PROLOGUE

It is mid-June, 1990, in Fremantle, Western Australia. Lennard and I are leaning across the railing on the back veranda of his house on Belleview Terrace, gazing over rooftops sloping down towards the city and the Indian Ocean beyond. The air is still, and the blinding sun is arching down the cloudless sky towards the western horizon, but shade from the bullnose corrugated iron roof enables us to make out the distant pale blue haze of Rottnest Island across the undulating sea.

We can see Lennard's glass sculpting workshop from up here. It looks more like a primitive church than a workshop, with three tall arched windows, sandstone bricks and a high-pitched red corrugated iron roof. It sits on the grassy bank of Bathers Beach—down there, between the fishing harbour and the rocky causeway of the south mole.

We spent the morning there. Lennard showed me round the furnaces, the kilns, the sand-casting moulds and the annealing ovens. The processes he described left me mystified until he displayed the blueprints and photographs of glass sculptures he'd produced since his student days. Their unexpected beauty took my breath away. Their elegance and slender shapes, colours and sizes were eye-catching, especially those on show in London's Victoria and Albert and New York's Metropolitan and Corning Glass Museums. Many others complemented prominent buildings and landscapes in parks and gardens around the world.

Then he showed me the preliminary drawings for his next project, his most ambitious yet. It will be a gigantic, solid glass cenotaph designed to commemorate the First Nations warriors who died fighting in the Frontier Wars resisting the

colonial invasion. Based on Jandamarra's Rock in Windjana Gorge in the Kimberley, it will stand two storeys high. Lennard imagines it as a dazzling iceberg refracting shades of blue from turquoise to ultramarine as the sun, arcing across the sky, lights it up.

* * *

I've been here now for a week.

Time to wrap my head around the radical change in my situation. Time to come to terms with such an unforeseen new direction.

It is hard to believe a 30-year-old part-indigenous Mexican woman with a PhD in Amerindian languages and linguistics suits the needs of Lennard Currie and his First Nations Malgana mob so perfectly. Especially the timing. With Annie Morgan's life hanging in the balance, we have no time to lose. She's the last fluent speaker of Malgana.

Lennard introduced us when we passed through Northampton on the way south to Perth. She was sitting with two friends on her front veranda beneath sprays of purple bougainvillea. Their animated conversation reached us when Lennard switched off his Harley motorbike, and we dismounted. It sounded as though they were bickering and squabbling good-humouredly at the top of their voices, bursts of laughter carrying to us as we approached.

They were silent as we climbed the steps. The whirring of their battered Panasonic tape recorder greeted our arrival, before one of them—Susie Kelly, I soon discovered—switched it off and the rollers squealed to a stop.

'Afternoon, Aunties,' Lennard said. 'Let me introduce Alicia Serrano.'

With an extended forefinger he pointed out Annie Morgan, Susie Kelly and Molly Sanderson in turn, before explaining, 'I picked Alicia up on the side of the road at Exmouth, hitch-hiking to Darwin—'

'*Darwin*?' Molly interrupted him. 'You lost your bearin's, sister? Aren't you headin' in the wrong direction?'

'No, Aunty Mol. I've convinced her to join us. This is where she belongs right now. Where she's needed. Alicia is the linguist we've been looking for.' He grinned. 'With a PhD.'

The three old ladies looked up at me bright-eyed, appreciation dawning in their collective, '*Aaaah*…'

'Just what the doctor ordered,' Annie Morgan said, patting the seat beside her. 'Never mind Darwin. Make yourself at home right here, 'Leesh. Next to me. Tell us all about yourself.'

Although her sunken eyes were bright and her strong, dark face appeared cheerful beneath a red-chequered scarf concealing her skull, her hacking cough told a different story.

We can't allow the Malgana language to die with her.

* * *

I had no intention of returning to Perth or Fremantle. It was the last thing on my mind. After my beloved Alain's death in West Africa in such tragic circumstances five months ago, I had to get away. Escaping north to Darwin seemed the sensible thing to do. To distance me from the trauma, ease the pain and enable me to reflect on what had happened. To give me time to heal and empower me to move on.

Yet here I am, such a short time later, back to where I'd experienced the worst of it.

'Everything happens for a reason,' Lennard said the evening we arrived back in the city and were settling in. 'If you hadn't met me on your way up north, who knows where you'd have ended up?'

'It all depends on what you mean by reason,' I said. 'If you believe your life is somehow orchestrated for you, I have to disagree. It's random and unpredictable. Things happen by chance and coincidence. It's a matter of luck, one way or the

other. Serendipity. And if they do work in your favour, it's by way of a happy accident, when you find yourself in the right place at the right time. As I did with you. Pure and simple.'

'Too right, Alicia, it all comes down to luck. Like right this minute when you've won the lottery, though you may not know it yet. From what you've told me, I reckon you've reached a character-defining moment, a rare opportunity. How you face the challenges will tell us who you are… how resilient, by crikey.'

How I face the challenges? I thought. *How resilient I am? That's always been at the heart of my story.*

As he spoke, the years fell away and I saw myself once again a terrified girl of eight, standing on the bloodstained paving stones of the Tlatelolco Plaza in Mexico City in October 1968. Deafened by the gunshots, I wound rapidly through the film in my grandfather's Leica camera and shot the scene, a witness to the horror, before sprinting to safety from the massacre through the labyrinth of the Aztec ruins below me. It was a defining moment when I'd held my ground, and it has never left me.

SURÉ

Aqui esta mi secreto. Es muy simple: soló con el corazón se puede ver correctamente; Lo que es esenciel es invisible a los ojos.
And now here is my secret. It's very simple: it's only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
The Little Prince, April 1943

In Cerocahui, beside the Copper Canyon in Northwestern Mexico, May 1967

My mother, Suré, died on 10 May 1960, a month after I was born. Although I have no memory of her, I've spent my life trying to recall her particular smell, her comforting touch, the beating of her heart against my own.

I have a tinted photograph showing me feeding at her right breast, taken a week before she died. I carry it with me everywhere. She held me in her arms for those thirty days, and I treasure every moment of our imagined closeness.

The day she died is Mother's Day, of all days. Can you believe it?

When I was growing up and missing her, my father, Victor, used to reassure me the date proved I was so special Mamá made it her purpose in life to give birth to me, despite the risks. She was forty years old. He'd take me in his arms and give me a consoling embrace, often cradling my face in his hands—but in the secret corner of my mind, I'd wish it was Mamá comforting me. I'd feel confused and even more upset, and guilty too, for hurting Papá if he ever suspected how I felt.

Every year without fail, we used to visit Mamá's older sister, my *Tía* Ariché, on the anniversary of Mamá's death. We'd spend a week at her *ranchería* in Cerocahui, deep in the

Sierra Madre Mountains among the canyons. We'd honour Mamá's memory, as though celebrating the *Día de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead, six months early.

The first such visit I clearly remember occurred in May, 1967.

We drove up from our home in Saucillo the day before, in my Tarahumaran grandfather Cerrildo's 1956 Golden Hawk Studebaker. It was a seven-hour journey, with short stopovers in Cuauhtemoc and Creel.

My older brother Andrés let me win four games of checkers out of seven during the drive, 'Because you're still a beginner and learning the moves.'

I went through Andrés's latest comics between games, reading and rereading the adventures of my favourite superhero, Kalimán, and his eleven-year-old apprentice, Solín, until I was car sick—just the once and fortunately outside the car. Papá bent me over at the roadside, an arm around my waist and his free hand holding back my hair, urging me not to soil his shoes. I slept the rest of the trip stretched out on the back seat with my feet up on Andrés's lap.

The next morning I woke early and found my *Tía* Ariché sitting in silence on the chilly patio, looking out across her grapevines. Andrés was out on his early morning training run, and Papá and Abu Cerrildo were still asleep.

Tía's feisty white miniature Schnauzers, Zipi and Zape, lay alert beside her, their muzzles on their paws, their eyes scanning the vineyard for any marauding thick-billed green parrots or other birds daring to feed on the grapes.

When I sat down, Zape lifted his overhanging eyebrows and met my gaze, the glint of warning in his bright, dark eyes letting me know he'd nip me if I got too close. I promptly lifted my bare feet to the seat of my chair and rested my chin on my raised knees, wrapping my arms around them, and he dismissed me and resumed his surveillance.

The green and gold leaves of the vines gleamed as the sun rose behind us. Clouds of tiny midges shimmered here and there in particles of light above the ripening purple bunches. The sun's rays slanting towards the rim of the Urique Canyon warmed my back and shoulders, melting away my icy dread at the thought of confronting Tía with the question I'd asked Papá and Abu Cerrildo countless times.

'Tía, please tell me the truth this time.'

No one else will and I'm sick of asking. The frustrating thought ran through my mind.

'What truth, sweetheart?'

'What happened to Mamá? Why did she die?'

Until now, Papá and Abu Cerrildo have not replied to me directly. They've diverted my attention. You're too young to understand. You barely knew her, if at all. All in good time. As if the cause of her death is a secret or they're shielding me from the distress of discovering something unbearable in her passing.

Tía's shrewd black eyes stared thoughtfully into mine for several long moments as she rearranged a loose strand of her thick black hair streaked with grey back into the bun coiled on top of her head.

I took a deep, determined breath and held her narrow-eyed look, unsure what she was thinking or what was coming next. She slowly nodded, rocking her body from the waist up in her creaky wicker chair, the gold Aztec Tree of Life pendant on her necklace swinging like a hypnotic pendulum across her black, loose-fitting linen blouse.

'An infection took her, Alicia,' she said at last, her voice an unexpected hiss. 'Septicaemia. After an emergency caesarean to bring you into the world.'

To bring me into the world? Uncertain what she meant, the words struck me like an accusation, and I ducked my head as though she'd slapped me.

After a long pause, relaxing back in her chair, she continued, 'You are seven years old, going on seventeen. It's time you knew yours was a complicated breech birth. It took so much longer than we expected. It was never-ending and extremely painful for her. *Pero ella era estoica*, but she was stoical.'

Bewildered, I looked up and stared at her with hesitant defiance as she gathered her thoughts. Then my stubbornness gave way, and I nodded, pretending with a thoughtful look that I understood her. She reached across with a calloused hand to pat my shoulder as though acknowledging my confusion.

'You arrived feet first. We couldn't turn you round,' she said, her voice now reassuring and matter of fact. She raised her eyebrows and showed her strong white teeth in a smile I guessed was sympathetic, 'as if you couldn't wait to meet the ground running. *Como la pequeña cabra montañosa*, like the little mountain goat you've become. But Suré had just turned forty. Very dangerous. Especially for a *mukí* of the Tarahumaran *Rarámuri*. And even though the pregnancy was unplanned, she didn't listen to our advice. As usual. *Ya mero*, *pero no*. Almost, but no. No. She was having none of it.' She gave a quick shake of her head. 'She was determined to have you, *mijita*. She always was the pig-headed one. Just like you. And the prettiest. How else did she snare your father from under my nose when we were young, while I was her *acompañante*, her chaperone?'

She leaned forward, wrapped her arms around me and squeezed before I could wriggle away, her smell earthy and her voice rasping as she spoke beside my ear. 'We wouldn't have it any other way, honey. She did us all a favour. You, especially you.'

When I broke free and ran, I heard her call out. 'Relax,

nenita, relax, child. Now her spirit is *kiri-i-kiri huko*. At peace.' She cackled as if to emphasise the Tarahumaran phrase she'd shouted. One of the working mules in the paddock beside the house brayed in response, both silenced as the door slammed shut behind me.

The words she yelled again were faint, 'At peace, compared to the rest of us… me and you both.'

It took me many years to come to terms with the realisation that I was partly responsible for Mamá's agonising death and understand that she'd considered an abortion early in her pregnancy but decided against it. Even Tía Ariché, who hadn't realised she'd be fostering me when Mamá died, advised her to abort me.

Almost, but not quite. My life in exchange for hers.

Was that to be my ongoing story?

* * *

When I opened the curtains an hour later, Tía still sat alone, sunlight now igniting the blood-red climbing roses blooming on the trellis above her head.

A pine-scented breeze brushed across the vineyard, its minty fragrance reaching me through the open window, and there, beyond the nearby shadows of the canyons and the mauve silhouettes of distant mountains, a pale three-quarter moon hung like a fingernail in the brightening sky.

'What colour would you paint it, Mamá?' I whispered, picturing us standing together at the window admiring the landscape, just as I'd fantasised about us doing at home in Saucillo, allowing her to share with me the experiences she'd missed. *'Oh, something golden, mijita, with the sun coming up,'* I imagined her saying. *'Something golden would be perfect.'*

The fact that I was speaking on her behalf did not diminish the authenticity of the shared moment. It seemed to me to add to it.

Before rejoining Tía, I took out Mamá's treasured brown leather beret from my chest of drawers. Papá gave it to me a month ago on my latest birthday, along with another two of her favourite things—a silver butterfly brooch embedded with garnet stones green as emeralds and a fringed sky-blue silk rebozo shawl he assured me she'd worn as a child.

He explained that before she died, she'd insisted I should have them when old enough. She didn't want them buried with her in the coffin.

I hadn't yet worn any of them. I'd been afraid to. And now I wasn't sure I deserved to, but I braced myself, put both hands inside the beret, held it open and placed it over my head. I tugged at my ponytail to adjust the beret there before tightening the leather thong running around the rim so it fitted me perfectly.

I stood for several minutes facing the mirror, arranging the beret with the bright green oak tree emblem on it front and centre. *It's shaped like Tía's Tree of Life*, I thought. *This is how Mamá must have worn it, checking her reflection as she adjusted it, just as I am.*

I felt uncannily connected to Mamá at that moment. I could not remember her, but now perhaps I could get to know her by piecing together everything I was told about her and allowing my imagination to do the rest.

Perhaps.

It was a start.

What I wanted then more than anything was to have used the superpowers I'd learned from Kalimán and done a somersault in Mamá's womb seven years ago before moving headfirst down her birth canal, leaving us both intact and alive when I was born.

A surge of relief, almost of happiness, ran through me as the painful, unsettling sense of isolation and loneliness

I usually experienced when I asked or thought about her fell away. I beamed at my image, as though her eyes were looking into mine and mine hers—and the unexpected idea flashed across my mind—*This is how I'd feel if Mamá was giving me the unconditional love I need to give myself.*

On my way out through the dining room, I surprised myself by using my fingertips to transfer a kiss to Mamá's charcoal portrait. Sketched when she was young, so long before she became my mamá, I'd always considered her's the face of a stranger. For the first time, however, I recognised myself in her. The high cheekbones with their shadows, though mine were not yet as pronounced. The wide-set eyes. The hint of creases at the edges of her smile.

The picture was propped up on the temporary *ofrenda* altar the maid Ofelia and I helped Tía construct, with a glass of water and bowl of Mamá's favourite salted cashews and peanuts, and five melting candles and incense sticks Ofelia had lit earlier for the day. The brightly coloured mandala of crepe paper flowers we'd made matched the two vases of brilliant orange and yellow *cempasúchil* marigolds I'd picked from the rows bordering the vegetable garden. Their distinct musky scent was designed to guide Mamá's spirit on her journey home to protect us, or away to the other world awaiting her.

Surrounding the offerings, Ofelia laid a semi-circle of her magic stones and crystals—a miniature dry-stone wall designed to protect Mamá from evil spirits and other *diablitos* who might want to cause her harm. The centrepiece was a small white *calavera* sugar skull Ofelia made. She decorated it with rainbow-coloured icing and sequins.

By way of contrast, a copy of Filippino Lippi's *Adoration of the Magi* was hanging on the wall beside the altar. One of Tía Ariché's favourite religious illustrations, she believed its

presence guaranteed Mamá good fortune in the afterlife.

When I walked out, Tía Ariché adjusted the empty wicker chair beside her without facing me. She patted the seat. 'Are you hungry, *mijita*?' she asked. 'After *desayuno* why don't we ride the horses down to Urique and leave some flowers on your mamá's grave like we did last year? Would you like that?'

Then she looked at me with her eyebrows raised and waited for me to nod.

'I know Suré would,' she went on. '*Nada mas segura*, nothing surer. What do you say? Some sunflowers again? Her favourites. Why don't you go and pick some? We can stay there overnight and come back up tomorrow. Oh, I like your beret. It suits you. You look as striking in it as your mamá did.'

I looked away as a warm glow rushed through me at her compliment and her mention of my similarity to Mamá.

When I stood to get the clippers, Andrés appeared on the path leading to the canyon edge. He'd removed his T-shirt and wrapped it around his head against the sun. The dark skin of his lithe torso gleamed above his faded blue running shorts.

His black mixed-breed Calupoh dog, Geronimo, sleek as a greyhound with a white flash down his chest, bounded past him, his long tongue extended, his tail a runaway metronome when he recognised me. He slurped at his water bowl before slumping with a heavy sigh beneath the table, where he stretched out, panting, just beyond kicking distance of Tía's sandalled feet and a respectable distance from Zipi and Zape, who acknowledged his arrival with a combined warning growl.

Andrés glided up to us, barely panting and looking as though he hadn't raised a sweat. He placed his metre-long snake-catching pole on the table and pressed the button

on the stopwatch he wore on his left wrist. Ten years older than me at seventeen, I worshipped the ground he ran on, joining him for short stretches whenever he'd allow me to. Despite our teasing, he insisted he'd been training for the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City all his life. The Games were now a year away.

'*Una hora y veinte*, an hour and twenty,' he said. 'Same as yesterday. Halfway down to Lorenzo's lookout and back.' He glanced at me. 'You should have joined me, *floja*.' Then he noticed the beret. 'Or should I call you Che? All you need is his red star… and his beard.'

'I'm not a lazybones and I'm not Che, I'm *me*. Come with us to Urique after breakfast and I'll show you who can run.'

'I'll have a shower and breakfast first before we find out who shows who.'

As he walked away, I was reminded how much we looked alike, how closely we shared our looks with Mamá. A thrill ran through me. It gave me a new sense of belonging; a deep connection I was craving to offset the loneliness I sometimes experienced when I was mixing with girls my age who had their mothers.

* * *

Hours later, we laid the sunflowers across Mamá's horizontal ochre-painted grave in the Urique cemetery in the scanty shade of an alder tree.

'*Los girasoles simbolizan la adoración*,' Tía said. 'Sunflowers symbolise adoration, as I told you last time.' She squinted up through the leaves at the pale blue sun-scorched afternoon sky. 'They may not last long in this heat but our adoration will.' She hesitated, before adding, '*Mientras Dios esté feliz de sonreírnos*. For as long as God is happy to smile down on us.'

We paid our respects and left offerings of food and drink Tía had prepared, which we arranged on the grave.

We stood with bowed heads for a minute before Tía murmured her consent and Andrés and I chased each other in and out of the white-trunked sycamore trees encircling the cemetery—trees so pale and ghostly Andrés partly convinced me as we ran that they came out of the ground at the full moon and danced among the tombstones on their roots to the hooting of the giant owl roosting in their branches.

'That owl is La Lechuza,' he said as we ran, catching me unawares and giving me goosebumps. I knew the myth. She was the shape-shifting wicked old witch who swooped down, talons drawn, to seize unsuspecting children at night, ripping them apart with her beak and taking revenge on people who'd wronged her.

The goosebumps eased when he suggested Mamá was running unseen beside us. He said she'd loved to do so with him when she was alive, and suddenly I could sense her there, the eerie rustling of the breeze among the sycamore leaves no longer the beating of a giant owl's wings but the whisper of Mamá's breathing—a sound so soothing in that moment it struck me that Mamá was not dead to us. In a sudden rush of emotion I took his hand and squeezed it, aware he must be missing Mamá as much as I was. He allowed me to hold it for several privileged moments before releasing mine to sprint the last few metres to the gravesite.

Later, we sat for some time in the nearby sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the cool, calm silence of the chapel occasionally shattered by the expanding corrugated iron roof cracking like a starter's pistol.

Tía reminded us to make the sign of the cross and kneel when we entered. As I did so, I looked up at the mural of the dark-skinned *la Virgen* on the wall behind the altar. She still wore the bright purple eyepatch someone crudely painted over her right eye during the Easter celebrations last year,

protecting her from witnessing the suffering of her son on the cross, but allowing her to watch through her left eye the destruction and burning in hell of the papier mâché effigy of Judas—the climax to the ceremonies.

Before she settled into a pew, Tíá Ariché adjusted her favourite cotton rebozo shawl embroidered in olive-green and gold snakeskin diamonds over her head and shoulders. Next, she removed my beret, replaced it with Mamá's rebozo and assured me I looked as fresh and untouched as la Virgen Purísima herself wearing it.

'So did your mamá when she was your age and innocent,' she added as she adjusted it, before leaning forward with a meaningful glance. '*Pero sin tu rebeldía*, Alicia. But without your rebelliousness.'

My rebelliousness? How dare you? You're not my mother. You never will be! I forced a smile and bit my tongue, but my eyes gave me away and for a brief second I sent her a spark of defiance, quickly extinguished by the respect and fear I held for her uncertain temper.

'Oh, look at you, *mijita*. So fiery. So headstrong.' She shook her head. 'What are we to do with you?' Her expression softened and her voice changed as she reminded us as always that Mamá was far from dead and we should pray for her. Still alive in that other place, with spiritual access to our world, she was doubtless watching over us. '*Un milagro gracias a Dios*, *nada mas*,' she said.

A miracle? Thanks be to God? Nothing more?

Part of me wanted to believe her, and did, but in the following silence, perplexing questions flooded my mind. *Has Mamá forgiven me without me asking her to because she loves me and is my mother? Am I worthy of her sacrifice? Does she miss me as much as I miss her? Can I ever make it up to her?* And the question tormenting me above all: *If giving me life meant*

she'd died in accordance with some miraculous purpose, as Papá had suggested, what does it mean for my future? A future I was destined to live without her.

'*Un milagro?*' I asked.

'*Un milagro sin lugar a dudas*, *como tú*.' She patted my knee. 'A miracle for certain, just as you are.' She gave me her familiar enigmatic smile and contradictory look. 'On the other hand, only God truly knows.'

'And if God has his doubts, then we keep guessing—' Andrés broke in.

'Sssssssssssst! Not in this place,' Tía Ariché admonished him. She stretched across my back and delivered a sharp slap to the back of his head. 'You leave your scepticism at the door, and any other doubts you've got floating around in your empty skull, Andrés. In this place, our faith keeps hope alive, not questioned by your so-called logic and reason.'

I suppressed a laugh when I heard him grumble as he flinched, '*Si. Si.* Okay, Tía.' He made a face, and I saw him mouth under his breath, '*Pero no*, but no,' as he often did, reasserting his seventeen-year-old machismo Mexicano.

When we left the chapel, Andrés asked if we could race along the thousand-metre sandy circuit cleared of rocks beside the river. 'We don't have time,' Tía replied. 'It's getting late.'

Impulsively ignoring her, I took off my riding boots and laced on my made-to-measure huaraches. They'd been designed for running—with car tyre soles.

'Race you up the hill!' I shouted, and with a head start, I sprinted with Andrés and Geronimo over the rocks and slippery gravel up the slope to the tethered horses. I punched him several times on the arm when he said he'd let me win.

'Tía's right about your running.' He gazed intently at me, his dark brown eyes alight. 'You are a little mountain goat—and you look like one.'

'That makes two of us,' my tongue surprised me by replying before I'd thought of an answer. 'And you're ten years older so you're twice as ugly.'

My quick response caught him off-guard.

'*Tienes razón*. Touché!' he said, and we both laughed till the tears came, Andrés tickling my ribs with the bony fingers of his left hand while he held my upper arm with his right, careful to protect the long fingernails he'd grown for Papá and his good friend Tío Guillermo, who were teaching him to play new flamenco techniques on his guitar. Of course I'd grown mine as well, and when Andrés was practising after his lessons, he allowed me to sit beside him, joyfully tinkering with the child-size guitar Papá gave me when I'd complained about being left out.

Tía Ariché, beaming, struggled up the hill towards us. I could see her wondering what the fuss was all about. The two rebozos lay across her shoulders and in her right hand she held the little *hielera* cooler with our Lulú drinks on ice. When she lifted the lid, she surprised us with an unexpected extra treat—a slice of her homemade *mazapan de cacahuate*, her peanut marzipan, left over from the plateful of pieces she'd placed on Mamá's grave, along with the paper cup of her favourite drink—crushed-ice mango licuado.

Before she handed us our rewards, she held out her arms, as always. '*Abrázame*, hug me,' she said. And I did, just as I'd have hugged Mamá if she'd lived. The smoky smell of sweat and camphor lingered when she let me go and I asked myself achingly, *Did Mamá feel and smell the same?*

* * *

Looking back on it now, when I was seated between Tía Ariché and Andrés in the chapel, her dark Rarámuri skin and his deep mestizo tan so distinctly contrasted to my paler fawn, I felt different—in some way blessed—and yet the same, and

sensed emotions stirring within me I didn't yet understand. For the first time, I feared living in a mystifying world where I suspected my destiny was no longer of my choosing or my will, but more a matter of chance.

I learned on that Mother's Day that the world, for all its magic and mesmerising beauty, can turn and strike you quicker than a homeless cat you're stroking in the street when it rubs against your leg. Shocked and bleeding, you stifle your scream and wonder, *Did I deserve the vicious clawing and the unexpected bite? And if so, why?*

Either way, you carry the scars as a lifelong reminder of your questions and the lessons you learn, and the confusing thought struck me, *If my relationship with Mamá—the most important of my life—lasted no longer than a month, are all my relationships only temporary and destined to end quickly?*

When we returned to Cerocahui the next day, Tía took me out to one of the ramshackle garden sheds. It was dark inside, the single cobwebbed window grimy. She reached up to a shelf where there was a row of lidded jars.

'Cup your hands together,' she said.

She shook the jar, unscrewed the rusty lid with some effort and poured a handful of small white sunflower seeds into my open palms. 'Now go, *mijita*. You know where to plant them. The early ones will be ready for you next year.'

Since then, I've taken a handful of seeds to plant in whatever flowerbeds are available wherever I am so that I'll have a bunch of sunflowers in full bloom on the following Mother's Day.

Caring for them as they grow, watching their buds develop and listening to stories told about Mamá over the years, have extended the one unremembered month we shared into decades, giving me a comforting, imaginary sense of bonding with the mother I never knew.

In ten short years, I'll be as old as she was when she died. It gives me an intense, uneasy awareness of my mortality, as if I'm living on borrowed time, and it reminds me—just as the growing sunflowers do each year—that mourning for her will never end.

What I learned that day I spent with Tía Ariché I've never forgotten. And although the memory can be mysteriously selective, fragmented and unreliable, I've often returned to those moments for insights into my own story, my coming of age and my quest for self-awareness, to better understand who I am and accept the person I've become.

There I am, my eager younger self, thrilled Tía has confirmed I looked so much like Mamá when she was younger, wearing her beret and rebozo and listening for further revelations to add to my growing picture of her. She took her stories with her when she died, but listening to Tía enabled me to imagine her retelling them.

There are times when I can still hear Tía describe the challenges Mamá dealt with during my birth and explain how she faced her demons with the courage, determination and resolute independence I like to think I've inherited.