gonzalo. E anche di Isabel. Sapevano quanto Daniel fosse importante per lui e che, senza di lui, Gonzalo, che amavano alla follia, non avrebbero fatto parte delle loro vite. Eppure non avevo il minimo dubbio che
285 non avrebbero mai perdonato Daniel per avermi spezzato il cuore tanto tempo prima. Per aver avuto un ruolo in ciò che avevo passato.

«Senti», disse Daniel prima di sospirare, «so che forse è troppo tardi per questo, ma volevo dirti che mi dispiace. Non penso di averlo mai fatto».

No, non si era mai scusato.

290 «Non ho mai voluto che accadesse ciò che è successo. Non avrei mai immaginato che fosse possibile».

Ma certo che non l'aveva fatto, e non era forse stato parte del problema? Mi aveva trascinata con sé, e quando le cose avevano iniziato a mettersi male, aveva abbandonato la nave. Mi aveva lasciata lì ad affondare. E così era stato, ero stata
295 trascinata sotto la superficie, e avevo dovuto lottare per risalire. Da sola.

Le sue scuse erano in ritardo — forse anche di troppo — ma perlomeno le stavo finalmente ricevendo. E questo contava qualcosa.

«É acqua passata», gli dissi, e lo dicevo sul serio. Eppure una piccola parte di me avrebbe sempre ricordato che aveva avuto un ruolo fondamentale in qualcosa che
300 mi aveva lasciato una cicatrice che avrei sempre portato con me. «Non preoccupati di quello che ha detto mio padre, comunque. È un po' emotivo». Agitai una mano

davanti a noi, per sminuire la cosa, ma mi fermai quando mi resi conto che non dovevo assolutamente nulla a Daniel. Non avrei dovuto cercare di farlo sentire meglio. Mi schiarì la gola. «Sai che i matrimoni tirano fuori il meglio e il peggio di noi».

Ne ero la prova vivente, il mio finto fidanzato era seduto al tavolo con la mia famiglia, e finalmente affrontavo il mio ex, prossimo al matrimonio.

Eppure, il vero problema di tornare a casa per il matrimonio di Isabel — single, senza accompagnatore — non era mai stato rivedere Daniel. Era dover affrontare tutti nel mentre. Era l'attesa, l'idea che ci fosse ogni singola persona che mi aveva visto crescere, innamorarmi, avere il cuore spezzato, perdere una piccola parte di me per un po' e poi fuggire in un altro paese. Era dover affrontare un uomo che aveva chiaramente rimesso in sesto la sua vita, mentre io non l'avevo fatto. Era questo che aveva dato inizio a tutta la faccenda, esattamente ciò che mi aveva fatto andare nel panico.

E quanto era stato stupido? Quanto era stato sciocco lasciare che una cosa del genere mi spingesse a mentire? A creare e dare un'immagine ridicola e genuina di me che credevo mi avrebbe fatta apparire felice ai loro occhi?

In quel momento, di fronte al catalizzatore di tutto quel casino, mi resi conto che era stato fottutamente stupido.

«Spero che tu dica sul serio, Lina. Comunque è meglio che tutta questa storia rimanga nel passato». Daniel guardò a terra per un attimo poi annuì. «Adesso sei felice? Della tua vita? Con lui?». Inclinò il capo. «Non sembri del tutto felice».

Mi si inaridì la gola e gli occhi si spalancarono mentre cercavo di elaborare le sue parole. «Certo che lo sono,» risposi, ma mi uscì un po' trafelato.

Un assoluto shock turbinava nel mio corpo, mescolandosi alla sciocca paura che la mia bugia fosse stata scoperta. «Sono felice, Daniel», ribadì e quelle due emozioni si trasformarono in qualcos'altro. Qualcosa che aveva un sapore molto più amaro.

«Ne sei sicura?», chiese con calma, in un modo assertivo e condiscendente che mi fece drizzare la testa indietro. «Questo Aaron sembra un tipo serio. Anche se sembra un po'... noioso. Compassato», continuò Daniel. I miei occhi si chiusero per una frazione di secondo e mi travolse un forte senso di protezione. «Ma immagino che sia buono con te. Ti è rimasto incollato dal momento in cui l'ho incontrato». Ridacchiò. «Non è proprio il mio stile, quell'aria da cane da guardia, ma posso capire che piaccia».

Le mie labbra si dischiusero appena, non riuscivo a credere alle parole che uscivano dalla bocca del mio ex.

«Ma sei davvero felice, Lina? Ti conosco, e questa non è la Lina spensierata di sempre. Nel poco tempo trascorso da quando sei arrivata, hai sempre avuto i nervi a fior di pelle, e sarò sincero, non posso fare a meno di essere preoccupato».

Preoccupato? Sbattei le palpebre. Poi lo feci ancora. E ancora e ancora.

Avevo i nervi a fior di pelle? Forse. Di certo mi ero sentita così in più di un'occasione. Ma... non era importante se ciò che pensava fosse vero o meno. Lo era invece il fatto che credesse di avere il diritto di negare qualcosa che io stessa gli stavo dicendo.

Daniel, ignaro della mia crescente indignazione, continuò a parlare. «Potrebbe essere il ritorno a casa. Dev'essere stressante per te. O magari è il fatto che Isabel si stia per sposare e tu no».

Un respiro mi si bloccò in gola.

«O forse è *lui*. Non so, ma...».

350 «Smettila», sibilai. Dentro di me si incendiò qualcosa. Come un falò. Riuscivo persino a sentire le fiamme crepitare e sfrigolare e incenerire ciò che restava della mia pazienza. «Non ti permettere, Daniel».

Le sue sopracciglia si incresparono in un'espressione confusa. «Di fare cosa?»

«Di fare cosa?», ripetei e la mia voce salì di un'ottava. Chiusi gli occhi, cercando di
355 fare del mio meglio per ritrovare la calma. «Non fingere di tenerci o di conoscermi ancora. Non hai alcun diritto di giudicare o mettere in dubbio la mia felicità».

Il ritmo con cui il mio respiro entrava ed usciva dai polmoni aumentò, la rabbia non si affievoliva. «Perciò, smettila di sbattermi in faccia qualsiasi cosa pensi di sapere o vedere. Hai perso quel diritto molto tempo fa».

360 Scosse la testa, sospirando forte. «Ho sempre tenuto a te, Lina. E lo farò sempre. È per questo che sono preoccupato per te. Il motivo per cui sto cercando di avere una conversazione con te».

«Hai sempre tenuto a me? Ci terrai *sempre*?»

«Ma certo», sbuffò. «Sei come una sorella minore per me. Stiamo per diventare una
365 famiglia».

Qualcosa nel mio profondo si tramutò in ghiaccio. Il midollo nelle mie ossa si congelò, e rimasi inchiodata sul posto.

«Sono come una sorella minore per te, adesso?». Nella mia bocca la sua affermazione aveva un sapore aspro. «Mi stai prendendo per il culo, Daniel?!».

370 La sua espressione si trasformò in una che voleva essere d'imposizione. Per trasmettere autorità. La conoscevo molto bene dato che un tempo in aula sedevo direttamente davanti a lui. «Non fare così, Lina».

«Così come?».

Schioccò la lingua con disapprovazione, inondandomi con la sua sintesi. «Non fare
375 la bambina. Siamo entrambi adulti ora. Puoi parlare e comportarti come tale».

Ora. Aveva detto “ora”. Rispetto a quando? A quando stavamo insieme?

«Ero una bambina quando stavamo insieme, Daniel? Quando uscivi con me? Mi
facevi sentire speciale? Mi dicevi che mi amavi?». Vidi la sua mascella contrarsi in
una linea stretta. «È questo che ero per te, quando mi hai piantata in asso non appena
380 hai anche solo sentito odore di guai per te? Immagino che spiegherebbe tutto. Perché
stia ricevendo delle scuse solo ora che finalmente sono diventata adulta e degna di
riceverle».

Feci un passo indietro, sentivo il cuore tamburellarmi nelle orecchie vedendolo
rimanere completamente immobile.

385 «Sai cosa ti dico? Ho chiuso con questa storia». Scossi la testa, ridendo con amarezza.

«Non ti devo assolutamente nulla. Ne tu a me. Non hai mai tenuto a me, Daniel. Non
abbastanza almeno. Altrimenti, non avresti lasciato che mi mangiassero viva».

Deglutii, scacciando via tutti quei ricordi che urlavano e lottavano, pretendendo di
essere liberati. «Vorrei davvero che non avessi detto tutto questo. Dico davvero.
390 Perché questi ultimi minuti hanno spazzato via il poco rispetto che avevo per te».

Feci un altro passo indietro, guardandolo mentre si muoveva a malapena davanti a
me.

La sua bocca si spalancò, ma non uscirono altre parole oltre a, «Lina».

«Va bene così», gli dissi. «Non mi aspetto nulla da te. Come ho detto, è acqua passata
395 ormai».

Le sue labbra si chiusero di scatto, le sue spalle si abbassarono e sperai fosse
accettazione.

«Ma posso dirti questo: *Sono felice*».

E lo *ero*. Anche confusa, ad essere sincera. Certo, il mio cuore era scombussolato e
400 disorientato. Terrorizzato per di più. Ma c'era una forza che sembrava voler lacerare
la corazza di paura che ricopriva quel povero organo malandato, che filtrava
attraverso le crepe, pronta a polverizzare completamente ogni dubbio se glielo
avessi permesso. Che prometteva sicurezza e conforto.

Ma era una conversazione che non dovevo a Daniel. La dovevo a qualcuno altro.
405 Qualcuno da cui dovevo tornare.

Stavo per girarmi sui tacchi e farlo, quando una persona che riusciva sempre a farmi
sorridere, svoltò l'angolo.

«Che fine avevi fatto, *cariño?*», chiese Abuela in spagnolo, guardando Daniel. «Ah,
ora capisco». Gli lanciò un'occhiata sbieca e poi lo ignorò completamente. Quando si
410 voltò verso di me, le sue labbra erano sollevate leggermente verso l'alto e la malizia
le si poteva leggere in faccia.

«Quel tuo fidanzato è seduto al tavolo e sembra un cucciolo abbandonato». Mi prese
sottobraccio e mi sentii già un po' più leggera. «Ti ha ordinato il dolce, sai? E continua
a fissare il punto in cui te ne sei andata, come se si trattenesse dal venirti a
415 prendere».

Lo stomaco mi ricadde e una fremente sensazione prese il sopravvento. «Davvero?».
Abuela mi diede un buffetto sul braccio. «Ma certo che sì, *boba*». Schioccò la lingua,
riportandoci verso ristorante. «Non ha nemmeno chiesto due cucchiaini, quindi sa
che è inutile tentare di farti condividere». Ridacchiò, e cercai di ignorare il fatto che
420 in quel momento il fremito si stesse propagando al petto.

«È... praticamente perfetto», mormorai con mia stessa sorpresa.

«Sì», disse lei senza pensarci troppo. «Ecco perché non dovresti lasciarlo seduto da solo per così tanto tempo. È troppo bello per il suo bene».

Lo era — anche per il mio bene.

425 «Pensi che mi riserverà un ballo domani?»

«Credo di sì.» Non avevo alcun dubbio che l'avrebbe fatto. «Solo se glielo chiedi gentilmente, Abuela».

Ridacchiò, e capii che forse avrei dovuto litigarmi le attenzioni del mio finto fidanzato con mia nonna.

430 Poi, la donna che aveva rubacchiato la cioccolata un milione di volte prima di andare a dormire, ci ricondusse dal resto della famiglia che stava chiacchierando animosamente.

Poco prima di raggiungere il tavolo, abbassò la voce. «Ai miei tempi non ne facevano di uomini così. Abuelo era piacente, ma non così. Anche se non è stato il suo aspetto

435 a conquistarmi», mi fece l'occholino, «sai cosa voglio dire».

«*Abuela!*», esclamai con un sussurro.

Mi diede un buffetto sul braccio. «Non fare l'ingenua con me. Sono vecchia. Ne so più di te. Vai adesso».

Un paio di occhi blu trovarono subito i miei. Rimbalzarono su Abuela e poi da
440 qualche parte alle mie spalle. Guardandomi introno, mi accorsi che Daniel si trovava a qualche passo dietro di noi.

Dopo essermi separata da mia nonna, lasciai che il mio sguardo ricadesse sul mio finto fidanzato mentre mi avvicinavo a lui. Riuscivo a vedere il disagio contornare il suo bel volto. Aveva la mascella serrata e la fronte aggrottata. Quando il suo sguardo

445 incrociò ancora una volta il mio, nei suoi occhi c'erano domande e quel senso di

protezione che avevo provato pochi minuti prima quando Daniel l'aveva nominato. Era chiaro come il sole d'estate.

Aaron era preoccupato. Si stava trattenendo dal venirmi incontro a metà strada e chiedermi che diamine fosse successo. Lui ci *teneva*. Teneva a me.

450 E mi avrebbe difesa, stretta a sé, o sarebbe rimasto semplicemente al mio fianco se solo avessi aperto bocca per chiederglielo. Lo sapevo. Diamine, l'avrebbe fatto anche se non gliel'avessi chiesto.

Preoccupazione genuina, autentica. Totalmente opposta a quella che aveva dichiarato Daniel.

455 Lasciandomi cadere delicatamente sulla sedia, mi presi un attimo per stamparmi sul volto un sorriso rilassato. Un'espressione neutra. Ma probabilmente le mie labbra si curvarono nel modo sbagliato e i miei lineamenti rivelavano tutto ciò che si agitava ancora dentro di me dopo la discussione con Daniel, perché quando mi voltai verso Aaron, i suoi occhi si infiammarono più intensamente.

460 Costrinsi le mie labbra a sollevarsi ancora e un muscolo della sua mascella si contrasse.

Mia sorella iniziò a parlare di qualcosa — di cosa esattamente, non sapevo. La mia mente era da tutt'altra parte.

Tenevo le mani in grembo quando sentii quella di Aaron ricadere sulle mie. Per la
465 seconda volta quella sera, fece in modo che le nostre mani si stringessero. Ognuna delle nostre dita si intrecciò all'altra. Ma questa volta, lasciò le nostre mani congiunte esattamente dove si trovavano, sulla mia coscia. Come se in quel mondo cercasse di dirmi, che quel contatto, sotto il tavolo, nascosto a tutti gli altri, fosse solo per noi. Non parte della farsa.

470 Strinse la mia mano con intenzione, le sue dita si serrarono intorno alle mie, il suo
palmo era caldo contro mia pelle. “Solo per noi”, sembrava rassicurarmi.
Promettermi.

E proprio come la più grande idiota dell’universo, trovai il massimo conforto in
quelle cinque dita oblunghe. Nel calore di quella mano. Così, avvicinai le nostre mani
475 congiunte al ventre e ricambiai la stretta.

CONFICCATO tra le mie costole, c’era qualcosa che sembrava proprio una bomba a
orologeria.

480 «Riesco a sentire le rotelle che ti girano in testa», disse Aaron attraversando la
stanza indossando quel paio di pantaloni del pigiama che ancora una volta stavano
facendo impazzire il stomaco. Lo stesso valeva per la maglietta. Era quella con cui
aveva dormito il giorno precedente.

Almeno ne *indossava una*. Non pensavo di riuscire a sopportare Aaron a torso nudo
485 in quel momento.

«Sto bene», mentii. La testa mi pulsava ogni volta che ripensavo alla conversazione
con Daniel. Era in loop nella mia testa da quando avevamo lasciato il ristorante. «Sto
solo ripassando tutto quello che devo fare prima del grande giorno di domani».
Cioè quello che *avrei* dovuto fare.

490 In pigiama anche io, allineai sul pavimento due paia di scarpe col tacco: quelle che
avrei indossato e quelle di riserva. Proprio contro il muro. Lasciando
meticolosamente lo stesso spazio tra l’uno e l’altro.

Feci un passo indietro, ammirando la mia opera. *No*.

Poco convinta, mi inginocchiai e le risistemai.

495 Quando avevo qualcosa che mi frullava in testa, facevo due cose: mangiavo in modo compulsivo o riordinavo. Considerando che avevamo appena cenato e vedendo il mucchio di vestiti ordinatamente impilati e gli oggetti esposti perfettamente in fila sopra la cassetiera, sembrava che in quell'occasione fosse la seconda.

Con la coda dell'occhio, notai Aaron lasciarsi cadere sul letto con una agilità e
500 un'eleganza che nessuno della sua stazza avrebbe dovuto avere.

«Ti esce il fumo dalle orecchie». Appoggiai la schiena sulla testiera del letto e il legno protestò sotto il suo peso.

Allungai ancora una volta una mano verso le scarpe, spostandole di un millimetro a destra. «Non credo proprio», dissi con tono brusco. Poi le spostai di mezzo
505 millimetro a sinistra. «In quel caso starei rimuginando. E non è così».

«Oh, ma è così», disse dal letto. «Parlami».

Non mi curai di rispondergli. Al suo sospiro, rimasi concentrata sul mio compito.

Forse se le giro verso il muro...

«Catalina», mi chiamò Aaron.

510 E il modo in cui lo disse mi fece voltare verso di lui. «Vieni qui». Diede un colpetto sul letto con una mano.

Gli lanciai un'occhiata, con le sopracciglia corrugate.

«Siediti con me per un po', e poi potrai tornare a torturare quelle scarpe finché non saranno perfette», mi disse con un sospiro. «Qualche minuto soltanto». Poi, poggiò
515 ancora una volta la mano sulla coperta.

Dato che non dissi nulla e non mi mossi, aggiunse molto dolcemente, come se gli si sarebbe spezzato il cuore se non gliel'avessi concesso: «Per favore».

Quel “per favore”, quel maledetto “per favore” e il modo in cui lo disse, diede lo slancio alle mie gambe.

520 Prima di rendermi conto di cosa stessi facendo, mi ritrovai con il sedere già sul letto, proprio accanto al suo fianco. Sapevo di che cosa voleva parlare. Di quel cocktail di emozioni, ricordi e domande che aveva iniziato lentamente a mescolarsi nella mia testa. Quello che avevo riportato all'appartamento, e che sapevo che se avessi anche solo aperto bocca, avrei rigurgitato. Ma parlare avrebbe significato fidarmi
525 completamente di Aaron. Raccontargli di una parte del mio passato che non provavo alcuna gioia a rivivere. Consegnargli una chiave che avrebbe potuto aiutarlo a capirmi, a conoscermi meglio. Volevo farlo? Sarei risuscita a farlo senza voler seppellire la testa nel suo petto e cercare conforto in lui?

«Non voglio annoiarti con i melodrammi della mia vita, Aaron», sospirai, e dicevo sul serio. Quello che non gli dissi fu che, sotto sotto, c'era solo paura.

«Non devi preoccuparti...».

Con un movimento fluido, Aaron mi sollevò e mi posizionò tra le sue gambe aperte. Un altro sospiro abbandonò le mie labbra socchiuse, ma non aveva nulla a che fare con la stanchezza o con quel che mi ribolliva in testa.

535 «Qualunque cosa ti preoccupi, è importante per me, e voglio saperla», disse da dietro di me. «Non c'è nulla di te che sia noioso o non mi interessi... mai. Capito?».

Mi sentii annuire e forse mormorare anche un silenzioso: “Sì”. Il cuore mi tamburellava troppo forte nelle orecchie per saperlo per certo.

Aaron continuò, «Se vuoi parlare di qualsiasi cosa sia successa, allora lo faremo». Le
540 sue mani ricaddero sulle mie spalle con una tenerezza disarmante. Poi, mi scostò i

capelli di lato e le sue dita navigarono fino al mio collo. «Se invece non vuoi, allora parleremo di qualcos'altro. Ma voglio che ti rilassi. Solo per qualche minuto».

Si fermò, con i pollici iniziò a massaggiarmi lungo la spina dorsale. Dovetti trattenermi dal mugolare come un animale ferito. Però non stavo soffrendo.

545 «Ti sembra un buon piano?»

«Sì», risposi senza riuscire a non sciogliermi sotto le sue mani.

Ci fu un attimo di silenzio, e le dita di Aaron risalirono lungo il mio collo, massaggiando delicatamente i muscoli. Un altro suono mi risalì in gola e quasi mi sfuggì dalle labbra. Ma lo trattenni.

550 «Quel che ha detto tuo padre a cena mi ha fatto ripensare a una cosa che mia madre mi diceva sempre quando ero piccolo». Le dita di Aaron continuarono a massaggiarmi, alleviando molto più che la tensione nelle mie spalle. Mi trasformò in burro mentre la sua voce profonda mi strappava ai miei pensieri, affidandomi l'ennesimo pezzo di sé. «A quel tempo, non lo capivo o non lo trovavo importante.

555 Finché non sono cresciuto e le hanno diagnosticato il tumore e la possibilità che ci lasciasse è diventata reale. Ma mi raccontava sempre che alla mia nascita, sapeva di aver trovato la sua luce nel buio. Quel faro che, a prescindere da tutto, era sempre acceso. Illuminava la notte e le indicava la strada di *casa*. E da bambino, la trovavo una cosa smielata o troppo drammatica».

560 La risatina che lo abbandonò era bassa e priva di umorismo.

Il mio cuore si spezzò ancora una volta per lui, doleva e mi implorava di voltarmi e dargli tutto il conforto possibile. Ma rimasi ferma. «Deve mancarti molto».

«Ogni giorno. Quando è mancata e le mie notti sono diventate un po' più buie, ho iniziato a capire che cosa intendesse».

565 Era una perdita che speravo di non dover subire per molto tempo.

«Ma quello che ha detto tuo padre... che dentro hai questo fuoco, questa luce e vita e che per un periodo si sono spenti...», fece una pausa e giurai di averlo sentito deglutire. «È solo che...», non concluse la frase, come se avesse avuto paura di pronunciare le parole successive. E Aaron non aveva mai paura di dire ciò che pensava. Aaron non aveva mai paura. «Tu sei tutte quelle cose, Catalina. Sei luce. E passione. La tua risata da sola può risollevarmi il morale e svoltarmi la giornata in un paio di secondi. Anche quando non è diretta a me. Puoi... illuminare intere stanze, Catalina. Hai questo potere. Ed è grazie a tutte le cose che ti rendono chi sei. Tutte, fino all'ultima, anche quelle che mi fanno impazzire in modi che neanche immagini. Non dovreesti dimenticarlo mai».

Il mio cuore saltò un battito. Poi un altro. E un altro ancora. Finché non riuscii più a respirare e mi accorsi che il mio cuore aveva smesso di battere completamente. Per un lungo istante, rimasi sospesa nel tempo a pensare che non mi sarei mai ripresa dato che il mio cuore aveva smesso di funzionare. Ma se quelle dovevano essere le parole con cui avrei dovuto lasciare questo mondo, allora me ne sarei andata felice. E quando il mio cuore ripartì, non mi sentii sollevata. Come potevo esserlo, quando si dibatteva nella mia cassa toracica con una violenza che non avevo mai provato? Alcune persone sostengono che la cosa più bella che qualcuno abbia mai fatto per loro sia stata scrivere una poesia, comporre una canzone o confessare il loro amore eterno con un gesto epico. In quel momento, accoccolata tra le lunghe gambe di Aaron, con le sue dita che mi massaggiavano delicatamente il collo solo perché gli ero sembrata tesa, mi resi conto che non avevo né bisogno e né volevo nulla tutto ciò. Se non avessi mai ricevuto la mia epica dichiarazione d'amore, mi sarebbe

andato bene ugualmente. Perché le sue parole erano, senza alcun dubbio, la cosa più
590 bella che avrei mai sentito pronunciare su di me. A me. E per me.

Il mio corpo voleva voltarsi, gridava nella mia testa perché lo permettessi. Ma sapevo
che se l'avessi fatto, qualsiasi cosa avrebbe visto sul mio volto, avrebbe cambiato
tutto. Ogni singola, fottuta cosa tra noi.

Avrei... dannazione. *Quest'uomo*. Continuava a mostrarmi quanto fosse perfetto.
595 Continuava a svelarmi tutte quelle meravigliose parti di lui che mi facevano sentire
elettrizzata e frastornata e mi facevano desiderare di più.

Ma mi sentivo ancora come se fossi in piedi sull'orlo di una scogliera, a guardare giù
verso l'oceano dalle onde rabbiose dello stesso blu profondo che colorava i suoi
occhi. Avrei avuto il coraggio di buttarmi?

600 «Mi innamorai di Daniel al secondo anno di college», dissi senza voltarmi. Non
osando una caduta libera. Non del tutto. «Avevo diciannove anni. Lui era il mio
professore di fisica. Era più giovane di qualsiasi altro docente della facoltà, perciò si
faceva notare. Era popolare tra il corpo studentesco, quello femminile soprattutto.

All'inizio, era una stupida cotta. Aspettavo con ansia le sue lezioni. Forse mettevo
605 più cura nel vestire e mi sedevo in prima fila. Ma non ero l'unica. Quasi tutte le
ragazze – e alcuni ragazzi – erano rimasti affascinati dalla fossetta sulla sua guancia
e dalla sicurezza con cui camminava per l'aula. Nonostante il suo corso fosse uno dei
più difficili per cui avessimo dovuto studiare».

Aaron continuava a sciogliere la tensione dai muscoli del collo e delle spalle. Rimase
610 in silenzio, e sembrò quasi che, a parte le sue dita, si fosse immobilizzato.

Così proseguì. «Immagina la mia sorpresa quando ho iniziato a notare che il suo
sguardo si posava e si tratteneva su di me un po' più a lungo che su chiunque altro.

O che la sua fossetta compariva un po' più spesso quando era me che guardava». I miei occhi si chiusero mentre le mani di Aaron scivolarono più in basso, navigando
615 lungo la mia schiena.

«Durante quell'anno, la cosa è cresciuta a tal punto che ci ha portati a scambiarci innocenti carezze tra una lezione e l'altra o durante le ore di tutoraggio. Era tutto così... emozionante. Quasi esaltante. Mi faceva sentire speciale come se non fossi un'altra delle studentesse che si struggevano per lui». Sentii la mia voce abbassarsi,
620 persa nei ricordi, così cercai di rialzare il tono.

«In ogni caso, iniziammo a frequentarci solo quando terminai i due semestri del suo corso. Frequentarci ufficialmente, pubblicamente. Non nel campus o cose del genere, ma uscivamo come qualsiasi altra coppia. Ha fatto conoscere Gonzalo e Isabel che si sono innamorati alla follia dopo il primo sguardo infuocato».

625 Ripensando al momento in cui Isabel e Gonzalo si erano guardati negli occhi, un sorriso genuino mi increspò le labbra, era sembrato che avessero atteso quel momento. Come se, inconsapevolmente, avessero atteso l'uno l'altra.

Le gambe di Aaron si spostarono, racchiudendomi ancora più a lui. O forse ero io che mi accoccolavo sempre più contro di lui. Non lo sapevo, ma non mi sarei lamentata
630 o allontanata.

«Ed ero innamorata anche io. Dopo un anno passato a fantasticare su qualcuno che non potevo avere, a sperarci, ero accecata dalla gioia di poterlo finalmente avere. Di definirlo mio».

Le sue dita si fermarono brevemente, come se stessero esitando sulla loro prossima
635 mossa. Poi ripresero e continuarono a massaggiarmi le spalle.

«Durò un paio di mesi. Poi sentii il primo mormorio, la prima orrenda e velenosa voce che oscurò tutta quella felicità. A quella, ne seguirono molte altre. I mormorii si trasformarono in fragorosi pettegolezzi, che si propagarono nei corridoi del campus. C'erano anche post su Facebook e discussioni su Twitter. Mai diretti a me, 640 ma su di me. Almeno all'inizio». Mi portai le ginocchia al petto e le abbracciai. «“La troia che si è fatta i suoi professori”, dicevano. “Ovvio che è la prima del suo anno. Ecco come ha passato fisica a pieni voti quando più di metà degli studenti è stata bocciata. Se l'è scopato, e finirà il college a forza di scopate”».

Sentii il sospiro di Aaron. Lo percepì sulla nuca. Le sue dita si irrigidirono e si 645 fermarono per un attimo.

«Era tutto così offensivo». La mia voce suonava diversa, vuota e amareggiata. E mi ricordava una Lina che non volevo ricordare. Né essere mai più. «Le voci su di me si sono trasformate velocemente in dita puntate e in foto disgustose in cui qualcuno aveva fotoshoppato la mia faccia su... cose veramente terribili».

650 Il massaggio di Aaron si trasformò in semplici e fuggevoli carezze della sua pelle sulla mia, che mi tranquillizzavano, mi spingevano a continuare, mi dicevano, “*sono qui. Ci sono io*”.

«Tutto è stato trasformato in un racconto spregevole, in cui io ero la donnaccia subdola che seduceva i professori per i voti. E tutto il mio impegno e le notti di studio furono cancellate solo perché... Non lo so. Ancora oggi non so il motivo. 655 Gelosia? Per farsi una risata? Ma so che se fossi stata uno dei miei compagni maschi e Daniel una professoressa, forse non sarei stata io a finire in quella situazione, ma la professoressa. *Lei* sarebbe stata accusata di essere una panterona, e lo studente avrebbe ricevuto qualche batti cinque. Invece io sono stata quasi perseguitata e

660 spinta ad abbandonare gli studi. Non volevo frequentare le lezioni. Non volevo uscire di casa. Vivevo ancora con i miei genitori perché da lì potevo raggiungere il campus in macchina, e non volevo nemmeno parlare con loro. Ho cancellato i miei profili su tutti i social. Mi sono chiusa in me stessa, allontanando tutti gli altri, perfino mia sorella e i pochi che mi erano rimasti amici». Mi concentrai sui cerchi rilassanti
665 che Aaron stava disegnando sulla mia pelle, piantandomi e radicandomi a lui e al presente. «Era troppo. Mi vergognavo. Mi sentivo indegna. Come se tutto ciò che avevo fatto non valesse nulla. Di conseguenza, quando i miei voti e il mio rendimento crollarono, la mia media andò a farsi benedire. Ma non me ne importava».

Un attimo di silenzio che parve prolungarsi troppo a lungo, mi fece rendere conto
670 che Aaron non aveva detto una parola. Sapevo che non mi avrebbe giudicata, ma mi chiesi che cosa pensasse. Se il modo in cui mi vedeva in quel momento, fosse cambiato.

«Lui che cosa ha fatto?», disse finalmente. La sua voce suonava roca, ruvida. «Che cos'ha fatto Daniel riguardo a tutto ciò che ti stavano facendo?»

675 «Beh, le cose iniziarono a mettersi un po' male per lui. Non c'era nessuna regola che gli impedisse di frequentare una sua ex studentessa. Ma tutto quello che stava succedendo, per lui era diventato troppo».

«Per *lui*?», ripeté con una nuova punta di irritazione nella voce.

«Sì. E così, ha troncato, ha detto che era troppo complicato e che le relazioni non
680 dovevano essere così difficili e incasinate».

Le dita di Aaron si fermarono, e non si mossero più. Rimasero semplicemente lì, sospese sulla mia pelle.

«Pensava che non avremmo dovuto intralciarci a vicenda rischiando di cadere, quindi quando è successo, non aveva senso stare insieme. E... penso avesse ragione.

685 Almeno credo».

Aaron non disse nulla. Non una parola lasciò le sue labbra, ma capii che c'era qualcosa che non andava. Lo percepivo nel modo in cui il suo respiro aveva accelerato, era diventato più profondo. E nel modo in cui le sue mani erano rimaste pietrificate sulle mie spalle.

690 «Spesso mi chiedo come sia riuscita a laurearmi, ma ce l'ho fatta. Ad un certo punto, dopo che ci siamo lasciati, mi sono risvegliata. Mi sono presentata agli esami e li ho passati. Poi, in qualche modo, ho fatto domanda per un master internazionale e sono partita per gli Stati Uniti».

Le mani di Aaron ripresero a muoversi. Molto delicatamente, ma le sentii lungo le mie spalle. Non come prima, ma almeno mi stava toccando ancora. E ne avevo bisogno, più di quanto volessi ammettere.

«Non stavo scappando da lui, sai? Tutti pensavano fosse così, ma non lo era. Daniel mi aveva fatto male al cuore, eppure non stavo fuggendo da quello. Era da tutto il resto. Tutti mi guardavano in maniera diversa. Come se fossi cambiata o fosse cambiato qualcosa nel modo in cui mi consideravano. Come se fossi stata a pezzi.

700 Piantata da Daniel, perseguitata, derisa. Tutti mormoravano, "Oh, poverina. Come farà a riprendersi da una cosa del genere?". Mi trattavano come se fossi a pezzi. Lo fanno tuttora. Ogni volta che tornavo a casa da sola, mi guardavano con compassione. Ogni volta che dicevo di essere ancora single, annuivano con un

705 sorriso triste». Scuotendo la testa, liberai tutta l'aria che avevo nei polmoni. «Lo odio,

Aaron». Sentivo l'emozione nella mia voce che mi strozzava le parole, perché lo odiavo davvero. «Per questo tornavo così di rado».

D'altra parte, odiavo anche temere che in parte forse fosse tutto vero. Perché altrimenti, non ero riuscita ad affidare il mio cuore a nessun'altro?

710 «Tutto quello che è successo mi ha ferita, mi ha lasciato una cicatrice, ma non mi ha spezzata». Inghiottii il groppo che avevo in gola, volevo credere alle mie stesse parole. «Non l'ha fatto».

Da dietro di me provenne un suono profondo, roco e sofferente. Prima che mi rendessi conto di che cosa stava accadendo, le braccia di Aaron mi circondarono le
715 spalle e mi strinse forte a sé. Contro il suo petto. Caldo e solido e sicuro e... mi sentii molto meno sola. Molto più completa di quanto non fossi stata attimi prima.

Aaron affondò la testa nell'incavo della mia spalla, e sentii l'impulso di confortarlo. E così lo feci.

«Non mi ha spezzata, Aaron», gli dissi con un sussurro, ma forse stavo assicurando
720 più me stessa. «Non posso esserlo».

«Non lo sei», disse sulla mia pelle. Stringendomi ancora più a sé. «E so che anche se qualcosa ti spezzasse — perché la vita è così, e nessuno è invincibile — rimetteresti insieme i pezzi e rimarresti la persona più luminosa che abbia mai visto».

Le mie mani si strinsero intorno alle braccia avvolte intorno alle mie spalle, che mi
725 tenevano contro il suo petto, quasi temesse che altrimenti mi sarei dissolta in fumo se non l'avesse fatto. E io mi aggrappai a lui altrettanto disperatamente. Come se ne valesse il mio prossimo respiro.

Restammo così per molto tempo. Poi lentamente, molto lentamente, i nostri corpi si rilassarono l'uno nell'altro. Si fusero insieme. Mi concentrai sul respiro di Aaron,

730 sulla sincerità di quel momento, sul battito del suo cuore contro la mia schiena, la
sua forza. Su tutto ciò che aveva continuato ad offrirmi senza riserve, come se non
fosse stato nulla. Come se fosse qualcosa che fosse pronto a dare e che io avessi il
diritto di prendere.

Nessuno di noi disse nulla mentre il tempo si dilatava, il nostro abbraccio si allentò
735 a poco a poco, finché non fummo vinti dal sonno.

Alla fine le mie palpebre si chiusero, ma prima che l'oscurità mi inghiottisse, mi
sembrò di sentire Aaron sussurrare: «Sei completa tra le mie braccia. Con te mi sento
a *casa*».

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