***Tobia Village, Colombia, 2017***

Deep within the jungled hills of Central Colombia a small village drew strength from the power of their river god. Their survival depended on the outsiders who traveled from around the world in hopes of conquering El Rio Negro’s fierce and winding rapids.

Only one of the village families was impervious to the tourists’ investments, but even they depended on the river’s grace to irrigate their prized coffee plants. For them, the river represented the southern border of *La Hacienda Cruz*, a century-old coffee plantation spanning 200 hectares. It had been owned by three generations of the Cruz family, a family known for their commitment to hard work and careful cultivation.

Camila and Angelina Cruz—children of the youngest generation and distinguished by their closeness—worked the hardest of them all. During the days, they planted, tilled, and harvested coffee beans alongside forty family members. Then, when the evenings came, they worked in tandem to prepare the dinner table.

Angelina filled large ceramic vats with rice and beans and others with broths made from newly harvested vegetables. Camila filled the aluminum basins with fresh fruit soaked in condensed milk, cream, and vanilla. And neither daughter ever complained. Each night, following long, arduous days of school and chores, they welcomed everyone to the long wooden table in the central dining room and took great pride in the splendor of the ingredients they’d picked and plucked with their very own hands.

For the first fifteen years of Camila’s life, where one sister went, the other, only two years older, followed, and things were always as they should be.

But one cool and cloudy morning, something changed. The river grew angry, and a heavy fog crept in, filling the skies with nature’s unknown. The girls’ grandmother, Doña Maria, a woman who often conversed with the land, grew concerned by the curious weather, knowing they were in a season soaked with humidity and warmth.

“The skies are thick with tears,” she warned. “It’s an omen. We should all stay inside today.”

Yet, no one took heed.

In their commitment to hard work, the girls continued with their weekend routine, putting on their wide-brimmed hats, long-sleeved shirts, and plastic boots—a uniform for hand-picking coffee berries. But it was the first day either girl could recall such a chill in the air on the verge of summer.

When the morning chores were complete, the skies continued to darken, and the air remained moist, but still no rain. The girls grabbed their backpacks and raced to a secret place near the cliffs where they knew no one would follow. They huddled close amid the odd chill in the growing breeze and joined their heads together, sharing in the richness of their many secrets, including Camila’s growing passion for art.

Angelina shivered atop the damp grass and flipped Camila’s book of drawings to the newest page.

“You’ve captured Madre’s likeness perfectly,” she said. “This is her scowl of discontentment at the simple life of farmers.”

Camila nodded. “It’s true. But once Papi moves us to the modern city in Florida, fat with fancy Americanos, she will never scowl again.”

Angelina agreed, laughing at the idea that their mother’s misery was a secret the woman believed she’d kept to herself.

Camila pulled out her pencil and reached for her sketchbook, but her older sister shook her head.

“Not yet,” she said. “We need to begin with me today.”

Angelina reached into the backpack for her textbook, begrudgingly prepared to review that week’s calculus assignment. The year-end exam was scheduled for the following day, and Angelina still didn’t understand the concepts enough to pass the exam.

It was one of the biggest secrets between them.

While the highly advanced subjects were simple for Camila, nothing academic ever came quite as easily for Angelina.

A gust of wind swept past them, flipping the textbook open to its center as both girls stared up toward the sky.

“I don’t know that the rains will hold off long enough for us to study out here,” Angelina said, the worry in her voice evident. If they didn’t study, she knew she would fail, but if they returned home, they wouldn’t be able to conduct their session in secret.

Releasing a long and languid sigh, Angelina’s fingers reached out and grazed the edge of the sketchbook’s spiral wire. She pictured the pages upon pages of Camila’s detailed drawings, silently admiring how everything bloomed full and beautiful on the page, no matter the muse. Camila had never shown a preference for flora, fauna, or portraits of unsuspecting family members. Instead, each detailed image showcased an abundance of rich shadows and clean lines, all uniquely coming together with a vision Angelina had never seen before. Camila’s art looked like it sprang from the hands of an old soul.

Camila studied the sad smile on Angelina’s face as she reached for the textbook, but even her smile couldn’t hide the angst that burned from within. For years, the two of them had hidden Camila’s natural strengths for learning, knowing that if their parents understood what she was truly capable of, they’d never support her pursuits in art.

A deep slice of guilt cut through her. *No longer*, Camila thought, and a thick rumble of thunder pounding at the sky above them only confirmed it.

El Rio Negro was warning them to return home.

Their abuela had been right, and nature’s growing wrath swept past, pulling at their hats with abnormally cold winds.

*It’s an omen*, Abuela had said, and this time Camila understood.

“We cannot continue in our secrets any longer,” she said. “It’s time we tell the truth.”

Angelina looked up. “Absolutely not. Have you lost your mind? You know what will happen. No more art. You will be forced to carry the full weight of their expectations.”

Camila grabbed the textbook and tossed it back into the backpack.

“It doesn’t matter. We are going to tell them the truth, and then we are going to insist on the freedom to choose our own paths. Neither of us has to become a doctor. We can be free to do what we want.”

Angelina rolled her eyes, exasperated. “You think everything is so easy, child, because, up until now, for you, it has been.”

Camila took her sister’s hand, guiding her to stand. She lifted her finger and placed it on Angelina’s lips, rising on tiptoes to reach her. “You will not be the martyr any longer,” she said, peering deeply into her sister’s eyes. “And neither will I.”

Angelina squeezed her hands. “It’s already decided. If Papi and Madre realize the depth of your mind, they’ll never agree to a career drawing pictures. Don’t forget—they are leaving their home and everything they know to provide us the best opportunity they can.”

Camila took a step back, her patience waning, and looked down at the pages splayed open from the wind, image after image staring back at her.

Angelina bent down and grabbed the sketch pad.

Wanting to prove a point, she threw it toward the cliff’s edge. “I knew it. You should see the expression on your face,” she said.

The winds increased, bringing a light howl with their arrival. A crack of lightning streaked across the sky, but still the rain did not come. Both girls glanced up at the light flashing within the clouds, then turned to stare at one another.

“I think we should get back to the house,” Camila said. “Nature is sending us a message that we shouldn’t be here. El Rio Negro is urging us to end these lies once and for all.”

At this, the skies opened and pellets of cold rain fell from above while shrills of laughter rose from the raging water below. Both stopped their debate.

Normally, the girls loved watching the familiar rafts shuttle tourists down a river, intent on testing the conviction of its challengers.

But not this time.

They raised their hands to wipe the rain from their faces while the captain hollered at his team. His bright yellow paddle speared high into the air, then sliced down into the cloudy, churning waves.

Then Camila noticed the fog. She stood entranced at the shadows of steamy grey that swept down from the hill and moved in behind the rafters.

*It’s chasing them*, she thought. *That was our final warning*.

And when she looked down again, the crew had rounded the bend and moved out of sight.