

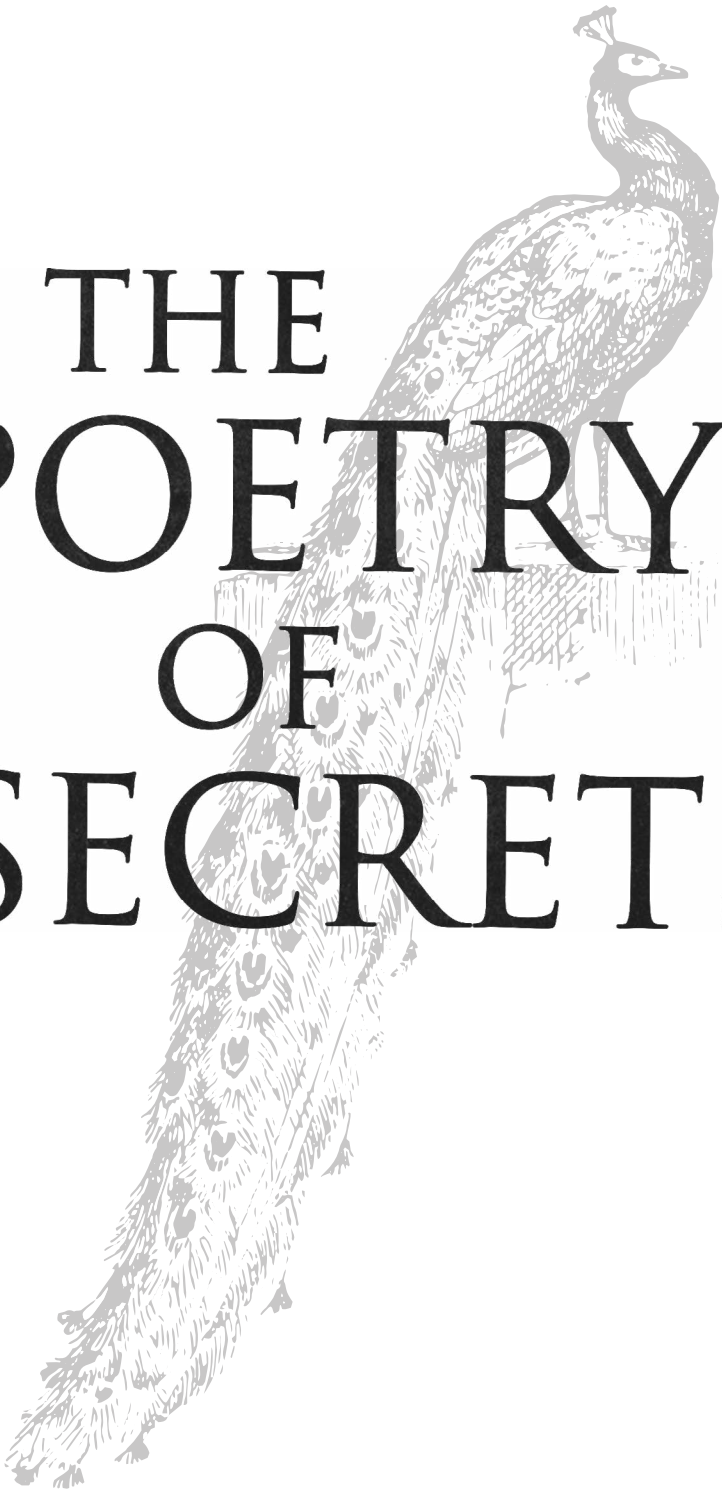
THE
POETRY
OF
SECRETS

A forbidden love. A hidden faith.
A life in the shadows has never
been so dangerous.

CAMBRIA GORDON



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OF
SECRETS





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Cambria Gordon



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For Howard



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Trujillo, Kingdom of Castile, Spain

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 processional 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.

At the mouth of a narrow, winding alley, Diego smelled the scent of roses behind him. He paused, wanting to see where it came from, but his father's voice buzzed in his brain like a trapped fly. "It's time you learned the family business!"

Family business, *mi culo*, he thought. My arse. As the son of Count Altamirano, Diego must learn how to recognize the proper forks for fish and meat, play the lute, and become adept at courtly flirtations.

There was no part of that life he wanted to lead.

His father had sent word to Diego at University of Coimbra in Portugal, where he was in his second year. Enough frivolous pursuits in art and philosophy. It was time to do his duty for the Crown and act the part of the noble title he was to inherit. Diego supposed he should be grateful for the education he had been afforded so far. Unlike other sons of aristocrats, he did not have to become a page and train in a royal household. His parents enrolled him in grammar school to learn Latin, and then later, when he asked, allowed him to attend college. But there was an urgency in his father's latest letter, and Diego had been unable to refuse him. When the family horse and carriage had shown up to fetch him at his leased house near campus, he was resigned.

Upon arriving home, he and his father had argued.

"Why now?" Diego asked.

"Our family is part of the Order of Chivalry. Whether you desire it or not, you will inherit my title."

"But I want to be a painter, you know that."

"Stop with that nonsense," said the count. "If you

must have art in your life, then become a patron and buy some devotionals to adorn your walls.”

“I want to be of use to society, Father.”

“Then help me with tax and rent collection.”

Diego had acquiesced, as he always did.

Thus he found himself today, trudging through the streets and alleyways of Trujillo, meeting all the tenants on the Altamirano estate. He stood at the entrance to a tannery, the putrid smell of grimy animal skins soaking in urine nearly making him back out. At this very moment, his own classmates, dressed in short cassocks and square caps, were probably reading philosophy. Or perhaps even studying the techniques of the painter Verrocchio and his young apprentice Leonardo da Vinci. Diego’s favorite professor was likely gesticulating in that comical way he had, with one elbow in the air. He had recommended Diego for an artist guild in Lisbon earlier this year, but Diego had not even bothered asking his father. Sons of highborns didn’t join guilds.

A customer buying a horse saddle exited and the tanner turned his attention to Diego. Just in time. Thinking about philosophy and famous paintings had made Diego want to toss his dagger at something and shout obscenities. He needed to act the part of a count-in-training. Let the cursed tax collection begin.

Seville, region of Andalucía, Spain

Fray Tomás Torquemada blew out the candle and lay down on his wooden board. His coarse pants and tunic irritated his skin, but this was how he preferred it. Pain was purification. The only way to salvation. Sleep would not come easy to him this evening. Tomorrow was the first day of the Order of the Inquisition and he would be riding from the capital to spread the gospel to those Godforsaken, uncivilized villages all over the country. A vein in his neck pulsed with anticipation. Maybe he should wash, a ritual cleansing, to calm down? No, that's what the dirty Jews did before the Sabbath. A lot of good it did them. They could never wash off the impurities. The filth was under their skin. Even worse than the Jews were the conversos, heretics the lot of them.

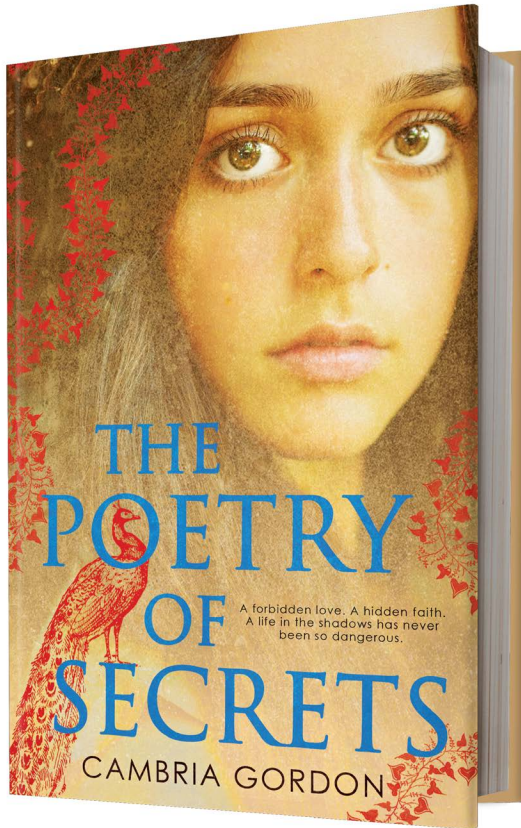
He rolled onto his side, the hard surface digging into his shoulder. Torquemada had not always been his surname. But it was apt. It meant twist and burn. How fitting that he would be the one making the converso sinners writhe in the flames of the stake. Who better to ferret out the false Christians than someone who descended from Jews himself? He must point his finger the hardest so it would never be turned on him. He sat up and spat for good measure into his chamber pot. Those once-Jewish converso swine belonged where he voided his own waters each morning.

Finally, his queen had understood! All those years of listening to her foolish childhood confessions had paid off. She and that weak husband of hers, King Ferdinand, had seen the light

*of reason. He, Tomás, would get to fulfill his lifelong dream of uniting Spain under one Christian God. Sin was the only reason his country had been divided. The sin of tainted blood running through the veins of conversos, sullyng good Christians by intermarrying and breeding with them. These impostors were liars, converting and being baptized in public, but Judaizing in private, lighting candles on Fridays and eating all that horrid food fried in oil. Not to mention cutting off a piece of skin on the male sex organ. It was unholy, altering the body God chose for you. Eliminating them once and for all was the key to redemption. He would lead the charge of the *limpieza*, the cleaning of the country, and personally see that the punishment equaled the crime. He whispered the words of Saint Vicente Ferrer. Per quae peccat quis, per haec et torquetur. We are tortured for our sins.*

He had never felt this assured. He was a hunter. And he would not quit until all his prey was annihilated.

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