Alicia in a thoughtful mood – Courtesy Carlos Neri / Alamy stock photo

PROLOGUE

It is my eighteenth birthday, April 17, 1978, late in the afternoon. My brother Andrés and I are on the balcony of his third storey unit in Mazatlán, Mexico, gazing down towards the city spread below us and the Pacific Ocean beyond.

The air is still, and the sun is about to sink beneath the western horizon, painting the sky in swathes of scarlet and orange. We can still make out the silhouettes of Wolf, Deer and Bird Islands across the shimmering sea.

We can see the sports stadium and the long stretch of the Malecon seafront promenade from up here. It's Andrés's favourite running track, beside the ocean.

Ten years older than me, he's been testing the latest prosthetic foot for running sent to him by the Ottobock Company in Germany. He is one of a team of athletes selected from around the world to use the latest prosthetics. He is as determined as ever to compete in a Paralympic Games wearing one, even if he has to wait until the year 2000 for the International Olympic Committee to accept prosthetics.

He'll be fifty years old by then, but we both have Tarahumaran Indian blood in us. We're among the best

long-distance runners in the world, matching the East Africans.

That's why we call ourselves the Rarámurí, the light-footed ones, who run across the ridges and the slopes of the Copper Canyon in the Sierra Madre Mountains.

We spent this morning running along the Malecon, the sea breeze cooling us and the rich salty smell of the sea giving us the energy for an occasional sprint between the lamposts.

I've been here now for a week.

I've graduated from Saucillo High at last. I'm about to enrol at the Guadalajara University. I decided to study Languages and Applied Linguistics there. It was an easy decision. I already speak four languages: Tarahumaran and Spanish fluently and English and French a little. Besides, I hated Maths and was only moderately interested in Science. I left all that to Andrés, who was good at both. Especially Architecture, which is his day job in Mazatlán.

It's hard to believe I've left school after so many years. Looking back, it seems time has flown, whereas before I graduated time seemed to drag on forever.

Andrés grins at me and says, "So, Alicia, this time in August you'll be a university student."

"At last. Another four months. It's taken long enough."

"It has, and the University will test you. How you face the challenges will tell us who you are. How determined."

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

As he speaks, the years fall away. I see 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 gunfire and horrified by the bodies falling around me, I will myself to take the last shots in my camera before I run. Then I sprint to safety from the massacre through the labyrinth of the Aztec ruins beside the plaza.

It is a self-defining moment when I bravely held my ground.

The memory will never leave me.

While I'm in Mazatlán I intend to write our story as I remember it.

I've brought my typewriter and made a start yesterday.

I've decided to call it *My Brother Andrés*.

Enjoy.

Sunflowers on Mothers Day – Courtesy Shutterstock

CHAPTER ONE

1

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.

I can't remember her, but I've spent my life trying to recall her.

Her particular smell.

Her comforting touch.

The beating of her heart against my own.

I have a 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. I treasure every moment of what I imagine was our 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 tell 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 found out 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 home in Cerocahui. It was deep in the Sierra Madre Mountains among the canyons. There we would honour Mamá's memory as though we were celebrating the *Día de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead, six months early.

2

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

I was seven years old.

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," he told me.

I read Andrés's latest comics between games.

I enjoyed reading and rereading the adventures of my favourite superhero, Kalimán, and his eleven-year-old apprentice, Solín.

That is, until I was car sick—just the once and fortunately outside the car. Papá bent me over, an arm around my waist and his free hand holding back my hair.

"Try not to soil my shoes," he kept urging me.

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 up early.

I 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 excitable white miniature Schnauzers, Zipi and Zape, lay alert beside her. They had their muzzles on their paws. They were scanning the vineyard for any 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 let 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. I wrapped my arms around them, and he dismissed me and resumed his watch.

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. It melted away my icy dread at the thought of bothering 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 thought ran through my mind.

"What truth, sweetheart?"

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

Until now, Papá and Abu Cerrildo have avoided answering. You're too young to understand. You hardly knew her, if at all. All in good time. As if the cause of her death is a secret. Or they don't want to upset me by discovering something unbearable in her passing.

Tía's shrewd black eyes stared thoughtfully into mine for several long moments. 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.

I 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 swung like a hypnotic pendulum across her black, loose-fitting linen blouse.

"Your Mamá got really sick, Alicia," she said at last.

Her voice was an unexpected hiss. "It was septicaemia. After an emergency operation to bring you into the world."

To bring me into the world?

I was unsure what she meant. Her words struck me like an accusation. 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 very painful for her. *Pero ella era estoica*, but she was very brave."

Puzzled, I looked up and stared at her defiantly as she gathered her thoughts.

Was it my fault, after all?

Then my stubbornness gave way. I nodded, pretending with a thoughtful look that I understood her. She reached across to pat my shoulder as if she understood my confusion.

"You arrived feet first. We couldn't turn you round," she said.

She raised her eyebrows and showed her strong white teeth in a smile I guessed was sympathetic. Her voice was suddenly reassuring and matter of fact.

"It seemed to us 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.

That's a very dangerous age to have a child. Especially for a Tarahumaran Indian woman."

She leaned forward, wrapped her arms around me and squeezed.

"And even though the pregnancy was unplanned," she went on, "she wouldn't listen to our advice. As usual. An abortion? 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."

Before I could wriggle away, she said, "We wouldn't have it any other way, honey. She did us all a favour. You, especially you."

Her smell was earthy and her voice vibrated as she spoke beside my ear.

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.

They were both silenced as the door slammed 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 realise 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?

3

When I opened the curtains an hour later, Tía was still sitting alone.

The sun was firing up the blood-red roses blooming on the trellis above her head.

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

"What colour would you paint it, Mamá?" I whispered.

I pictured us standing together at the window admiring the landscape. I'd started fantasising about us doing so back at home in Saucillo, allowing her to share with me all 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 imagining her speaking and putting words in her mouth did not make our shared moment any less real to me. 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. He also gave me 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 told me she'd used as a child.

Before she died, she'd insisted I should have them when I was 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.

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. I arranged the beret so that the bright green oak tree emblem on it was front and centre.

It's shaped just like Tía's Tree of Life, I thought. *This is how Mamá must have worn it. She would have checked her reflection as she adjusted it, just as I am.*

I felt strangely 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. I'd allow 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. Then I'd move headfirst down her birth canal, leaving us both alive and well when I was born.

A surge of relief, almost of happiness, ran through me.

The painful, unsettling sense of loneliness I usually experienced when I asked or thought about her fell away.

I smiled 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 love I need to give myself.*

4

On my way out through the dining room, I surprised myself—I used my fingertips to transfer a kiss to Mamá's charcoal portrait.

It had been sketched when she was young, long before she became my mamá. Up till then I'd always thought it was the face of a stranger.

For the first time now, I recognised myself in her.

The high cheekbones with their shadows, though mine were not yet as full.

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 the day before, to commemorate Mamá's death. It held a glass of water for her, and a bowl of her favourite salted cashews and peanuts.

Ofelia had lit five candles and incense sticks earlier for the day. The brightly coloured wreath of crepe paper flowers we'd made matched the two vases of brilliant orange and yellow marigolds I'd picked. I found them in the rows bordering the vegetable garden. We believed their strong musky scent would 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 wall to protect Mamá from evil spirits and other *diablitos* who might want to cause her harm. Standing guard at the entrance was a small white *calavera* sugar skull Ofelia made. She decorated it with rainbow-coloured icing and sequins.

A copy of Filippino Lippi's *Adoration of the Magi* was hanging on the wall beside the altar. It was one of Tía Ariché's favourite religious illustrations. She believed it 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 breakfast why don't we ride the horses down to Urique? We can leave some flowers on your mamá's grave like we did last year.

Would you like that?"

She looked at me with her eyebrows raised, waiting 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 really suits you. You look as lovely in it as your mamá did."

I looked away.

A warm glow rushed through me at her compliment, especially when she mentioned my similarity to Mamá.

When I stood to get the clippers, Andrés appeared on the path leading to the canyon edge. He had removed his t-shirt and wrapped it around his head against the sun. The dark skin of his chest gleamed above his faded blue running shorts.

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

Andrés glided up to us.

He was barely panting.

He looked 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.

He was ten years older than me at seventeen, and I worshipped the ground he ran on. I used to join him, running for short stretches whenever he'd let me.

In spite of our teasing, he insisted he was training for the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. They were now a year away.

He'd been training for it ever since I'd known him.

"*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, lazybones." Then he noticed the beret. "Or should I call you Che Guevara? 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. Then we'll 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 aloneness I sometimes experienced when I was mixing with girls my age who had their mothers.

5

Hours later, we laid the sunflowers across Mamá's horizontal ochre-painted grave in the Urique cemetery. It lay in the 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. We arranged them on the grave.

We stood with bowed heads for a minute before Tía murmured, "Alright, you two can run now."

Andrés and I chased each other in and out of the white-trunked sycamore trees encircling the cemetery. The trees were 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.

That was so unexpected I felt my skin freeze and goosebumps rush across my arms, the fine hairs on my forearms standing up.

I knew the myth. La Lechuza was the shape-shifting wicked old witch who turned into an owl and swooped down, her claws drawn, to seize unsuspecting children at night. She ripped them into pieces with her beak as she took revenge on people who'd wronged her.

The goosebumps eased when he suggested Mamá was running unseen beside us.

"She loved to run with me when she was alive," he said.

Suddenly I could sense her there.

The eerie rustling of the breeze among the sycamore leaves was no longer the beating of a giant owl's wings but the whisper of Mamá's breathing.

It was a sound so soothing that in that moment it struck me Mamá was not dead to us.

I felt a rush of emotion.

I took his hand and squeezed it.

He must be missing Mamá as much as I am, I realised.

He allowed me to hold it for several privileged moments before releasing mine to sprint the last few metres to the gravesite.

6

Later, we sat for some time in the nearby chapel of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The cool, calm silence of the chapel was 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 Madonna painted on the wall behind the altar.

She was still wearing the bright purple eyepatch someone crudely painted over her right eye during the Easter celebrations last year. It protected her from witnessing the suffering of her son Jesus on the cross, but allowed her to watch through her left eye the destruction and burning in hell of the papier mâché effigy of the traitor Judas. That was the climax of the ceremonies.

Before she settled into a pew, Tía 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. She replaced it with Mamá's rebozo. Then she told me I looked as fresh and untouched as the Virgin Mary herself wearing it.

"So did your mamá when she was your age and as innocent," she added as she adjusted it. Then she leaned forward, gave me a meaningful glance and said, "*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 I'm sure my eyes gave me away.

For a brief second, I sent her a spark of defiance.

It didn't last, though. I had too much respect and fear for her uncertain temper.

"Oh, look at you, *mijita*. So fiery. So headstrong." She shook her head. "What are we to do with you?"

Then her expression softened and her voice changed.

She reminded us 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 no doubt watching over us.

"A miracle, thanks be to God. Nothing more," she said.

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 spend without her.*

"A miracle?" I asked.

"A miracle for certain, just as you are."

She patted my knee.

She gave me her familiar inscrutable 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 scolded him.

She stretched across my back and delivered a sharp slap to the back of his head.

"You leave your doubts at the door, Andrés! And any other disbelief you've got floating around in your empty skull. 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.

Then I heard him murmur under his breath, "*Pero no*, but no," as he often did, reasserting his seventeen-year-old Mexican manliness.

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. I 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 than me so you must be twice as ugly."

My quick response caught him off-guard.

"*Tienes razón*. Well said!" he exclaimed, and we both laughed till the tears came,

He tickled my ribs with the bony fingers of his left hand, while he held my upper arm with his right. He was 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. 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 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. It was 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?*

7

In Mazatlán, Mexico, April 1978

Looking back on it now that I'm eighteen, when I was seated between Tía Ariché and Andrés in the chapel, her dark Tarahumaran skin and his deep Mexican tan so distinctly contrasted to my paler fawn, I felt different.

In some way blessed.

And yet the same.

I sensed confusing 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, despite its magic and captivating 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 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. That way 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 as I grew up, have extended the one unremembered month we shared into years.

It gives me a comforting, imaginary sense of bonding with the mother I never knew.

One day I'll be as old as she was when she died.

That thought 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.

I've often returned to those moments for insights into my 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 observations to add to my growing picture of her.

She took her stories with her when she died.

Listening to Tía enabled me to imagine her retelling them.

There are times when I remember 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.