

THE COOK OF CASTAMAR

FERNANDO J. MÚÑEZ

Translated by Rahul Bery and Tim Gutteridge



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Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
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THE
COOK
OF
CASTAMAR

PART ONE

10 OCTOBER TO 19 OCTOBER 1720

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10 October 1720, morning

‘No pain lasts forever,’ she said, in an effort to convince herself that her suffering was temporary. ‘No joy is everlasting,’ she added. Perhaps the phrase had lost its power from so much repetition and now only expressed the disappointment she had experienced over the last few years. She felt like a rag doll coming apart at the seams, trying to mend her spirits at the end of each day. It was only thanks to a courage born of necessity and her own determined character that she had found the strength to survive. ‘Nobody can call me a coward,’ Clara told herself.

Completely hidden beneath a thick layer of hay, she avoided looking at the milky light that filtered through, concentrating instead on individual raindrops sliding down the stalks. Despite this, she occasionally glimpsed the immensity that lay beyond the cart that was taking her to Castamar. When this happened, she had to take deep breaths, because the mere idea of not being enclosed by the walls of a house set her heart pounding. On more than one occasion, such an attack had caused her to faint. How she hated her weakness! She felt vulnerable, as if all the ills of the world were about to fall upon her, and she was overcome by lethargy. This fear reminded her how torn she had felt when Señora Moncada had told her there was a position at Castamar. The burly supervisor of the hospital staff had approached her to inform her that Don Melquíades Elquiza, a good friend of hers and head butler at Castamar, was in need of an assistant cook.

'This could be an opportunity for you,' she had said.

Clara had felt compelled to accept but she was terrified at the same time, as it would mean stepping outside of the hospital where she both lived and worked. Just imagining herself on the streets of Madrid, crossing the Plaza Mayor as she used to do with her father, had brought her out in a cold sweat and left her feeling weak. Despite this, she had tried to find her own way to the Alcázar, but was overcome by panic almost as soon as she set foot outside the hospital and had to turn back.

Señora Moncada had been kind enough to speak to Señor Elquiza on Clara's behalf and to vouch for her culinary prowess. Their friendship went back a long way, to a time when Moncada had been in the service of the Count of Benavente and Señor Elquiza was already part of the Duke of Castamar's household. Thanks to her, Señor Elquiza had learned that Clara's love of cooking came from her family, and that her mother had been head cook for Cardinal Giulio Alberoni, a minister of King Felipe V.

Unfortunately, the prelate had fallen into disgrace and had returned to the Republic of Genoa, taking Clara's mother with him. Clara, who had risen to become her assistant, had been obliged to leave the service of the cardinal, who had only allowed the head cook to travel with him. Clara had lowered her expectations in the hope of finding a less exalted position and, in the meantime, had earned her living looking after the poor unfortunates at the Hospital of the Annunciation of Our Lady.

She felt profoundly sorry that her father, Doctor Armando Belmonte, had gone to such lengths to provide her and her sister with an education, only for it to come to this. But she could not blame him. Her father had behaved like the enlightened gentleman he was, until his tragic death on 14 December 1710. *All that education for nothing*, she lamented. Their governess, Francisca Barroso, had maintained an iron discipline over the girls' education from an early age. As a result, the two sisters had knowledge of such diverse subjects as needlework and

embroidery, etiquette, history and geography, Latin, Greek, mathematics, rhetoric and grammar, and modern languages such as French and English. They also received piano, singing and dancing lessons, which had cost their poor parents a pretty penny, and on top of it all, they were both compulsive readers. However, after the death of their father, their education had been of no use at all, and they had slid inexorably down the social scale. Instead, it was the mother's and the daughter's shared passion for cooking – a passion the father had always complained about – that became the pillar of the family's survival.

'My darling Cristina, it is not for nothing that we have a cook,' Clara's father used to remonstrate. 'What would our friends say if they knew that you spend all day in front of the stove with your eldest daughter when we have servants to spare?'

During the good years, Clara had read all manner of recipes, including translations of some Arabic and Sephardi volumes, many of which were censored in Spain. Among them were *A Book of Soups and Stews* by Ruperto de Nola and *A Treatise on the Art of Confectionery* by Miguel de Baeza. She had been in the habit of accompanying their cook, Señora Cano, to the market, where she learned to select the best cabbages and lettuces, chickpeas and lentils, tomatoes, fruit and rice. How she had enjoyed sorting through the chickpeas while they were soaking, picking out any bad ones. What pleasure she had taken when she was allowed to taste the broth, or the bitter chocolate obtained by her father, thanks to his connections at court. Once again, she wished she was at her mother's side, making sponges, biscuits, jams and preserves. She remembered how they had convinced her father to build a clay oven so they could expand their repertoire. At first he had refused, but eventually he had given way on the grounds that it would help make the servants' lives easier.

After receiving Clara's credentials from Señora Moncada, Señor Elquiza had accepted her for the position. For Clara,

Castamar represented the first rung on the ladder of her aspirations, a return to a real kitchen. Working in the household of the Duke of Castamar – who had been one of King Felipe V's most distinguished followers in the War of the Spanish Succession – represented a secure life in service. She had been informed the house was an unusual one in that, despite being one of the grandest in Spain, it employed only a third of the staff one might expect to find in such an establishment. Apparently, the master of the house, Don Diego, had shut himself away following the death of his wife, and his appearances at court were few and far between.

Before setting out for Castamar, Clara had written to her sister and mother. After sending her letters, Clara had had to wait while Pedro Ochando, who was in charge of the stables at Castamar, finished his tasks for the evening. He had loaded the cart with bales of hay at first light next day and was kind enough to collect her from the hospital coachyard so that she had no need to hide her fear of open spaces. Fortunately for her, it was raining.

'I prefer to travel at the back, if you don't mind,' she had told him. 'That way I can shelter under the hay.'

They travelled along the Móstoles road towards Boadilla in the pouring rain for more than three hours. Occasionally the cart hit a pothole, terrifying her with the possibility that the hay load would shift and expose her to the elements. But she was lucky. Before too long, and with her muscles aching from the ordeal, the cart rumbled to a halt and Señor Ochando, a man of few words, announced their arrival.

She thanked him and climbed down from the cart with her eyes closed. She shivered as the cold rain trickled down the embroidered collar of her dress. Then, waiting until the sound of the creaking wheels had faded into the distance, and with her heart in her mouth, she tied her scarf over her eyes. Peering through a slit so narrow she could barely see the ground beneath her feet and using a crook to guide her like a blind man, she

walked towards a small walled courtyard abutting the rear of the mansion. She kept her eyes on her own shoes and prayed the scarf would continue to conceal the rest of Castamar from view. She walked as quickly as she could, her pulse racing and her breath coming too fast as she felt her hands and feet start to tingle. As she passed through an archway into the courtyard, she barely registered that she had crossed paths with a serving girl who was stifling her laughter as she gathered some laundry from the line.

All of a sudden, she felt lost in the open space, unable to orient herself by dint of what little she could glimpse from beneath the scarf. She looked up, and on the other side of the courtyard, beneath an overhanging wooden roof, she spied a door. She didn't care that it appeared to be firmly shut. With her body shaking and her strength waning, she ran towards the door, begging the Lord to save her from falling headlong or fainting. Upon reaching the safety of the doorway, she removed the cloth from her eyes, rested her forehead against the solid wood, no longer thinking about the wide-open space she had just crossed, and knocked with all her might.

'What's up with you, girl?'

The voice came from somewhere behind her and had a tone of dry authority that made Clara's heart miss a beat. She turned around, struggling to maintain her composure. Her eyes met the severe countenance of a woman in her early fifties. Clara held the woman's gaze for no more than a second, just long enough to register her stony expression.

'I'm Clara Belmonte, the new assistant cook,' she stammered, holding out the reference signed by Señora Moncada and her own mother.

The woman slowly looked her up and down, and somewhat reluctantly accepted the piece of paper. To Clara, the moment seemed to last a lifetime; she was almost fainting from vertigo and was forced to lean surreptitiously against the wall. The other woman, seeing that Clara was on the verge of passing out, raised

her eyebrows and inspected her. It was as if she was peering into the very depths of her soul.

'Why are you so pale? You're not ill, are you?' she asked, before returning to her reading.

Clara shook her head. Her legs threatened to give way and she knew she could no longer sustain the illusion of normality. However, she also knew that if she revealed her inability to tolerate open spaces then she would lose the job before she had even started, so she clenched her teeth and took deep breaths.

'Señor Elquiza told me he'd be sending someone with experience. Aren't you rather young for all this?'

With a curtsy, Clara replied that she had learned from her mother, in the household of his eminence, Cardinal Alberoni. With a gesture of indifference, the woman returned the document to her. Then, with an economical movement, she took out her keys and opened the door.

'Come with me,' she ordered, and with a feeling of relief, Clara went inside.

As she walked along the bare white corridor, following in the woman's brisk footsteps, Clara began to regain her calm. The woman imperiously informed her that the door they had just passed through was always closed and the proper entrance was on the other side of the courtyard, opening directly into the kitchen. This was a relief, as Clara had no intention of venturing outside the house.

They came across three servants with loud voices; several maids who, at the mere sight of the woman, adjusted their uniforms and hurried away; two tired-looking boot boys; and the man who was responsible for supervising the kitchen supplies, Jacinto Suárez. At his side was Luís Fernández, who oversaw the pantry, the vegetable store, and the supplies of coal, firewood and candles. The woman haughtily greeted both men by their first names. A little further along the passageway, they met two lamplighters, who bowed their heads so low that their chins rested upon their chests.

'You'll be on probation until I decide otherwise, and if your work or your application are not to my liking, you'll be sent straight back to Madrid. You'll receive six reals a day, you'll be given breakfast, lunch and dinner, and you'll have one day's rest a week, which will usually be a Sunday. You will be free to attend mass. You'll sleep in the kitchen, in a small alcove with its own door,' she clarified, as two laundry maids passed by. She paid them no attention.

Clara nodded. If she'd been at court – and if she'd been a man – her salary would have been eleven reals a day, but although Castamar might be one of the grandest houses in Spain, it was not the royal palace. And she was not a man. Even so, she felt lucky; there were girls who scrubbed stairs for less than two reals a day. At least she'd be able to set a little aside for if her fortunes took a turn for the worse.

'I don't tolerate idleness or secret relationships among the staff, and absolutely no male visitors,' the housekeeper continued.

They continued down the corridor, with its elegant, coffered ceiling, until they arrived at a pair of cherrywood doors, beyond which lay the kitchen. Suddenly, another chambermaid appeared, carrying a silver tray. On it was a breakfast consisting of chicken consommé, milk and chocolate in separate jugs, buttered toast sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon, poached eggs, soft rolls and some bacon. Clara noticed the consommé had been over-seasoned, the eggs had been cooked for too long, and the rolls were not properly fired. She noted the absence of a footman to accompany the place setting, bread and food from the kitchen to the master's table. Only the bacon appeared to have been prepared correctly, finely sliced and fried in its own fat. But what drew her attention most was the presentation. Despite the refined porcelain and the elegant silver cutlery, which included an unusual four-pronged fork, she could see that it had not received the care one would expect in the household of a Spanish grandee. The separation between the different items of cutlery was haphazard, and worst of all, there

was a scandalous absence of even the slightest floral decoration; the white embroidered cloth hung over the edges of the tray; the baked goods, consommé, bacon and eggs – which should have been concealed under their respective silver domes to keep them warm – were, instead, in plain sight. One look from the housekeeper was enough to stop the maid in her tracks. She approached, carefully placed the coffee spoon at the correct distance from the breakfast set and rearranged the silver jugs.

‘And don’t let anything move, Elisa,’ she ordered. ‘You can go now.’

Clara understood that the housekeeper had a strong sense of etiquette and protocol, even if she was unaware of the sophisticated culinary presentation associated with the haute cuisine King Felipe had introduced to court circles.

‘Of course, Doña Ursula,’ Elisa replied, performing a curtsy with the heavy tray and waiting for them to enter the kitchen.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and bowed or curtsied. It was clear the housekeeper was in charge of preparing the duke’s food. At a gesture from her, the activity resumed, and Clara watched as two scullery maids continued to pluck capons for that day’s lunch. Somewhat distractedly, another maid seasoned two pullets, while in the background, a fat woman supervised them out of the corner of her eye while she prepared a mushroom sauce to accompany the meat.

Clara could not help concluding that the staff was small indeed for so prestigious a household as Castamar. It could do with at least three more kitchen maids, several additional footmen and boot boys, and another scullery maid or two to sweep and scrub, and to pluck poultry. However, according to Señora Moncada, the master lived alone on the estate with his brother, and while it was true that some of the finer details were lacking, four people were more than sufficient to cater for his personal needs.

Clara wondered how it was that a housekeeper had achieved such dominance. It was normal, in an aristocratic household, for

this person to have all the female staff under her supervision, from the chambermaids and housemaids to the scullery maids, laundry maids and seamstresses. However, this woman appeared to exercise the same degree of control over the male staff. It was more as if she were some kind of steward, charged with inspecting the premises, establishing prices and payments and managing the estate. The royal bureau – the body presided over by the head butler, which administered and managed the court – consisted of several high-ranking nobles in the service of the king and queen. At Castamar, of course, the bureau would consist only of people of humble birth. For the moment, its two visible members were Don Melquíades Elquiza, the head butler, and this imposing woman who stood before her and who she would soon learn was called Ursula Berenguer. She wondered at the nature of the relationship between the butler and the housekeeper.

‘There is only one week until the annual commemoration of our beloved Doña Alba, the master’s deceased wife,’ Doña Ursula told her, solemnly. ‘It’s very important for the duke. The event is attended by every aristocrat in Madrid, and by Their Majesties the King and Queen. We must do the occasion justice.’

Clara nodded and the housekeeper looked over to the far side of the kitchen.

‘Señora Escrivá,’ she said, sharply, ‘let me introduce your new assistant: Señorita Clara Belmonte. Inform her of her duties.’

The fat cook came over and Clara felt that she was scrutinizing her with her piggy eyes, as if she were a piece of meat. The housekeeper departed, leaving a tense silence in her wake. While the other women didn’t take their eyes off her, Clara took the opportunity to observe the kitchen more closely. Her mother had always told her that a kitchen’s appearance spoke volumes about the cook. After seeing the breakfast that was on its way to the master, she wasn’t surprised to observe that the stove was black with soot, the oven had not yet been cleaned, the utensils were all muddled up, the drain was blocked, and

the well cover was open. On the shelves, the spice caddies were smeared with grease, and it was impossible to tell on what basis they were organized. Next to them were the flour chests, from the bottom of which hung yellowish threads of lard. The high double windows overlooking the north courtyard were dirty, and on the work surface were remains of blood, wine, spices and entrails from earlier preparations, concealing the colour of the wood and telling her that, although it might have been cleaned daily, it had not been scrubbed with the necessary vigour.

'What a scrawny pigeon they've sent me,' said the head cook, casting her a pitying glance.

Clara started and took a step back. When she placed her foot on the slippery tiled floor, she felt something crunch beneath her boot. Señora Escrivá smiled as she observed Clara lifting her foot to reveal a squashed cockroach.

'You've already started to muck in, that's one less to worry about. It's impossible to get rid of them, however much we try. They're like a plague,' she said, and everyone present laughed. 'I'm Asunción Escrivá, the cook here at Castamar, and these two are María and Emilia, the scullery maids. Over there, preparing the poultry, is my help, Carmen del Castillo. And down there is Rosalía. She's as mad as a goose. The master took pity on her. She carries and fetches things.'

Clara looked down and discovered a fifth person beneath the table. Rosalía looked at her and greeted her with a sad smile. Then she held up her hand and showed her another cockroach.

'I like how they crunch,' she said, with some effort. Clara was smiling back when Señora Escrivá took the girl roughly by the arm.

'Start peeling those onions,' she ordered. 'Hurry up! You're here to work, not to daydream!'

The cook reminded Clara of a fat old sow, squealing in her sty. Any illusions she might have had of working under the orders of a great chef vanished in that instant. It was enough for her to look at Señora Escrivá's fingernails, grimy with food and soot,

to understand that there would be little to learn from her. It was clear the master of Castamar had given himself up to a routine of food presented without decorum and prepared without the necessary hygiene. No self-respecting noble household would have tolerated such neglect.

10 October 1720, midday

Men liked to be in charge of situations, but Ursula had learned the painful lesson that she must never again allow anyone to bend her to their will. And so the arrival of the new assistant cook, without her approval – indeed, without any warning before the appointment was made – had unleashed her fury. From time to time, Don Melquíades challenged Doña Ursula's dominion over the household but hers was the louder voice, as the butler was only too aware. If he were to confront her, he stood to lose far more than his job. It would have been better for everyone if he had departed some time ago, taking his dark secret with him. That would have left everything at Castamar under her careful supervision, running as smoothly as a meticulously adjusted pendulum clock.

Lost in these thoughts, Ursula made her way along the corridor, passing the stairs to the upper floors on her right, and coming to the door of the butler's office. She gave two light knocks, trying to hide the turmoil inside her. From the other side of the door, the deep voice of Don Melquíades invited her to enter. Ursula closed the door behind her. The butler was writing in one of his scarlet notebooks, a book that nobody would ever read. She was sure his prose was deplorable, sprinkled with learned words and phrases designed to give the impression that he was a highly educated man. He filled his diaries with all manner of details, striving to convey on the page the dedication

he brought to his life as a butler. A dedication which, in Ursula's opinion, had gradually been diluted over the years until he had become a servant to routine, lacking any ambition to improve. She waited until he raised his head from the book. A weighty silence followed, one of those that she found deeply irritating. Don Melquíades glanced up briefly, then continued to write as he spoke.

'Ah, it's you,' he said, laconically.

She ignored the disrespect and waited like a hunter in the dark, before humiliating him for his failed attempt to impose his authority.

'I have come to inform you that the new kitchen assistant has arrived,' she said. 'I hope she is suitably qualified and—'

'You only have to read her references, Doña Ursula,' he interrupted drily, without raising his head.

She fell silent again, and he raised one of his bushy eyebrows and looked her up and down, as if trying to make her feel uncomfortable. Ursula waited. She knew the game would end in her victory.

'Perhaps we should prepare one of the rooms in the east wing for the commemoration dinner,' she said, changing the subject.

He didn't reply, continuing to write instead. She told herself that the silence no doubt made him feel powerful, as if it was up to him to grant permission for such an action. Even so, she did not allow a sound to pass her lips, while he remained mute for a few more seconds.

'As you see fit, Doña Ursula,' Don Melquíades finally replied.

She allowed a moment to pass before striking the fatal blow. She approached the desk and scrutinized him as if he were an insect.

'Don Melquíades, would you do me the favour of putting down your pen for a moment and actually listening to me?' she asked, in a courteous tone.

'I apologize, Doña Ursula,' he replied immediately, as if he hadn't realized she was still there.

With a faint smile, Ursula came a little closer, making him seem smaller and more hunched. Then, smoothly, she let drop the hurtful words, the words she knew would inflict most damage on his pride, as a man and as a servant.

'Don Melquíades, you are the head butler of Castamar, please behave accordingly.'

The man blushed and stood up angrily.

'Especially in my presence,' she concluded.

Don Melquíades wobbled like a jelly that had just been turned onto a serving dish. She deliberately delayed saying anything more until he was about to speak.

'Or I will be forced to speak to his lordship about your little secret,' she cut in.

Don Melquíades, knowing he had no choice but to capitulate in the face of such a threat, assumed an air of dejection, while glaring at her with an offended expression in an attempt to maintain what was left of his dignity.

The corners of her lips turned up in a smile. It was the usual victory – one she had first inflicted on him many years ago and one which he needed to be reminded of from time to time, a victory over male power and over the repressive society that had once done her so much harm. Don Melquíades's little shows of insubordination had become less and less frequent, until one day, he had finally accepted that the big decisions at Castamar were not taken in his office but instead were delivered to him there as *faits accomplis*. Ursula turned to leave, as usual. However, when she reached the door, she decided the butler needed to show greater capitulation.

'There's no need to be so annoyed,' she added. 'We both know who really runs this house. We're like an unhappily married couple, keeping up appearances.'

Don Melquíades stroked his moustache. His face bore the expression of a defeated soul. Ursula turned again to leave, observing as she did how the head butler slumped back onto his pathetic throne.