

ANOTHER TERESA

SPAIN, CIRCA 1533

HE pale, shivering girl was vaguely aware of being lifted onto a clean sheet and covered with a dry blanket. When she opened her eyes, a blurry face hovered above her. The girl's head was pounding, and nausea swept over her in waves. Slowly, she pulled herself upright on the narrow straw mattress. Suddenly, she cried out with alarm as her big brown eyes continued to stare vacantly.

"Run, Rodrigo! He's found us! Run!"

"Sister Juana, she's burning up with the malaria," Teresa heard a young nun say as she was gently laid back down. Someone was dabbing her forehead with a cool, wet cloth. As if from afar, she recognized the voices of the two nuns who stood at the foot of her bed, praying their rosaries.

Her pulse faint, her breath shallow, the feverish girl closed her eyes, as her memory drifted back to her past, beginning with when she was just seven years old . . .

Holding her little brother's hand, she ran with him as fast as their little legs could carry them, and they made it past the city gate. Suddenly, she felt a large, strong hand grabbing her by the shoulder,

ANOTHER TERESA

abruptly ending their flight. Her uncle had caught up with them.

"Come now, little Teresa, it's time to go home. Your mother is anxious!" he said gently, as he dragged her and Rodrigo back home to their worried parents.

Safely home and tucked into her bed later that evening, she overheard the family members and servants talk late into the night.

"Whoever heard of a noble family having to send a search party into the streets for two precocious children—because of their vivid imaginations!"

"Who would put these foolish ideas into Teresa's head?"

"What could possibly have inspired a seven-year-old girl to run away with her little brother, and to Morocco of all places?!"

"And to face certain martyrdom by beheading at the hands of the Moors!" blustered her irate uncle loudly.

"That is what she desired," sighed another family member. "What do you expect of a child who reads too much?"

As Teresa grew older, only her father understood her love for books and the effect they had on her active imagination. She had inherited her passion for literature from her mother, who had spent many hours of the day in bed reading romance stories. *She is so like her mother*, her father frequently thought, smiling to himself. He often found Teresa alone on the roof of the villa, reading books rather than watching over her younger sisters and brothers in the courtyard below. How she loved those fascinating stories of saints and martyrs.

Twelve-year-old Teresa was profoundly impacted by her mother's tragic death. Her passing had left the young girl feeling emotionally raw and empty. Finally, in quiet desperation one evening, Teresa threw herself on the floor before an image of the Virgin Mary and pleaded with her, "Be my new mother."

Her father kept a watchful eye on his daughter as her extreme devotion to the Mother Mary and her good intentions to live a devoted life eventually gave way to an interest in fashion, perfumes, and hairstyles. Before long, her passion for reading and writing romances was rekindled as her imagination and beauty blossomed. Concerned that Teresa had no mother to guard her virtue, Father sent her away

CASTLES IN THE SAND

to boarding school at the Augustinian convent. After all, his lovely daughter was attracting the attention of far too many young men.

The first week at the convent was most dreadful for a girl accustomed to the fineries of life. But she soon decided that the harsh conditions served some practical use. At least she was being provided with an education, which was certainly preferable to looking after siblings, she reasoned.

The following year, Teresa fell dreadfully ill. Deemed far too beautiful and charming a girl to be left to die of malaria, the nuns decided to send for her father...

Now she lay on this bed, hair damp with sweat from running a high fever, awaiting el padre's arrival. The door slowly creaked open, and the tall, dark-haired man entered the sunny room. Sister Juana and the other nuns moved aside respectfully as Don Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda—smelling of leather, sweat, and horses, his face

expressing compassion and concern—removed his hat and sat on the edge

of his daughter's bed.

"My dearest Teresa," her father spoke softly, as he wound one of her long dark curls around his forefinger. "The carriage is waiting. I have come to take you home."