

Corridos of the Copper Coin

by April Galarza

Chapter 1

They say love makes you different. Iraseme took inventory of herself in the mirror on the door of her black wood armoire the morning after the party by the light of the sun streaming in between the curtains. She had slept in. The coffee should have been on the table a half an hour ago. If their servant Chela made it, her father, the venerable Don Federico Pasqual Espinoza, would stare at the cup and not drink it. *Café con leche* with a tiny bit of chocolate, sprinkled with cinnamon, was her specialty. Don Federico refused every cup unless it was made by her hand. As she looked at herself in her soft cotton underdress with its lace straps and neckline, she tried to see herself through Diego's eyes. She saw her scissor-thin legs, her hollow black eyes, and the paler hollows of her collarbone. She saw her ever-tangled waist deep brown hair. She looked up and down her figure, from her corn kernel nipples, to her tummy that pouched slightly because of her strongly arched back. Her teeth were closer to the color of bone instead of the pomade white of the ladies in fashion

magazines. She *felt* different—more aware of the feel of loose strands of hair on the back of her neck and a little light headed perhaps, but staring at herself in the mirror she could not discern any physical difference. She looked the way she always had. She prayed her father and brother would not find something she had missed. Quickly putting aside comfort in the interest of speed, she removed the flattened orange blossoms from her hair, carefully unraveled the ribbons from their braids, and undid the pins holding the coils atop her head. She took up her wooden brush and tore at her knotted hair. It seemed the longer it got the worse it tangled. Heaven forbid she fell asleep without braiding it. And that's exactly what she had done last night. She had come in late with smell of tamarind in her hair and the taste of Diego still lingering in her mouth. She had lain down on top of the covers and fell asleep with her hair still coiffed. The morning's consequence of tangled hair worried her. What if leaving your hair unbraided and loving outside your class were just the things you weren't suppose to do? What if life could get just as tangled if you strayed?

Most Saturday nights the summer of 1954 when Iraseme turned 15, the *dons* and *doñas* and their marriageable children from Tayahua and the neighboring towns, would arrive at the Espinoza hacienda for the most lavish parties in the state. The mariachi band would warm up the instruments. Silver lids would be lifted to reveal steaming rice; *frijoles pintos*; spicy red mole sauce over chicken; enchiladas dripping in cheese; *sopez* piled high with brightly colored peppers; green guacamole mashed with red tomato and *tostadas* burned and crisped at the edges for scooping it.

They'd arrive on dusty roads in sputtering automobiles, driven by sun-browned Indian servants wearing starched white shirts and caps. In the case of the poorer rich they arrived in their good Sunday shoes. Their feet pinching after the long walk, they would brush the dust from off their shoes and slip into the crowd pouring into the hacienda, praying a quick Hail Mary that no one saw their mode of travel.

The east wall of the courtyard overlooked the rolling hills and fields that as far as the eye could see belonged to the great Don Federico. All of the windows in that wall would have their shutters flung wide open, and would be hung with garlands. Across the open ceiling of sky from the east wall to the west wall, and from the north wall to the south wall, crisscrossing over the giant pink marble fountain in the center draped long strings of *papel picado*. Delicately cut images of church bells, flowers and ladies dancing on white, baby blue and pale pink paper would gently waft in the wind. Plum colored sangria, rosy *agua de Jamaica* and luminous moon-colored *horchata* would sparkle in glasses from one side of the courtyard to the other—each table dotted with numerous glasses that shimmered like candles in the glow of sunset.

At the beginning of the night the men and women would dance with rigid backs and wide circles of fluid motion. The Mexican polka would take them step-one-two-three, one-two-three, and so on. The spinning air would cause the flouncy crinoline skirts to puff up around the women like flower petals. Her right hand would be placed in his left, his right hand settled on the small of her back and each couple would circle around and around like individual gears in a much greater machine.

By the end of night the women's vibrancy would dwindle--their glasses sloshed about in their hands. They'd begin to droop and dangle from the men's arms, their limbs limp and tingling. They would be gently led to the tables at the edges of the long courtyard, where candles flickered and greasy foods would ease their stomachs.

While the perfumed women of Tayahua hung over the tables, their husbands, and *novios* would whisk shot after consecutive shot of sugarcane tequila in quick fiery gulps in order to obtain just enough courage to speak. Hands wildly waving in the air or fists pounding on the bar, their unrequited emotions leaked out in the form of slurred stories about love

affairs, gambling debts--all their regrets, doubts and dreams that otherwise might never be spoken of. Someone would shout "*Aye, Dios eterno!*" and the band would cease pumping polkas and the music would die down into the mournful weeping of *baladas* and *boleros*. The couples left dancing would cling to each other in the middle of the dance floor—clinging and swaying. These were the couples that these songs were about *amores por vida, amores hasta la muerte*.

Iraseme stood in front of where the band was playing. It was the end of another long night and her father had bid her to sing for their guests. She looked around the dark room over the seeping faces of her townsmen, and the guitarist brought his fingers down the first four of the strings and played the mournful beginning of a ballad. She waited in her stunningly beautiful (and expensive) French Couture dress. The bodice was far lower cut than she was comfortable with but the way the knee length silk skirt, and tulle lining swished when she moved and the hand-embroidered rose on the right breast delighted her. The fabric was the color of habenero peppers and it made her skin look pale in comparison. She rolled her bare shoulders back—the dress was practically strapless with only two thin ribbons holding it up—shaking her neck, causing the polished orange coral beads on her necklace to rattle. Her hair was curled, wrapped, braided, woven with a thin white lace and piled on top of her head with fresh orange blossoms. The red leather heeled sandals with their delicate ankle straps that she had taken with such eagerness from her father at her quinceañera (only two Saturdays ago), now dug into her heels. She could barely walk without wincing and they gave her an extra height she was unaccustomed to. In the back of her mind she was aware of the weighty expectations that outfits like this implied, but she did her best not think about them. Just enjoy yourself, she tried to tell her shaky limbs, marriage and all such things will sort themselves out in due time. She was expected to sparkle and, in this at least, she did not disappoint.

The handsome *indio* man who worked for her father was watching her from across the room. *Diego is his name* she thought. She knew who he was of course. In a tiny town like Tayahua it was impossible not to. He was the stranger from the south her father had hired as a hand to look after the horses and do odd jobs around the ranch. Apparently, Chela had outdone herself as usual acting far beyond her role as nursemaid and head cook for the Espinoza household and taken on the responsibilities of *maître d'* as well. It seemed she had cajoled the young man into assisting her with the party this evening. In a starched white shirt with an open collar and tiny white buttons he had been employed to wait on the guests. He poured water in the glasses. The ice clinked together in the pitcher. She saw Diego make incremental movement until around the table until he could stare at her freely. She felt his eyes on her and it made her feel ostentatious. When her leg moved under her dress as she began to tap her foot in time with the guitar she was aware of the way the fabric moved over her skin because she knew he had most likely noticed her bare ankle knee, accidentally exposed. The flesh behind her ears became inflamed with heat and a deep blush rose in her cheeks.

When she started to sing, Diego became dangerously distracted by her voice. Iraseme clasped her hands to her chest—ignoring the burning of her ears and cheek bones—and did her best to remember the lyrics without letting too much treble into her voice. The song she sang was that of loss, of a man who loved a woman who did not return his love. He could not live without her and so killed himself. She discovered his death and finally understanding the depth of his love, mourned him for the rest of her life unable to love again.

Although she had often seen the young man working she hadn't paid him much mind. Suddenly, he was all she could think about. His gaze awakened something inside her that until now had lain dormant. It was the way his dark brown muscles, contrasted with his clean

white shirt, turned in the candlelight. It was the way his eyes, blacker than ink seemed to stare past her bodily self and straight into her soul. In that moment when she was singing, the moment he bent to pour the water, he caught her eyes in his and she felt arms around her although none were there. She felt the warmth of skin touching skin and heard and felt a heartbeat pressed against her chest.

Throughout the song he continued to watch her, and he must have been terribly affected by her singing because the water he was pouring missed *Señorita* Sanchez's glass completely and poured into her lap. She leapt up screeching like a wild cat.

"*Bruto! Que haces?*" she exclaimed, jabbing her fan in his direction.

There was a large wet spot on the girl's blue skirt, and ice cubes clattered to the floor from between her knees. She struck him with the fan on his face. But even when the lace and wood hit his cheek his eyes remained on Iraseme. He was too slow to apologize and stood dumfounded. She struck him again this time on the crown of his head. The men who had been courting the blue skirted *señorita* stood up from their seats and rolled up their sleeves looking from the wet girl back to Diego—still dreaming—and back again.

"Has he insulted you, *niñita?*" They asked, "Shall I take out my pistol and shoot him, my flower?"

"What has the *mandigo indio* done to you?"

She squealed and waved her fan about in the air this way and that, and one of the men taking it as a signal shoved Diego hard in the shoulder and he was awakened from his reverie at last. Like rosters they puffed up their chests and shoved Diego all the rougher wanting to impress the pretty little chick. They shoved and strutted and pushed until Diego was at the back door leading out of the enclosed courtyard and then the boldest punched him in the jaw so that Diego was thrown backward into the yard behind the house.

The fist smashed against his cheek, and even from where she was standing,

Iraseme could see the knuckles indent into the skin and the look of shock on the young man's face, who until that very second had not taken his eyes off her. She imagined the crunching sound of the impact—she couldn't hear anything over the band. But then the music stopped, everyone turned to face the scuffle and for a moment there was silence. Then the door swung shut, the men dusted off their hands and swarmed around the *escandalosa* Rebecca Sanchez, each insulting Diego to her worse than the one before him. Finally, the music started again and Iraseme resumed her song. Her lips kept singing without faltering, her clear voice rising in harmony with the guitar, but her eyes were locked on the back door where Diego had disappeared.

As soon as the song was over, she excused her way to the big vat of sangria adjacent to the bar. Chunks of fresh apples, grapes, peach and mango floated like little boats. She tipped the ladle into her cup. She made a quick check to see what her brother and father were doing. They sat at the bar with the other men from the town knocking back shots.

"That was beautiful," Don Federico said to Bartolome, "Sometimes when I hear your sister sing, I think it's her mother standing there." He had had several glasses of his favorite *mezcal anejo* which meant he had begun a perilous journey into his memories—especially those of Maricela Elena Medina, his wife who had died when Iraseme was three. Iraseme remembered her mother and her clear voice singing to her when she was a child. Her hair had smelled like jamaica flowers. In the dim light and the mezcal haze perhaps she did indeed resemble her mother. Her father and brother sighed deeply and turned to the bar slamming their empty glasses on the counter to signal the bar tender for another round. When they had turned their backs to her, Iraseme seized the opportunity and slipped out the same door the young man had previously toppled through.

Diego was sitting on the stump Chela used as a chopping block rubbing his sore jaw

surreptitiously with the palm of one hand.

“Oh there you are,” Iraseme said running to him. Diego stopped what he was doing and sat up a bit straighter. “Are you all right?” She continued while he gritted his teeth. “Those boys infuriate me! They think they are so macho, but I remember when they all needed their nursemaids to open their flies for them so they could take out their little things to pee!”

She was furious and her anger flushed her cheeks. Her lips pouted and her eyes watered, sparkling with her rage. Diego continued to beam at her, unaffected.

“Really I’m fine.” He said, “Don’t you worry those *barbaros* will get what they deserve! I’ll show them.” He stood up from the stump making as if he was going to go back inside but he must have been nauseous because he fell back onto the stump, sore jaw in hand.

“Oh!” Iraseme said “You’re hurt. I should get Chela,” but he grabbed her arm lightly.

“No please don’t get Chela, just...just stay here with me until my head stops spinning.” She fidgeted wanting to do more. She handed him the cup of sangria. He alternated between sipping it and pressing the cool glass to his jaw. He took a deep breath and after a moment in which Iraseme was sure he was carefully composing his words, he said, “You sing so beautifully, so passionately. The slight vibrato that adorns your voice makes me think that the sweet music must have rushed past your lungs and out your throat having only recently escaped the chambers of your heart.”

“Thanks,” she said, the anger in her voice fully dissipated leaving it sounding small and deflated. “I practice often.” What a funny romantic boy, she thought as she smiled so wide it hurt and stared into his deep brown eyes. He had thick long lashes that could have been a girl’s. This feature thrilled her. She imagined him batting his eyelashes at her.

“Please excuse my boldness, but I have to confess I’ve watched you practice playing guitar in the garden. You look like an angel with her harp under your halo of roses.”

Her face was burning as if she had spent all day in the sun without a hat. “It’s alright” she said, “I don’t mind if you watch.” What she didn’t tell him was that she was equally guilty. She had spent long moments peeking out from between her bedroom curtains watching him stack bales of straw in the back of the pickup truck. He had done the work shirtless. Sweat had glistened on his muscles.

He took another sip of the sangria. After a while the sickness must have subsided because he swallowed the last sip with a coughing gulp, brushed off his shirt, straightened his collar and then stood up, “Would you like to go for a walk, *Señorita*?” He asked offering her his arm. She grinned and took it.

“Why thank you, *Señor*, I would love to walk with you,” and they both giggled at the mock formality.

Iraseme could hardly fathom what was happening. She had been warned about the nature of men by Chela time and time again. “Men are dogs,” Chela always said, “There isn’t one exception as far as I’ve seen in all my years—and you know how long that is!” But it felt so right. Her hand fit perfectly in Diego’s larger one. Their forearms brushed against each other and the startling difference of their complexions, his as dark as coffee beans and hers as pale as the white *papel picado* dangling over the courtyard delighted her. He led the way, through the garden behind the house where Chela grew *chiles* and tomatoes on vine and other such vegetables, past the flower garden with its tall hedges, and through the break in the tall hedge that marked the boundary of the garden and the rest of the world under the lattice work arch blooming over with orange blossoms, and up the large hill just beyond. Hand in hand they climbed. There was a light perfume of sour tamarind in the air and the charcoal smell of burnt goat meat for tacos. The sounds of the party followed them up the hill, chatter and laughter and the wistful whining of guitars. Up on the hill with Diego’s back

against the trunk of the tamarind tree the couple teetered on the edge of their first embrace. Above them the trees branches twisted into “Ys” dividing into bursts of orange and peach set against sharp green leaves.

Diego leaned against the tree trunk and put his arms out. Taking the silent symbol Iraseme stepped forward. She resisted going any further at first. He put his arms round her and tried to pull her closer but she placed her palms on his chest and with the slightest pressure possible, held him back.

“Don’t you want to be with me, Iraseme?” Diego asked, and hearing her name from his lips collapsed her last modicum of hesitancy. She tilted her head back in order to let him kiss her, reaching her arms up to lace her fingers behind his neck, standing on tip-toe leaning into his body. He bent down and their lips touched and sank into each other. Her skin tingled from her elbows, bumping up against his bare arms, to her toes, which tingled confined in the straps of her high-heeled sandals, to her womanly parts below her waist and her nipples, which brushed lightly against his chest. She felt the joints of her body becoming soft and malleable, unwilling to support her. Her body slipped into place, the curve of her breasts fitting perfectly into the concave of his chest. He reached his arms around her back and pulled her close to him.

Down below at the bottom of the hill the guitars whined and the men gave great *gritos de dolor* along with the weeping music. The songs told the tales of men abandoned to tequila bottles by sweet smelling women with flowers in their hair and of love that might have happened but never came to be.

They stayed under the tree for an hour or so but it felt like the entire night had passed in a single moment. Just as the last of the partygoers were leaving, they parted and Iraseme turned to head down the hill home but Diego caught her arm. “Can I see you again?” he said. The setting moon had settled just behind the tamarind tree filling its branches and

surrounding Diego with a soft glow.

“Next Saturday at the party, find a way to meet me here,” She answered finally understanding the expression; *my heart is in my throat*. And then she hurried down the hill, her heels sinking in the soft earth.

Her father and brother had been sitting at the silent morning table for almost an hour waiting for her. Her brother leafed through a newspaper and her father sat stoic. Chela followed her into the dining room carrying the breakfast tray. This was another problem caused by coming to a meal late. No one could eat until everyone was at the table, Don Federico’s rules.

“*Buenos Dias*, morning flower. Slept in a bit after all of last night’s activities eh, *niñita?*” Don Federico said when she entered the breakfast room finally carrying the tray of *café con leche*.

“*Buenas*, Papi,” She said quietly, setting down first Don Federico’s cup then her brother’s.

“Tell me *chiquia*, who was the lucky young man you snuck off with last night? Don Heracio’s son, Marcus? Or maybe Luis Daniel?”

Iraseme blushed and tried to look down modestly at her feet as she took her seat at the table.

“So my flower wants to keep her love interest a secret, eh?” Iraseme tried to keep her eyes off her father’s receding hairline. She knew it made him feel self-conscious but she couldn’t look away. Her father was looking older and older every day. It worried her to see it. No matter how much he combed it, his hair got thinner and thinner until he was wearing his wide brimmed *sombrero* from the moment he woke up to the second he went to sleep. Sometimes he would forget it was on his head and would fall asleep with it falling over his

face like a *campesino*. He worked like the country folk too. He was up at dawn each day overseeing personally the care of the animals in addition to the financial transaction. He worked too hard for a man of seventy years. It was high time he retired and let Bartolome take on more responsibility. But he wouldn't take the advice of Iraseme, she was still his baby girl no matter how old she got. Her birth had been a surprise when he and his wife were well into their 40s. Bartolome was 10 by then and they thought they were done child bearing. Her father did his best to look young and fit. His shirt was always clean and pressed and his face always shaved smooth, but she wasn't fooled. He looked brightly up at her from under the *sombrero* as she tentatively twisted her fork around in her eggs, not eating a bite.

"I suppose if your mother were here, it would be her role to tell you these things, *mija*, but seeing as she isn't I suppose I will have to tell you. I know you didn't slip off to walk under the moon by yourself last night...one of the *jovenes* is wooing you. You are fifteen now and that, my dear, is old enough to know about men."

At this point the speech he must have been planning all morning failed him. He cleared his throat and took a long sip of the coffee. Chela moved in and out between the seats, setting down platters of steaming food and taking empty dishes away.

"Perhaps it was Ignacio Delajolla; I've seen the way he looks at you."

He winked pleasantly at Iraseme but it came off as a squint as if the sun was in his eyes, belying his true purpose. Iraseme stared down into her breakfast, shifting the eggs and *chorizo* from one side of her plate to the other. She tried to think of herself in the arms of Ignacio, or Nacho as everyone called him since childhood. Nacho's cheeks were red and covered in the scars of adolescent blemishes. They puffed up too, like his mouth was full of food, and his voice squeaked when he spoke making everything he said sound like a question. His large belly rolled out before him wherever he walked escaping the waistband of his pants. Diego's shape, on the other hand, fit easily into his clothes. His coarse white

cotton shirt shifted around his torso. It rippled in a breeze this way and that when he was embracing her under the tamarind tree. She bet *his* underarms were never stained with yellow puddles.

All of a sudden Bartolome peaked up from the newspaper he was reading. As if he knew what scandalous thoughts she was thinking he looked coldly at her from across the table.

“What our father is trying to say, *hermanita*, is that it is high time you were married and we want to be sure that you are married to the right kind of man. Marcus Heracio may be handsome but you need to think of your future and of our family name. Think prudently, Iraseme, you must make an adventitious match. It is your job to further this family’s interests with your marriage. A connection with the Delajolla family would be most satisfactory.”

And just like that the rosy bubble her heart had been floating in burst. Diego was no Ignacio Delajolla or even a Marcus Heracio. He was *Indio*. Now her heart felt like a stone sinking in gelatin. What would her father say if he knew the truth? Rebecca Sanchez’s had once told Iraseme about a girl her second cousin had said she knew. The girl had fallen in love with a mulato boy who swept up at the grocery and when her parents found out, they had shipped her off to a convent. Just like Ophelia in Hamlet! “This is 1952 not 1552!” she had exclaimed to Rebecca.

The older girl had sighed loudly and said, “Well she shouldn’t have fallen for a *mayate*.” Iraseme had covered her mouth as if she had said the foul word herself and vowed to never ever fall in love with such a man. She had kept that promise well, hadn’t she?

Her father responded to Bartolome’s statement in a placating voice, “But of course we want you to be happy. Surly one of the available boys will be to your liking. I was talking to Senor Heracio the other day. Did you know Marcus is studying to be a lawyer?”

Bartolome snorted a laugh as if he knew something disgraceful about Marcus. He had such sharp features; his smile was almost a snarl. His chin and ears came to points. He had spent much of his youth in Spanish boarding schools and as of such proudly pronounced his Ys as Js and often spoke through his nose. “*Jo hablo Castellano,*” he would say proudly when his pronunciations were questioned. He had the airs and manners of Europeans. He wore soft silk suits and cologne that smelled like soapy musk. He wore it liberally on his neck and chin and when he kissed his sister in greeting, the odor caused her cough. Bartolome sat at the opposite end of the long table in the seat formally occupied by their mother. Iraseme sat between them in one of the many chairs alongside the table, relegated to the position of the child in her brother’s and father’s eyes.

“Ignacio is due to inherit all of his father’s land holdings and a fortune in stocks and bonds one day.” He added as if it trumped studying to be a lawyer.

“Wouldn’t Ignacio be an excellent match, *Señor?*” Bartolome said directing his gaze to his father who was nodding empathetically. He continued to speak before Don Federico could reply. “I myself am waiting for Iraseme to be settled in before I take a wife of my own. Nothing would make me happier than to see you wed, *niñita.*”

Iraseme cringed. She took a tortilla from the warmer, rolled it in her palm and nibbled on the edges to avoid having to speak. Bartolome looked at her waiting for her to respond. She chewed vigorously and gestured toward her mouth.

“So, who is the lucky young man?” Don Federico asked smiling much too wide.

Iraseme swallowed hard. “Ignacio,” She said quickly and softly into her tortilla. “May I be excused now?” She was blushing quite red and the sight of this turned Don Federico’s false smile into a real one.

“Of course *niñita*, we’ll finish this discussion later.” Iraseme rushed out of the breakfast room holding her breath until she closed the door of her bedroom, lay down on the bed and

buried her face into her pillow and cried until she could cry no more.

Every Saturday night that summer as soon as they were able; as soon as all the couples had risen and were hop-stepping to the polka, as soon as the guests were lost in revelries, Diego and Iraseme would slip out, leaving the ice in the water pitcher to melt, out the courtyard door to walk under the moon. Although aiding the young couple was not his intention, Nacho also left the parties early. Consequently, it was he and he alone who noticed there was something between them. Shortly after the couple would slink off into the night he would see their shadows up on the hill, their bodies near to one another under the tamarind tree, he would lean against the kitchen wall and suck in two or three cigarettes watching the silhouettes of the lovers get closer and closer. But for a reason unknown to him—perhaps the sound of Iraseme’s laughter that he treasured so much, and that he couldn’t stand the thought of turning into tears—he kept their secret.