



PART ONE

THE ROOTS



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Chapter 1

GIFTS

*P*ain has been scorched into every fiber of my being. Sometimes, in the right light, it grows so large that I see its shadow, haunting me, reminding me of all I have lost. But I have learned to coexist with the bruises and scars, with the mind-numbing aches, and with the lonely throbbing in that vast, black space deep within my soul. I know every turn of its jagged corners, how frightening it is to teeter dangerously over its edge. Yet I never allow myself to look down; I can only try to keep the pain from getting any deeper and to keep from falling into its abyss.

I always knew that I was disciplined, but I never knew how strong was the blind courage that ran in my blood. I never doubted, or listened to those who said I would fail. I might come out on the other side beaten and banged up, but I let nothing stand in my way. Somehow I find a way to persevere. Those were the gifts I had from the start. But until I watched my mother die, I never understood what it meant to love and to be loved. Until I learned of my grandmother's story of loss

and new beginnings, I didn't understand dignity. I came to know faith and charity through the life of my mother's eldest sister, my *tia* America, who faced every setback with an unwavering calm and not an ounce of self-pity. And until I, too, became ill with the disease that will forever bind all four of us, I never understood why I had been given this gift to find hope in the most desolate places of the heart.

I am a singer, songwriter, musician, and producer. I have toured the world with my music, been on countless magazine covers, and have met and performed with some of my greatest idols, the people who've shaped my musical identity. My studio office walls are lined with gold records and awards, and in the last several years I have become a fervent patient advocate and public speaker. But those are not my proudest accomplishments in life. For I am also the granddaughter, niece, and daughter of three women who died from breast cancer, and I write these words today as a woman who has survived a diagnosis of advanced breast cancer beyond her projected years. It is not the sum of these years that emboldens my stride, but rather how I have redefined my concepts of time, quality of life, and all of the things in between.

The lives of my mother, my grandmother, and my aunt are the prologue to my own story. Through their example, they taught me what it means to be alive. From them I have inherited the courage to carry on through the incomprehensible with dignity and love. They taught me how to live when life itself is filled with uncertainties and the truth of certain death becomes undeniable. But also, they left me a complex legacy that challenges me both physically and emotionally, as they chose such completely different paths for confronting their illness that I often feel they left me with no clear choice as to which path is best. They faced daunting challenges beyond the cancer, and it is this struggle that has illuminated my own path: they taught me how to sort through the particles of life and only grab onto what really matters. Their physical confrontations with this disease were horrific, yet their spiritual growth throughout the suffering would make a believer out of the staunchest skeptic. I found something extraordinary in these ordinary women, and through them I have found myself. Their lives have served as a chronicle for mine.

As I look through family photos, I see beyond the disease that ties us together forever in our family's story, and I find my own eyes warmly looking back at me in the gaze of my mother's mother, my *abuela* Nayibe (nye-EE-bay). Headstrong and full of life, my grandmother left her war-torn homeland of Lebanon at age nine with her recently widowed mother, Jamile (jah-MEE-lay), and her grandmother, Mercedes. They set out on a steamship across the Mediterranean and ultimately the Atlantic with no certain plans and only a vague image of the place where they would disembark and start anew. Later in life, long after she had settled in Colombia, my *abuela* Nayibe would face the primitive treatments available to women of her generation who had "tumors." She died long before I was born, but Nayibe was the first in line to bravely face our fate, and she became an unwitting role model.

I have a collection of memories of my *tia* America, Nayibe's oldest daughter. I wanted to be her ever since I was old enough to walk. My aunt was regal and beautiful, and she stepped up to be the family matriarch after my grandmother, Nayibe, died. *Tia* America's life was filled with obstacles—tragedies that would easily destroy a person of a lesser constitution. But she carried on and took care of not only her own family but also all of us, even throughout her problematic life and her cancer diagnosis. Until the end, she was still the one in control. She was still the one with words of encouragement. Yes, if her fate is to be mine, I want to be her.

And then, of course, there is my mom, Yamila (yah-MEE-la), Nayibe's fourth child and America's little sister.

"Sorayita," I remember her calling out for me. But through the years of silence after her death, her voice is getting harder and harder to remember. Before she became my mom, a young Yamila followed her husband to pursue the American Dream. Just as her mother, Nayibe, had left Lebanon, my mother, too, left behind all she knew in Colombia and arrived in a new world. As the years passed, she went from being a shy and quiet young woman who sought company in books to one who spoke her mind and surrounded herself with friends and laughter. After her cancer diagnosis, she fought with unnerving strength. However, she was forever changed. The treatment abruptly

removed much more than her tumors. But somehow she kept going. Her inner light changed colors, but it never dimmed. Even when the doctors lost hope, she still held on. Of all the ways I came to emulate her, surely she hoped that this ability to hold on was the one lesson that I would never need to use.

Fortunately, since my diagnosis and consequent perpetual battle with this disease, I have searched my heritage and pulled from it the strength of these amazing women. I saw them bravely endure the treatments that were not so targeted as they are now. I saw them live alongside uncertainty with unwavering courage. Yet the greatest lesson of all came from their confrontation with, and ultimate acceptance of, their own mortality. As with all of us who lose a loved one, the time we had together was not enough, but for the most part, it was well spent. My *abuela* Nayibe, my *tia* America, and my mom all died with peace in their hearts. But they also spent much time battling both the physical pain of the disease and the heartbreaking realization that they would be leaving their children behind. The examples they set have helped me manage a wave of emotions through my battle with breast cancer. If I were to lose my focus even for a second, the tide would pull me out and I would sink, self-pity shackled to my ankles like lead weights. The experiences of my relatives have helped me to live at a heightened level, all the while proving the medical statistics wrong. With all I was told I might not ever do again, with all the time I was told I might not have, my ears remained deaf to these proclamations, and my mind pushed, and still pushes, my body to stay strong and carry on. Every day I move, walk, sing, speak, breathe, and live with the energy that my three *angelitos* left behind for me.

I have committed my life to living my life, concentrating all the while on balancing life-extending treatments with life-enhancing living. The reality of this disease will not be an impediment but rather a tool I use to harvest more out of the time I have been given—and maybe even the time I wasn't meant to have. I have become a professional patient, determined not to let it alter the quality of my existence. This is my reality and I do not fight it anymore. I choose to exert my energy living the life that, thanks to today's treatments, those who came before me never had the opportunity to enjoy.

I will keep on singing, and I will keep on sharing my message. I will continue on my mission to share hope not with empty words but rather by serving as a multidimensional example of what it means to be alive. I refuse to fall victim to a limited definition of self. It is this more enlightened woman that I present in this book, with the hope that others can recognize in me pieces of themselves, just as I saw my reflection in my *abuela* Nayibe, my *tia* America, and my mom.

The chronicle must end with me.

I stand at the end of the line, holding on firmly to the parts of the tradition worth holding on to, shattering those that are not, and living every day with the belief that maybe I will be the one to finally break the legacy. Maybe I will be able to grow old. If not, at least let me enjoy the ride to its fullest. Starting every day by waking up to your own mortality teaches one how fragile it all is. Each moment is treasured as if it were the last. And when I stumble and get tangled and feel I cannot bear any more, I reach deep within and run my hands through the ashes at the bottom of my soul. I am aware of what that dust once was, emergent but carefree. But I also know that from this rubble I will once again rebuild myself. I will rise like the women who preceded me. Time and time again, if need be, I will be a phoenix, and my new song will be sweeter than the last.