



Our Infinite Fates

a novel



Laura Steven



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
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Prologue

Several hundred years ago

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 a thing, 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 glistering 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 favorite 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 honor you always."

He drew his sword and touched the jeweled 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 traveled 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 backward. Without pause, the bride swiped her marital blade across his throat, opening a mouthlike 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.

El Salvador

2004

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 his 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 humor. 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 preemptive grief I'd grown 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 practicing 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 behavior 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."

La familia Sola and la 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 blamed each other, claiming that an attempt to sabotage their competitor 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 Quiñóñez son, and our fathers preferred any related bloodshed to occur *before* the wedding.

“So,” said Señor Quiñóñez, signaling 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 Quiñóñez 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 defense 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 Quiñóñez, 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 dunda,” 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 maquili-shuat 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 terra-cotta 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 of 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, 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 backward, 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 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 Arden’s body supine. He groaned blearily as I straddled him, knees planted on 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 toward 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 watercolors, 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.

Wales

2022

Tragedy struck the Blythe family often and hard, like a river flooding the same sorry houses year after year. And it didn't matter what defences we tried to build; there was no outsmarting this act of nature, or god, or the devil himself. It was human folly, or hubris, to think we could wrong-foot forces like seasons and time, to think we could build a dam against life and death. But that didn't stop us from trying.

When I was eight, my father was killed by a drunk driver on Christmas Eve as he walked home from the pub. Pinned against a stone wall, crushed until blood wept from his eyes, until everything in him ruptured and burst. A tragedy, though not the first, and certainly not the last.

A few months later we buried his parents—our beloved Granny and Gramps. They died one after the other, a heart attack and a stroke, two dominoes too devastated to stay upright any longer.

To make matters worse, eight was usually around the age I began to remember my ultimate fate. The realisation would come to me slowly, at first, the sense of a storm looming on the horizon, or maybe an atomic bomb, but not truly understanding the *who* or *why* or *what*. And then an image would break through—a knife to the chest, a garrotte round my neck, poison in my heart—

and I would *remember*. I would spend the next six or eight or ten years wondering how and when Arden would strike again.

How and when I would die by their hand.

Grappling with my own impending demise was one thing, but doing it at the same time as losing half my family was quite another. Life after life, cruelty after cruelty, and the unbearable weight of being human was beginning to wear me down. The constant cycle of love and loss, as inevitable and natural as the rolling seasons.

But I would always try to build the dam anyway.

Two weeks before my eighteenth birthday, I sat in the hospital where my grandparents had died and watched my bald sister play the violin.

The last note rang out smooth as velvet. The polished maple was tucked beneath her pale pixie chin, the concentration on her face relaxing as she looked up expectantly.

“Excuse me.” Mum sniffed, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. She stood up swiftly and left the room, paisley scarf fluttering behind her. Without her lavender perfume, the room smelled hospital-stale.

Gracie rolled her hazel eyes, resting the violin in her lap. “Maybe I should have chosen a less melancholic instrument. The drums, perhaps. Or a ukulele. Do we think the nurses might decapitate me if I took up the banjo?” I recognised my own resolute sarcasm in her voice—a little kid copying her older sister’s bravado.

“Mum’s just scared,” I said. “You’re her baby.”

“I’m fourteen,” Gracie retorted, as though this settled matters.

Gracie had been diagnosed with leukaemia about a year ago, when she’d finally got her endless bruising checked out. She’d been stoic, for the most part, though I had the distinct feeling it was to combat Mum’s cloying sadness. I understood it, of course,

but I sometimes found myself annoyed that Mum couldn't muster a brave face for Gracie's sake.

In truth, the thought of anything bad happening to my sister was deeply painful for me too, even if I likely wouldn't be around to see it. I'd loved a lot of siblings in a lot of lives, but Gracie was a firm favourite. Sharp, weird, bright in an entirely unique way. So *alive*. The image of her body lying empty in a cold, damp grave was so incongruous that my body folded in on itself whenever I thought about it.

And the idea of my mum up in that big farmhouse all alone—a farmhouse once filled with a family she adored—cleaved me in two. But it wouldn't come to that. I wouldn't *let* it.

Gracie nodded to the beige plaster on my upper arm. "How'd today's injection go?"

The doctors were prepping my body to donate stem cells. "Nothing compared to chemo."

"In your infinite experience of chemo."

I twirled my hair up into a bun. "It is quite famously horrible."

And yet still a miracle. I had lived long enough to remember hacksaws grinding through bone, teeth gnawing desperately on sodden rags, all of it so brutal and so futile. Modern medicine was a wonder.

Gracie eyed my hair enviously. She used to have the same smooth copper sheets. "I am a bit bald, it has to be said. Though I've always been eccentric, so perhaps the protruding skull fits my persona. I might start carrying a scythe to really freak people out."

A sudden sharp image came to me: a sickle propped against a dark stone wall.

It felt deeply, viscerally important, and yet there was no context attached.

These flashes of past lives felt like tiny splintered fragments of a gigantic mosaic, the full picture always beyond my reach. Like

the twist of a kaleidoscope, rearranging the pattern every time I tried too hard to study it.

I remembered the last five or six lives in Technicolor detail—the sights and smells and emotions, the casts of loved ones I’d left behind, every line of Arden’s new faces. But the lives before that became less and less distinct the further back they went, until everything was smudged with fog.

Occasionally a new detail would come to me, stark and unmistakable, but I couldn’t recall how it fitted into the big picture of my curious existence. I knew there was a row of grim pyres by a bobbing harbour, an olive grove in sun-dappled Andalusia, a trader ship in the buffeting wilds of the Indian Ocean, but the specifics had been lost to time—or to my own woeful memory.

And beneath it all, shrouded under several layers of love and fear and confusion and hurt and grief and anger . . . there was a *why*.

A *why* that had eluded me for centuries.

Over the course of a hundred lifetimes, I had considered this *why* from every possible angle, from the human and the mundane (a grudge, a rivalry, a bet) to the supernatural and the arcane (an ancient curse, a deal with the devil, a particularly malevolent bridge troll). There were glimmers of reason, of truth—such as when Arden had let slip, in darkest Siberia, that it was a deal made long ago that had sealed our fate—but nothing solid enough to build that *why* into a robust structure.

And for whatever godforsaken reason, Arden would never willingly share our origin story.

I was so lost in my thoughts—absorbed in the blade-sharp image of a sickle propped against a dark stone wall—that I didn’t realise Gracie was talking.

Or, rather, performing.

“ . . . and I thought of how it feels to hold you, each season of

you,” she proclaimed, holding a leather-bound poetry book in her pale hands. “‘Our love blossoming afresh, year after year, century after century, new flowers from old roots, an eternal seed from which life will always bloom.’”

Something in me prickled with recognition I couldn’t quite place. “What is that?”

Love blossoming afresh, century after century?

A strange turn of phrase for the average poet.

Gracie shrugged dismissively, tossing it onto the bed beside her blanketed legs. “Some poetry book? Becca brought it for me on her last visit.” Becca was Gracie’s equally macabre best friend, who wore exclusively black and talked in an exaggeratedly low voice to disguise her natural chirpiness. “She did this whole care-package thing. It was a bit tragic.”

“Yes, but what’s the book?” I angled myself to get a better look at the cover.

Ten Hundred Years of You.

My heart went unnaturally still in my chest.

“It’s a viral sensation,” Gracie said scathingly. She eschewed popular culture out of principle. “Honestly, what was Becca thinking? I have cancer, not bad taste. Speaking of which, I’m honoured that you’re still wearing the necklace.”

Gracie pointed toward the black ribbon around my neck.

My hand went to the ugly “jewellery” she’d made me a few weeks ago. The pendant was a discarded chicken wishbone, and it still smelled vaguely of roast thyme. It was completely disgusting, but I could tell by the triumphant look on her face as she handed it to me that it was a challenge. I had to pretend to love it and wear it all the time, even though it was a literal carcass. And if I took it off, she’d guilt-trip me for months.

I bit my lip, trying to forget about the strangely apt poetry book. “Yes. It’s beautiful.”

She pressed her lips together, trying desperately not to laugh.

A sudden metallic clatter echoed from the corridor, as though a supply trolley had overturned, and I jerked in my seat. My nerves had never been quite the same since the front lines of the Great War—as if being hunted like an animal through every existence wasn’t fraying enough.

I watched the doorway for a few moments, half expecting Arden to appear amid the commotion, but no murderous silhouette materialised.

“What’s the first thing you’re going to do when you get out of here?” I asked my sister, voice rattling slightly, like the brittle bars of a cage come loose. “Because you *are* getting out of here, Gracie. I promise.”

The absurd thing was that I genuinely believed it.

“Why the obsession with things we might do in the future?” Gracie smirked. “You’re such a daydreamer.”

“You say that like it’s some fatal disease.”

She gave me a pointed look. “I found your extremely tragic list. The things you’re going to do when you’re an adult, as though adulthood is some mythical state.”

My cheeks warmed. I’d kept such a list in every life I could remember, filled with things I’d do once I broke the curse and finally *lived*. Because if you can imagine a future, then surely, surely, it must be real, must be possible.

“I’m an optimist, all right? So what *are* you going to do when you’re free of this?”

Gracie considered the question, fiddling absently with her violin strings. “Go to the cemetery.”

“Why?”

I expected her to say something profound, like visiting our family graves or paying respects to her ward friends who hadn’t made it.

She stroked her chin. “One of my old teachers died. He once called me ‘unsettling.’ I’d quite like to deface his tombstone.”

Once my shocked peals of laughter had subsided, I checked my narrow gold wristwatch and jolted at the time. “Shit, I’m going to be late for work.”

I grabbed my backpack from the faded linoleum floor and stood reluctantly. My vision pitched and blurred. Needles made me woozy, but it seemed a pathetic thing to complain about given what Gracie was going through. It also made very little sense. I’d once had my torso blown open by a grenade, but god forbid a trained medical professional perform a blood test.

Flipping the sheet music on the stand beside her bed, she adjusted her thin blue blanket, picked up her violin, and said, “Bye, Bran Flakes.”

Even though I was Evelyn right down to my marrow, her pet name for me was one of many reasons I felt so at home as Branwen Blythe.

Tossing my backpack over my shoulder, I gave Gracie a kiss on the forehead. “Love you too, Porridge Face.”

“You can’t take the piss out of a leukaemia patient’s complexion!” she yelled after me. “You insensitive motherfucker!”

I looked back at her briefly before I went, love inflating in my lungs like a balloon.

Gracie was the only thing that had kept Mum and me sane after Dad died. She was too young to understand the gravity of it, and so spent the ensuing few months telling awful made-up jokes and performing dramatic soliloquies in a Venetian mask, fox-trotting around the living room in my mother’s highest heels as we wept by the fireside. She was simultaneously human sunshine and darkly gothic. One of her first full sentences was “The shadows are very quiet today.”

There was a whole six-month period when she dressed in stripes

and performed as a mime morning, noon, and night. Her teachers wanted so sincerely to be angry, but her cartoonish facial expressions and carefully choreographed routines were impossible not to laugh at.

A born performer. A pristine strangeness.

It seemed so unfair that someone so full of life could be sucked clean of it by a brutal disease. Yet while I had lost a lot of people in a lot of lives, I could *save* her.

A rare power. A gift in a lifetime of curses.

I just had to survive long enough to do so.

I would turn eighteen in exactly two weeks. The stem cell procedure was slated for four days' time, after my final cell-boosting injection. I was the only relative whose tissue matched Gracie's—without me, she'd have to go on a national register with a waiting list as long as the River Wye.

If Arden found me before the procedure, there was every chance my sister would die too.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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