

LBRIS

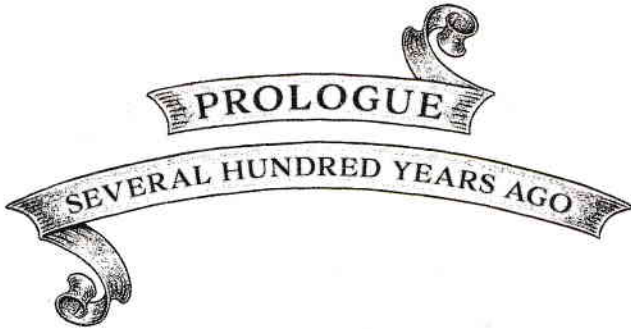
We know
books

Our
Infinite
Fates

LAURA
STEVEN



PENGUIN BOOKS



THE RIBBON BINDING THEIR wrists together was red as a wound.

It was late Sólmánuður, and a fine day for a wedding. Scant clouds wisped across the pale sky. The sea lapped at the pebble beach, afternoon sun splicing its surface with fractal shards of gold. Rounded rocks rose through the shallow foam, sprayed with salt and the vague echo of siren song – if one believed in such things, which the bride did not.

But she believed in love, and in the man who stood before her.

The groom's long chestnut hair was threaded with copper. His beard – impressively thick for a man not yet eighteen – was braided with metal rings and porcelain beads, scented with the pine resin and sage of his best oil. He wore a neat dark tunic and trousers, a gold arm ring, and a leather belt fastened at his waist. From the belt hung a glorious longsword, its hilt studded with rubies. A family heirloom.

A smile pulled the groom's crooked mouth wide, his eyes glistening with joy. He had known the bride since the day he was born, and had dreamed of this day for over a decade. She

was the golden strand running through his life, tying his past and future together in a harmonious bow.

The bride, however, was coiled like a spring. Dressed in a long linen dress of palest cream and beaded silver, she cut a tall, lithe figure.

Every taut line of her body lay in wait.

Half huntress, half hunted.

The groom barely noticed. He was too caught up in the moment, in the caw of seagulls and the felted words of the elder officiating the ceremony.

As formalities were exchanged, their hands remained fastened. The red ribbon had been woven from the tunic of the groom's late mother, so that she might still play a part in the ceremony. Indeed, the groom felt his mother's presence there, as both a spectral smudge in the middle distance and a reassuring solidity around his wrist. His heart swelled, pressing painfully against the cage of his ribs.

At the bride's curious insistence, they exchanged weapons instead of rings. Knives, forged by her brother, the curved silver blades each engraved with the Valknut. Odin was the groom's favourite god; he found himself inexplicably drawn to the interweaving of past, present and future, to the perpetual knot of life and death and rebirth.

The wizened elder nodded for the groom to utter his vows.

'By the light of the sun and the power of the gods,' the groom said, a marble of emotion rolling in his throat, 'I pledge to love and honour you always.'

He drew his sword and touched the jewelled hilt to his bride's shoulder.

The elder nodded once more, solemn, almost funereal. ‘I believe the bride has penned her own vows.’

Something strange darted over the elder’s aged face.

Scorn?

The bride shivered. She had been cold since sweating out her maidenhood in the hot springs the day prior, and the elder’s dispassion was unsettling.

A breeze picked up, and the sea whipped itself into sharp peaks.

The bride’s voice was low, crystalline, as she spoke to her betrothed. ‘Like the sway of the sea and the tug of the tides, love is a moving, eternal thing. Let us not be afraid of the wax and the wane, the rise and the fall, the eternal undertow. Each time our souls meet, let us submerge our bodies in the bright-blue cold, and let the waves make us anew.’ A tear slid down the apple of her cheek. ‘I love you, and I have loved you, and I will love you.’

The groom pressed his warm forehead to hers. ‘I love you, and I have loved you, and I will love you.’

They waited for a few moments, sure they would soon hear the elder’s blessing of the union. A wave tumbled and fizzed, and a plume of smoke rose from the fresh-lit fire where the meat would be roasted for the feast.

The silence unfolded an inch too far, and a murmur travelled through the crowd.

Confusion registered on the groom’s ruddy face, but the bride’s body understood something dreadful before her mind caught up, a warning bell tolling deep in her chest.

And then came the crisp, cutting words, like the bite of a shovel into frosted earth.

‘Did you truly think I would not find you?’

The bride and groom looked up in horrified unison to find the elder’s eyes glowing like crucibles. Her lined face was washing itself smooth, and her nails lengthened, thickened, blackened.

The groom stumbled backwards. Without pause, the bride swiped her marital blade across his throat, opening a mouth-like slit from which blood choked and gurgled.

He grabbed for breath, but none came.

Shock flashed briefly across his face before he crumpled to the pebbled shore.

The bride fell a second later, gasping, though her own throat remained unmarred. The bloodied blade fell from her hand, the Valknut still glinting in the oblivious daylight.

The last thing they saw before the world blinked out was the red ribbon of fate still binding their wrists.



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.