

The Poetry of Secrets

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Chapter 1

The day Isabel followed a handsome stranger into an alleyway, her grandmother's words echoed in her head: *Your impulsivity will be the death of you.* But Isabel could not help herself. In these moments, it was as if an unseen physical force took over her body, compelling her to act and ignore the consequences.

She had been sitting on her favorite writing bench in the plaza mayor, the main town square, working on a poem, when an older couple strolled by her bench.

"Whatever could you be scribbling, my dear girl?" remarked the woman, nostrils swollen.

Isabel was glad she had dabbed rose water on her neck this morning, as the woman was very close and, unlike Isabel, she smelled foul. The woman leaned over to get a better view of Isabel's notebook, her giant linen headdress jutting in two points, looking like a horned animal ready to charge. "Why, those are words! Shouldn't you be at home, learning a new stitch?"

Isabel ground her top and bottom teeth together.

"What's our world coming to," said the woman's male companion, the corners of his lips dipping down, "when young ladies can read and write like grandees?"

This was not the first time someone had rudely commented on what Isabel was doing on that bench, but she could tolerate it no longer. "Well, *this* young lady thinks there's more to life than embroidery, gossiping, and chewing búcaro," Isabel blurted.

The handsome stranger darted past right then. Isabel threw her writing materials into her leather satchel and ran, leaving the couple standing there, mouths agape.

He looked older than her, perhaps eighteen or twenty. She had not seen him before, which was unusual, their village being so small. His shoulder-length dark hair was tied in a cord, and he wore hose and black leather boots under a belted green doublet.

She began a made-up conversation between them, based on the poem she had just penned.

Her: A lifetime without love is of no account.

Him: Love is the water of life.

Her: Drink it down with heart and soul.

She knew people didn't speak in that way. She simply liked imagining having someone in her life who was as passionate about love as she was. At sixteen, she was still unbetrothed, and despite her romantic notions, she relished her freedom. Dios help her if she were married to a proper Spanish gentleman. He'd never allow her to write. Maybe she wouldn't wed at all and would become a famous poet instead. Later this evening, a public poetry reading was being held in the Moorish quarter, and for the first time, Isabel thought she might be brave enough to stand up and actually recite one of her own works.

Just inside a narrow alley, the striking young man paused and turned halfway around. She caught a glimpse of his profile. Long lashes, skin smooth and uncovered by beard. He darted into a tannery and she thought about walking right into the store to get a good view of him. But she did not. Practicality outweighed impulsivity. She needed to get back. It was Friday evening and the sun was almost setting. Sighing, she gathered up the layers of her skirt and reversed direction over the cobblestones.

A religious procession approached from the west, blocking her way. Though these were common in Trujillo, Isabel never got used to them. She waited for the macabre scene to pass her by, her eyes on the ground so she wouldn't have to watch the leather scourges break the flesh on the backs of the penitents. The ends of the cords held wax balls laced with filings of tin and splinters of colored glass. It was all so barbaric.

When she could finally cross the street, she hurried to where the paved road changed to dirt just outside town. She purposely let her dress drag in the dust. The dirtier the better. Another five minutes' walk and she'd be home.