



Calligraphy of the Witch

Alicia Gaspar de Alba

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Born of a Spaniard and a mixed-race woman, young Concepcion Benavidez was apprenticed as a scribe to a convent. At nineteen, she escapes and is captured in the siege of Vera Cruz in 1683. She unexpectedly becomes the property of the Dutch pirate Laurens-Cornille de Graffe, who rapes her repeatedly on the long, deadly journey to the Massachusetts Bay Colony where he will sell his cargo. Realizing the young mestiza has fine penmanship, the pirate promptly sells her when they reach the cold New England coast.

Concepcion is thrust into a strange world where she doesn't understand the language or the customs. Bought by a prominent Puritan, Merchant Greenwood, to tend to his old father-in-law and his chicken farm, the girl from New Spain is regarded with suspicion. She is considered a papist half-breed who speaks the language of the devil and practices an ungodly religion. Greenwood immediately forbids her to speak her native tongue, and he changes her name to Thankful Seagraves.

The merchant's barren wife discovers that the girl is pregnant with the pirate's child. And she covets the baby. In the following years, the two women spar for the child's love and affection. But when several women in Salem Village, including Concepcion's friend Tituba Indian, are imprisoned for witchcraft, it's not long before people and even her own daughter start whispering about Concepcion. After all, doesn't she keep a cat for a familiar and burn letters for the dead in the woods? Doesn't she appear lasciviously in men's dreams? How else could she have coerced the old man to marry and free her?

This riveting historical novel combines the horror of the Salem witch trials with the philosophy and poetry of the nun and writer known as the first feminist of the Americas, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. Meticulously researched and elegantly written, this novel takes a mesmerizing look at women in the New World in the 17th century and the stubborn men who accuse them for no reason.

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