



THE DINING TABLE WAS set for a feast, but all the carving knives had been hidden. The last thing we needed was the stabbing of an oligarch over carne asada.

Twelve of us sat around the banquet, Familia Sola on one side, Quiñónez on the other. Servants bustled around us, laying down blue plates piled high with pupusas and yuca frita. Firelight flickered in silver candelabras, and footsteps echoed below the vaulted ceiling. The air smelled of charred meat and cilantro.

‘How is the Pacamara production?’ Papá asked, trying to disguise the tension in his voice. Our guests owned a large coffee plantation in Chalatenango. ‘A poor year for growth, no? Almost no wet season at all.’

Señor Quiñónez shifted in the wooden chair. ‘Rafael has been experimenting with new processing techniques, and the quality is exceptional.’ He fixed my father with a defiant stare. ‘We are meeting with a major European buyer next week.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ said Papá through pursed lips. He had clearly never been less glad to hear anything in his life.

He was famous for his irascibility, for his endless cursing and hot temper, but I knew there was tenderness at the very heart of him. A fondness for rock music, a love of architecture, a wicked sense of humour. Genuine adoration for his children, evident not in mawkish compliments or bedtime stories but in the way he worked himself to the bone to give us a good life.

I missed him before I was even gone; a kind of pre-emptive grief I'd grown so accustomed to over the last several centuries. In a futile attempt at self-preservation, my mind rehearsed loss before death closed its fingers, as though practising it would lessen the blow. It never did.

My eighteenth birthday was only a few days away.

Which meant that soon, I would be dead.

And in the next life, Papá would be but a stranger.

Without conscious thought, I studied our guests with a careful sweep of the gaze, then the servants milling around the table, searching for that *spark*, that *pull*, that . . . *something*.

But my attention didn't snag on anything — anyone — suspicious.

Scanning faces was a paranoid tic that came as naturally to me as breathing. Hypervigilance had never saved me before, and yet the behaviour was too deeply ingrained to excavate.

'Buen provecho,' Mamá announced, gesturing for our guests to tuck into the food. She looked the perfect hostess in her puff-sleeved white dress and stark red lipstick, but there was fraughtness etched around her eyes.

'It'll be all right, Mamá,' I'd whispered to her in the kitchen before their arrival. 'You all want what's best for your kids. That's all that matters.'

She'd squeezed my hand, sighing. 'You always think the best of people. Of situations. I don't know where you came from, *mi rayo de sol*, but I hope you never change.'

Familia Sola and Familia Quiñónez were old friends turned bitter enemies. Our interests had mostly aligned throughout the twentieth century – our plantations kissed at the borders – until both farms were razed by a rogue arsonist at the outbreak of the Civil War. The families had blamed each other, claiming that an attempt to sabotage their competitors had backfired on their own land.

Now a temporary truce had been called, because my fool-hearted sister, Silvia, had fallen in love with the eldest Quiñónez son, and our fathers preferred any related bloodshed to occur *before* the wedding.

'So,' said Señor Quiñónez, signalling that the small talk was over. He stabbed a piece of black-edged beef with his fork, pausing halfway to his mouth.

Papá grimaced. 'So.'

Señor Quiñónez narrowed his eyes, and neither man said any more.

'We could just skip the Montague–Capulet performance, no?' I asked cheerfully, stuffing yuca frita into my mouth. 'For the children?'

A little reckless, perhaps, but in my defence I was an immortal being due to die any day now.

This always happened as my death date drew near – a loosening of the tongue, a spilling of secrets, an airing of the things that needed to be said but never were.

Mamá shot me a look of betrayal, while Rafael Quiñónez,

the other family's middle son, stifled a laugh across the table. Dark-brown hair fell around his face in waves, and his lips quirked playfully.

'No seas tan dundo,' my usually silent grandmother hissed – she was forever urging me not to be so *stupid*.

I shrugged. 'We should be celebrating. Love is in the air, after all. *Love is in the aaair*.'

I sang this last part with toneless gusto, and Rafael could not suppress his snort of laughter.

Papá glared at me warningly. 'Adella, you need to –'

'Get some air?' I smiled sweetly, climbing to my feet as my sister's mouth fell open. 'I agree.'

Without a backward glance, I shoved through the mahogany double doors to the courtyard in the middle of the house. The last thing I heard was my father apologizing for his clown of a daughter – only for Señor Quiñónez to gruffly retort that I'd inherited Papá's singing voice.

Ice broken.

*You're welcome, Silvia.*

I did not fear the aftermath; my father's ire would not kill me.

Only one thing – one person – *could*.

Outside, the evening air was warm and stagnant. The maquilishuat trees were in brilliant bloom, pink trumpet flowers fluttering seductively like dancers in bell skirts. All the cobalt-blue shutters were flung open.

I walked over the baked terracotta tiles to the small kidney-shaped pool in the far corner. It lay in the partial shade of an orange tree, green algae gathering at its murky edges. Slipping off my espadrilles and hitching up my flowing skirt – cerulean

blue embroidered with red and gold roses – I perched on the side and dangled my feet into the cool water. Through a barred window into the house, I heard a servant drop something with a muttered curse of ‘¡Puchica!’

The double doors banged open and shut again, letting loose an eruption of heated voices in the gap, and for a moment I thought my mother had come to lecture me on running my mouth.

But it wasn’t Mamá.

It was Rafael.

The middle-born Quiñónez and I went to the same private school, and frequented the same smoke-filled clubs. Still, we rolled in different circles. There was a kind of performed loathing between us, though it often lacked the depth our fathers might have hoped for. In reality, I didn’t care much about him either way.

Yet at the sight of him approaching, my breath hitched.

*Could it be . . . ?*

No. I’d never felt the slightest flicker of suspicion in his presence.

‘¿Qué onda?’ he asked, his footsteps soft on the tiles.

I said nothing, only narrowed my eyes.

‘You were funny back there.’ There was a smirk in his voice, almost flirtatious. ‘Like you don’t care what happens to you.’

I shrugged, trying to bridle the uneven canter of my heart. ‘It’s all so –’

Before I could finish my sentence, there was a knife at my throat.

A sharp bolt of adrenaline; a hollow pit in my stomach. The blade was warm from where it had been tucked into his pocket.

I sighed a long-suffering sigh, letting my eyes flutter close. 'For fuck's sake, Arden.'

My tone dripped with sardonic boredom, but my chest thumped wildly. No matter how many times I was murdered, it never got any less painful.

And, in truth, I hadn't suspected Rafael for a moment.

Arden was getting better at this.

How had I not known? How had I not felt that wrenching soul tether, that intimate magnetism? How could I ever hope to protect myself, to survive, if I didn't see the threat coming?

'It's a shame, Evelyn,' he murmured, his breath brushing my ear like a silk scarf. He was bent down on one knee at my back, as though proposing. 'Adella Sola suited you.'

I swallowed hard, the knife pinching my skin. 'Usually you make me fall in love with you first.'

'Thought I'd mix things up.'

'Bullshit.'

I slammed my head back as hard as I could into his face, crunching his nose with a bloody spurt. He grunted and fell backwards, the knife slipping away from my throat.

'Siberia hurt you as much as it hurt me.' Swinging my legs out of the pool, I rolled away from him, wincing as my knees grazed on the rough tiles. 'Is that why you kept your distance this time?'

'Believe what you want.'

He lunged forward, arm outstretched with the pocketknife angled at my chest.

I dodged at the last second. Using his toppling momentum against him, I grabbed a fistful of hair at the nape of his neck and slammed his head into the ground. The impact reverberated up my arm, the way jumping from a too-high tree branch jars your knees.

The knife skittered across the tiles as he went limp, not unconscious but definitely starry-eyed.

Blood roaring in my ears, I grabbed the wooden handle of the knife then rolled his body supine. He groaned blearily as I straddled him, knees planted either side of his waist, and some traitorous part of me throbbed at the feel of his body beneath mine.

*Focus.*

This time I wanted to look him in the eye as I killed him. Unlike in Nauru.

I pressed the tip of the knife under his chin. ‘And still you won’t tell me why you hunt me through every life.’

‘It’s insulting that you don’t remember.’

His hips jerked sharply to the side as he tried to shove me off him, and he gave it enough sudden force that it worked.

The blade slit his throat right as we both tumbled into the pool.

Body thrashing, he choked on the water and his own gurgling blood. The water was warm and thick, and the blade slipped from my already-weakening hand. My mouth and nose filled with chlorine as I gasped for air, hands pushing

away from him or maybe towards him, a confusion of turquoise tiles and metallic scarlet swirling into water.

Then, as though our lifestrings were woven fatally together, my own pulse waned.

A sun falling below the horizon, a slow orchestra fading out.

Old blood ebbing to a temporary trickle.

This brief life flashed before my eyes. My father's awful singing, my sister's knotted frown as she painted her watercolours, my grandmother's knitting needles clacking together, scorching afternoons with my mother in the dusty city, the scents of clay and coffee and heat, all of it doomed from the start.

Grief twisted through me, thick and sharp, the loss never getting any easier, the unmooring from history never any less disorientating.

Moments after Rafael's final gargled breath, the darkness creeping at the edges of my vision finally swallowed me whole. Floating in a pool of crimson, our hearts stopped beating as one.

Every *fucking* time.