

Calligraphy
of the Witch

ALICIA GASPAR DE ALBA



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For my goddaughters,
Bianca Fernanda and Yazmín Sylvia,
and for my moonchild,
Luzía Etienne

Also by Alicia Gaspar de Alba

Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders

La Llorona on the Longfellow Bridge: Poetry y otras movidas

The Mystery of Survival and Other Stories

Sangre en el desierto: Las muertas de Juárez

Sor Juana's Second Dream

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How the night changes from one country to another.

—Maryse Condé, I, *Tituba: Black Witch of Salem*

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.

—Anne Sexton, “Her Kind”

I am my own hangman
I am my own prison
The punishment and the punisher
Are one and the same thing.

—Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Romance* 48

PROLOGUE

The Pledge



Hanna Jeremiah

(ROXBURY, 1704)

How do I tell my children that I am the daughter of a pirate and a papist? Is that a necessary thing for them to know? I doubt it. Just as I doubt the wisdom of visiting Grandpa Tobias' decrepit little house in Roxbury, looking for some ill-begotten truth that Mama Becca made me promise, on her deathbed, to find. And yet, here I am, honoring my pledge to the only woman I ever wanted as a mother.

"The commandments, Hanna!" Mama Becca gripped my arm with an uncanny strength for one too weak to raise her head for a sip of water. "I am taking two broken commandments to my grave. Don't let me die a liar, as well."

"You've broken no commandments. You're the saintliest woman I know."

"She keeps appearing to me in my dreams, reminding me of what I promised her. Please, Hanna. Do what I ask."

"I don't even remember Thankful Seagraves," I lied, stroking Mama Becca's clammy forehead. "Why should she matter so much to you now?"

"I swore upon your life that I would tell you the truth. That I would give you the letters that Thankful Seagraves left for you to read. After . . . after she disappeared, we found a trunk in Grandpa's house. It was locked, but it was the only thing left. Maybe she left the letters in there. I don't know if anybody's taken it, or if it's survived after all these years, but promise me you'll go and find out. Promise me you'll go and find the truth."

"I know the truth, Mama. I was not born of your flesh. The woman who gave birth to me was a papist slave that Papa purchased from the pirate's ship. I know you raised me and she left me. That's all I need to know. The rest of it doesn't matter. What's done is done. Don't vex yourself so much."

"You must help me keep my vow, Hanna," Mama Becca muttered, pulling me so close to her face I could smell the sour milk on her breath. "The key to the cottage is in a hollow in the witch hazel tree by the well."

You will find what Thankful Seagraves left for you there. I gave my word on it and you shall have your truth or my soul will not rest for all the wrongs I committed against your mother.”

It was the only time Mama Becca ever admitted to any wrongs against Thankful Seagraves. And one of the few times she ever referred to her as my mother. I think the illness was distracting Mama Becca’s mind, but she seemed so certain that she would be judged a liar on Judgment Day that I had to promise her to come to Roxbury and look for this so-called truth. I did not want to leave her bedside, knowing how weak and close to the end she was, but the desperation in her eyes and her relentless pleading were too much for me to bear. I denied Caleb’s request to come with me, and I will not bring the twins into this, either. They know nothing about Thankful Seagraves. Their grandmother was Rebecca Greenwood, a merchant’s wife, a Visible Saint in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, not some mixed-breed, forked-tongued, Catholic woman transported from an ungodly country on a pirate’s ship.

The pirate that sired me was not English but Dutch or French, light haired and dark skinned, with eyes like mine, I was told, the color of fresh tree sap. Those who feared this man, my unknown pirate father, said he was more awful than Henry Morgan or William Kidd. Papa called him a buccaneer or a privateer, never a pirate, as it would not look well for the chosen children of God to be doing business with pirates, and nothing but Captain Seagraves to his face, though his real name was something else, something foreign that Papa could never remember.

Thankful Seagraves, the woman who delivered me into the world, hated this man, said little else about him save that, after pillaging her body and seeding a child inside her, the pirate had sold her like a household slave to the English merchant who is now, thank God, my papa.

“A mestiza can never be a slave!” Thankful Seagraves used to say to me, incensed at an injustice that I could never understand. Even when I was old enough to tell the difference between a slave and an indentured servant, between a blackamoor and an Indian, I didn’t understand or care what a mestiza was. She had a Spanish father and a

mother who was a mix of Indian, Spanish and some Oriental race, but all it meant to me was that Thankful Seagraves was a mongrel. She had eyes of different colors—one brown, one green—and skin like cinnamon bark and an accent so thick it made English sound like a foreign tongue. When she spoke, I cringed as though she were spewing spiders from her mouth. The truth is, I was afraid of Thankful Seagraves. I was afraid I would catch the way she spoke or that one of my eyes would change colors and look like hers. I did not want Thankful Seagraves to be my mother. She was a papist and a mixed breed and a foreigner. Who would want to be born of a mother like that? We had different family names, so it was easy for me to pretend we weren't related. It was Mama Becca I always wanted.

Sometimes when she slept, names tumbled from Thankful Seagraves' lips. For as long as I knew her, she denied that Thankful Seagraves was her name. "That is a falsehood," she would tell me in her weird English. "Everything here is false, except you, my reason for living." When I'd ask her who she really was, what her true name was, she would only shake her head. "That one drowned," she would say. "This husk of a body is all she left." Mine—or at least the names she gave me, not the ones I was christened with—she said most often, *Juana Jerónima*, pronounced in that raspy way of hers, in that foreign accent which turned the first letter of each name to a hiss. If it hadn't been for Mama Becca insisting that Thankful Seagraves give me a proper Christian name, I would have gone through life sounding like a papist. Thank God for Mama Becca, who made her christen me Hanna Jeremiah. It is a fitting namesake: Jeremiah, full of woe, full of strife and dissension. I have been conflicted as far back as I can remember. All of my life I have opposed and rebelled, and the object of this rebellion has been my own self, a hidden part of myself that I have tried to forget but that now presents its shadowy form.

There was a time when I feared the sign of Thankful Seagraves would show itself in the faces of my children, that they would be born red skinned like her or, worse, with two-colored eyes. Perhaps the odd

mixture of bloods that produced that variance in Thankful Seagraves has alchemized into a purer strain, now that Caleb's good English blood has joined the Dutch or French in my own veins. Still, the girls bear one telltale mark of the mixed breed: Clara's skin has the color of honey, Joanna's is like a light maple syrup, and yet Clara's eyes are round green filberts, while Joanna's are chestnuts, light brown and with the slightest downward slant. Oddly, both have full heads of curly auburn hair, where Caleb's is flaxen and mine a hazel brown. Thankful Seagraves' hair, I remember, was Indian straight and black. That curly hair must be a trait the girls inherited from the pirate.

I still do not know why Mama Becca was so prejudiced against my using those names for the twins—Clara and Joanna. And I know not why, when I held them for the first time, one in the crook of each arm, I was so certain those had to be the girls' names. Caleb had no say in it. I just remember Mama Becca's disappointment, the way she shook her head and muttered, "It must be in the blood." I can only surmise that those names must have had something to do with Thankful Seagraves, but that is a secret that Mama Becca took with her.

The twins know nothing of their heritage, for they are still too young to understand such things, but even when they are older, I will not tell them. I have never felt the obligation or the desire to share the dark intimacies of my childhood with anybody. Even Caleb, who was there much of the time, does not know everything. I could have put it all behind me and lived the rest of my life a contented woman, but now I am forced to return to Grandpa Tobias' house in Roxbury and face this specter named Thankful Seagraves.

BOOK I

The Neptune



(JUNE 1683)

CHAPTER 1



“Laaaand fall!”

Captain Laurens de Graaf opened his spyglass and looked out. Yes, there it was, the dreary, foggy New England coast. The Puritan merchants had commissioned him in January to bring sugar, molasses and slaves to the Bay Colony. Back then, the Captain had not been rich as he was now. At the time he had signed the agreement with the Puritan merchants, the siege of Vera Cruz was only a dare that Captain Van Horn had thrown in de Graaf’s face during a night of Christmas feasting in Port Royale.

If the Captain had known in January that Van Horn’s outlandish plan would work so well, that they would pull off the siege of Vera Cruz with the Spanish colors flying from the masts of their own buccaneer ships, while the Spanish Fleet sat like hens in the harbor, he would never have agreed to do business with the Puritans. This foggy, gloomy wilderness, which the Puritans referred to as the city built upon a hill for the chosen children of God, always gave Captain de Graaf nightmares. More and more he had come to despise his annual visit to the Boston port. Having to return twice in one year was enough to depress him until Christmas.

“Reyes!” the Captain called to his Spanish manservant. “Lay out my wig and greatcoat, and don’t forget the wool stockings. We’ll be putting into harbor soon.” Even in early summer, the coast of New England chilled his blood. “Tell Cook to get the grog ready. I want it hot.” He

turned and yelled for the quartermaster in French, ordering him to set up the auction table.

Though born of a *mulata* woman in the Netherlands and weaned on the odd dialect of the slaves, the Captain had been apprenticed at an early age to a cousin of his Dutch father's who was a quartermaster in the Spanish navy, there to remain until his own induction as a sailor for the Spanish Crown. Thus, he managed Castilian more fluently than his own native Dutch and could be counted on to interpret the mixed argot of the slaves he carried across the Atlantic. He knew French as well, having picked it up from the corsairs who, ten years earlier, had captured his Spanish vessel and then invited him to join their company. Not one to bite the hand of Opportunity, Captain de Graaf had become a buccaneer and now commanded two ships, his favorite of which was the *Neptune*. Though he had some French sailors on board, his crew on the *Neptune* was mostly from the British Isles, and so Captain de Graaf had had to learn English, too. A lifetime on the high seas had darkened the Captain's skin like a vanilla bean, and the loose curls on his head, like his brows and his beard and even the lashes of his hazel eyes, had been bleached by sun and sea wind to the color of new beer.

The only Spaniard among them was Reyes, a sailmaker from the Captain's Spanish navy days, who served as the Captain's groom and, when necessary, bedmate. Reyes went below deck, and the Captain watched the crew scrambling on the poop, taking in the sails, uncoiling the anchor ropes, loading the guns to announce their arrival, shouting and slapping one another on the back in anticipation of going ashore. The Captain yelled for the quartermaster again, and told him to inform the crew that nobody would be leaving the ship. They would send out the longboat to bring the merchants aboard, dispose of the cargo and sail the same day for Virginia. It was early enough still, and a good wind would find them once they left the cold shadow of the Boston port. The New England coast reminded him too much of the English dungeon where he'd been imprisoned at the beginning of his buccaneer fame.

The cannon went off, and he blessed himself with the triple sign of the cross. Though a Lutheran, Captain de Graaf was a superstitious man, and he had picked up many of the habits of the Spanish.

“That little bitch *hija de puta* made a mess in your cabin again, *mi capitán*,” Reyes said when he returned to the poop.

“*Joder, hombre!* For fuck’s sake!” the Captain swore at Reyes. “I told you to keep an eye on the wench. What now? Another fire?”

“Looks like she got into your logbook this time, sir. There’s chicken scratch all over the pages.”

“I curse her whore of a mother!” said the Captain, snapping his spy-glass shut. “Why did we let her loose again, Reyes?”

His lips pursed tightly, Reyes followed the Captain down the ladder, wanting to say, You’ve been craving bitch meat ever since she came on board, but *el capitán* de Graaf, the infamous Lorencillo, scourge of the Spanish Main, took to insolence the way he took to the pox. “You wanted her last night, *mi capitán*.” Reyes tried to keep the edge of jealousy out of his voice. “You know she always pays you back in some way.”

“Damn her to Hell! I should’ve left her in Campeche. What am I doing with that crazy wench aboard?”

Mexican half-breed bitch, Reyes wanted to correct him, but again he kept his mouth shut. In his cabin, the Captain threw his arms up in anger. The wench had spilled the inkhorn on the floor and smeared ink all over the bedclothes. The written pages of his log were torn in half, the other pages . . . The Captain dragged the lamp across the desk to see his logbook better. “By your life,” he said under his breath. “This is no chicken scratch, you imbecile! This is the calligraphy of a trained scribe.”

On one page the wench had written the name *Jerónima* over and over, on the other pages a long verse, in a penmanship so elegant and curlicued it confirmed his suspicion that the half-breed he’d been sporting with for the past five weeks had been educated in a monastery. How she’d gotten mixed in with the Negroes he didn’t know. It wasn’t common buccaneer practice to take Indians or half-breeds for slaves, but the girl was attached to one of the Negro girls in his share of the plunder

they'd captured in Vera Cruz and had pleaded with him to take her along, had actually knelt at his feet and kissed his groin, promising to do whatever he wanted in exchange for coming on the *Neptune*. Captain de Graaf had a weakness for brave women. Besides, he had never bedded a wench who had eyes of different colors: one dark as Jamaican rum, the other green as French chartreuse.

At first, the girl was dutiful and obedient, though she was a virgin and wept each time he took her. Then the Negro girl, who was her friend, caught the pox from some of the slaves they'd picked up in Havana. His quartermaster had ordered them all thrown overboard to keep the rest of the cargo from getting infected. Ever since then, the half-breed wandered through the decks, calling for her friend, wailing like a madwoman.

At midday, when the slaves were brought up to the deck to eat and exercise, the coffer of men to the starboard side, the women to the larboard, the girl served their food, chanting the Latin Ave Maria with such sorrow that the slaves and some of the Irish sailors broke into sobbing. Cook said that when the girl helped him in the galley she talked to a black figure that she carried in a wee purse hanging from her neck. She could stand for hours in the stern, staring at the water, ignoring storms or squalls or even the sailors' pinching and fondling, holding an invisible rosary between her hands, her lips moving in silent prayer. When the Captain brought her to his bed, she stared at him with crazed, terrified eyes, shouting a rhymed verse to him—something about stubborn men and the flesh of the Devil—until he finished.

One evening she had almost castrated Cook.

Dozing in his hammock, Cook had told the Captain, he did not feel the hand on his groin, untying his breeches, until the fingers raised his member. He could smell that it was the half-breed touching him and kept his eyes closed, expecting something else, swelling quickly. The tip of the blade cutting into his flesh startled him awake. In the glow of the lantern, the half-breed's eyes burned like a lunatic's. Cook wrenched the bone of her wrist, and she thrust the blade into his testicles. He released

her. She ran out of the galley shrieking curses, Cook was certain, in her heathen tongue.

“The wench about gelded me, Captain.”

“Did she damage you, Cook?”

“Hard to tell, Sir, but I don’t think so. Just a bit of bleeding, I hope.”

“Then you are not to damage her. Understood?”

“Aye, Sir.”

“Warn the others. A murdered wench would bring us evil winds. She is to be left alone. She should never have been touched in the first place.”

“All due respect, Captain, but she’s a danger to the crew, is what I think. The way she can sneak up on a fellow. And there’s that black doll she be forever whispering to, that voodoo thing she carries around her neck.”

“The men can take care of themselves, Cook. If I were you, I’d sport with someone else. The wench doesn’t take well to our kind of sporting. As to that figure she’s always talking to, that’s not a voodoo doll. I’ve seen it. It’s just a game piece.”

“Funny games she plays, Captain.”

“Well, you never know the ways of women.”

“Aye, that’s God’s truth, Sir.”

The Captain thought the girl had lost her wits completely, but this writing on the page showed him that he was wrong, that there was still hope of getting rid of her at a good price. The Captain scanned the stanzas of the verse, chuckling to himself at the sweet prize that Lady Fortune had just bestowed on him. This was no simple wench. Whoever wanted her would have to pay her price in coin.

“Reyes! Go find her, quick! I need to talk to her before the merchants arrive.”

When Reyes had gone, the Captain sat down at his desk and drew up a bill of sale, dipping the pen into the thick puddle of ink soaking into the floor.

*I, Captain Laurens-Cornille de Graaf, commander of the buccaneer frigate the Neptune, hereby sell this half-breed wench, captured in war on the coast of New Spain and subject to servitude. Her name is Jerónima. She is approximately twenty years old. Has all her teeth. Is immune to the pox. For her sturdy health and her knowledge of letters, her price is 50 sterling pounds.
21 June 1683*

The Captain signed the bill, sprinkled sand over the ink, and poured a generous shot of Spanish brandy into his polished silver goblet to celebrate his good luck. If there was one friendly thing he could say about the Puritans, it was that they knew how to appreciate good penmanship, even in a wench. He heard the guns go off in the harbor and knew that the New England merchants were on their way.