

Excerpt from Chapter One, *Isabela's Way*

Isabela cast her eyes to the back of the small but well-appointed room with its tall cupboards still stocked with the textiles, silk, gold and silver thread from which the de Castro Nunez family created their famous embroidery. Gabriel de Castro Nunez had journeyed to Germany, seeking to conduct his business in that new market. Isabela had assisted her mother, but now continued on her own. Until her father returned, it would be up to Isabela to keep the business alive. She had no brother, no uncle, no relatives at all in Abrantes.

Reaching for the delicately painted basket with its silk drawstring bag, a birthday gift from her mother, Isabela drew her chair into the light of the open door. How different the dry, sun-drenched way looked this morning. Last evening, the Rua Capitão Correia de Lacerda's cobbles had been deluged with rain, the red dirt from the surrounding fields ebbing away. Evening noises had been muffled by the soft plinking of raindrops on stone and dust. The scent of wet earth had replaced the stench of waste as rainwater washed the ruin of the day down the hill. Now the day was fair, and Isabela set to her task.

She outlined the border on the linen envelope with long satin stitches in the vibrant blue often used in depictions of Santa Isabela, her name saint. Carefully drawing out gold thread, she began to couch the blue, giving it dimension and elegance.

"Isabela de Castro Nunez!" shouted a guard at the top of road, mere steps from the castle gate. Isabela's hand froze, mid-stitch.

The songbirds, flitting among the blooming tilia trees, ceased their calls, as if alert to impending danger. A summoning by an official from town or castle never boded well for the new Christian. Only two weeks ago, the physician Abrao de Medelim had been detained, after months of tending to the plague-stricken of Abrantes, and after many days, was returned to his home. His gaunt visage and silence had terrified Isabela. There were whispered charges that Jews and New Christians were to blame for the sweeping deadly fever. Even as the supply of goods from new Christian merchants fed and clothed the townspeople, those same businesses were harassed and taxed unduly. But why summon Isabela?

David de Sousa appeared wordlessly in the doorway, blocking the stream of morning sunlight and breaking the frozen spell of panic that had struck the girl.

His presence steadied her as she carefully set aside her work and pulled a shawl from its hook .

“What is it?” Isabela whispered to her friend, her deep blue eyes pleading.

“I do not know,” said David. “I have heard nothing new or worrisome. But you must go. I will come with you.”

Casting a swift glance around the room, and seeing all in order, Isabela stepped across the threshold, and as always, kissed her fingertips and then touched them to the upper side of the doorframe. Crossing herself, she stepped into the brilliant morning. Turning to her left as her eyes adjusted to the light, she straightened her shoulders and faced the guard, the morning sun directly behind him, blinding her to his features.

He was not alone. A second figure stood to his right and a few steps behind him. Still squinting, Isabela made out the figure of a woman, tall and imposing, the hem of her cape rippling in the breeze.

“Hurry! I don’t have the day long to stand here waiting,” the soldier bellowed. Isabela made her way up the uneven cobblestones with David de Sousa at her side.

Fear radiated from the warming walls. Not a soul peered from a doorway or grated window. Even the distant din of hammering and workers’ shouts from the Igreja de São João Baptista, the magnificent church being rebuilt by King Filipe at the foot of the hill behind Isabela, seemed muted. Perhaps it was only the rush of blood from her pounding heart that masked the morning noises.

“Say as little as possible,” whispered David. “Let us try to understand who this strange woman is.”

Only steps away from the top of the road, Isabela halted, one stride ahead of David de Sousa and curtsied quickly, lifting her eyes only for a fleeting look at the woman before her. Taller than Isabela by a head, she appeared to be in middle age, though the skin of her plain face remained unlined. Her simple cloak of light wool did not entirely hide the fine silk brocade and deep orange dye of the dress underneath. Expertly tailored, the ensemble betokened the refinement of its wearer.

“You are Isabela de Castro Nunes?” the guard asked, no longer shouting, but still irritated, by the task at hand. “Who speaks for you?”

“I do,” said David at once. “David de Sousa. I am the magistrate’s assistant in this quarter. For what purpose do you seek this girl?”

“He asks on my behalf,” the woman interrupted. She stepped forward and with long fingers lifted Isabela’s chin so that she could gaze directly into her eyes. Isabela was held in the older woman’s deep brown stare for an uncomfortably long moment. “I am Dama Ana Martel Gerondi. I have come a great distance from my home in Catalan with instructions to care for the senhorita and see to her future.”

Dama Martel delivered this pronouncement in fluent Portugese with an accent that did not sound to Isabela like other Spaniards’. Instruction? Whose instructions? Questions flew to Isabela’s mouth like swallows to a belfry, but she recalled David de Sousa’s advice to say little