

# SNOWFLAKE

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**Nick Wolven's fiction recently appeared in the *Year's Best Science Fiction*, published by Tor and edited by Jonathan Strahan, and is forthcoming in *F&SF*. His short stories have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies in countries around the world. Nick's devastating new near future tale takes a powerful look at the cutthroat world of a touring rock band.**

So when my phone started up, jittering on the nightstand, I knew right away what it had to be. I pushed off the covers and went out on the balcony, holding the rail thinking, God, not again. Tokyo all lit up and crazy at this unholy hour of three a.m., and it made me feel worse, somehow, seeing those lights, like watching commercials for stuff you can't afford. When my phone buzzed again I grabbed it and thumbed it and like I thought, it was Sam, freaking out.

"Let me guess," I said. Thinking this was the one, you know, The One, and my heart stopped going for a breath.

But Sam said, "She's all right. I mean, basically, no, but yeah, she's all right." Because that's how Samira Gonzalez gets in a crisis, all fucked around and twisted up.

But here my heart was going extra hard, almost buzzing like a phone in my chest, shooting out notices and alerts.

"I'm coming."

When I was ready I went out in the hall. There was Donal already coming from his room, face scrunched up going, "Really? Three A.M.? Like feekin' jet lag wasn't enough?"

So we go down together, me leading on the stairs, and when we get to fourteen, there's Ames outside her door, titan-sized, bald, and totally unstoppable. He went into his pose when he heard us coming, stone-cold killer, murder in each wrist, like when in London he messed up those paparazzi. But when he saw it was us he pushed open her door.

"Bathroom. Sam's with her." Talking real soft. But if you knew him, you could see he was scared.

So we go in, quiet, and there it all was, like every single other time. She'd trashed the place. She always did. Lamps on the floor, clothes all over, the bed gunked up with food she liked when she was down, pizza and wings and spaghetti and sriracha—all that *red*—and seeing it I almost cried, even before I went in the bathroom and saw her.

"Help me," Sam whispered. She was kneeling on a towel.

We took away the bottle. We got her panties where they belonged. I took her feet, Ames took her head, Sam and Donal sort of patted down her hands—it took all four of us to get her on her feet and start her walking, keep her alert.

"You do the Narcan?" I whispered to Sam.

"I didn't, no. I don't know what she took."

I checked the bed. Mostly bottles. Tons of the wine we'd loaded up in Barcelona. A whole three-hundred-dollar Amelia lying empty in the sheets.

"No meds?" I was trying to be discreet, counting the bottles scattered around. White, blue, saffron, beige. Little, medium, big, gigantic. Stick-on labels now mostly peeled off. I tried to remember the new prescriptions, what was official, what not so much. It was all just medicine to her. Correctives, supplements, necessary treatments. All to get her close to something like okay.

"I don't know," Sam said. "I think she was trying to dump it down the toilet. I don't, I can't—"

"Take a sec."

Meanwhile I could see she was starting to wake up. Her eyes going slitted and glimmering and suspicious, picking up how we were whispering. She'd be alert soon, then she'd be mad, then it would be dangerous to have her on her feet. We brought her to the couch and put a sheet over her.

"Paramedics?" I said.

Sam nodded. "On the way."

"What do we do?" Donal started fidgeting like a child needing potty, picking up one foot, then the other. "I mean, what do we *do*?"

The same conversation we'd had a million times. Like a dream where you can't move or scream, can't change a thing.

Now she was moaning, kind of rolling. I knew what she wanted. I knelt beside her and put in the call, holding the phone up over us both, waiting for his face to appear in the screen. The connection was real bad, but I knew he would answer. He always answered. He the man with the answers.

The screen filled up with moving shadows, we heard a whispery sound of feet, and then he was there, wise and calm, in control.

Back where he was, it was bright noon.

"Coco, look. It's Doctor Ali."

Her eyes barely open. Two dark slits.

"Yes, Coco, it's Doctor Ali." His voice so warm, so gentle, so rich, I could see right away the effect he had. He always knew just what to say. "I understand you had an episode, Coco. Tell me, now, what seems to be the trouble?"

(I had the phone up close to her face, screen making watery flickers on her cheeks, but I could picture how he'd look at her, touching his beard, stroking his mustache, Doctor Ali, our savior, our saint.)

"I'm in LA, Coco, but I'm always here for you. Will you tell me, was it the dosage, Coco? Do you feel we need to adjust the dosage?"

Silence. But I knew she was listening. Hanging on his every word.

"The medications, Coco? Are you unhappy with the medications? Do we need to adjust the medications?"

It didn't matter what he said. What mattered was him, his voice, his soul, the magical aura of the man who brought the drugs.

"Is it the tour? Are you tired from the tour? I want to help, Coco. That's all I want. I will do whatever I can to help. Will you tell me, Coco, what's the matter?"

She tried to answer. Body arcing up, rising, falling, and I could swear it was *her*, in that instant, really *her*, the kid who used to hang out all day at the ballfield by the Iglesia Pentecostal, sitting on the fence kicking heels on chainlink, singing made-up words to the tune of "Chantaje." Coco, my Coco, and I wanted to grab her shouting, Look, we're *here* for you, okay? All of us, Donal, Samira, Ames, and Trey from make-up and Tim and Tyrene, and Cristal who's still over at the venue, and Mikey on the bus, and everyone, the crew, we'll always be here. And me, Nikki, I'll be here forever, if you just stay with us, please.

But her lids came down, and her breath went out, and she started crying, ugly sobs like she'd done when we were kids, and Doctor Ali saying:

"Listen, Coco. People are coming. When they come, you must do exactly as they say. After that, we'll find an answer. We'll explore new options. We will beat this, Coco. I swear, I promise, we will beat these feelings."

She wasn't with us. She was in some other place she went to these days, a place deep inside her full of pain and roaring voices. And the paramedics came, led by Ames, punching instructions into their gurney. One stopped when he saw who it was, but Ames gave the guy a look. They lifted her up and took her away, and I was sure I was the only one who heard what she whispered . . . there on the couch . . . the only one who knew she *had* whispered, answering the question we were always asking.

*What's the trouble, Coco?*

She looked at me, I swear, and said, *It's them.*

\* \* \*

## 2

"It's them," Samira said, pulling her cigarette from her lips, pointing the blinking blue tip at the TV. And we all looked up as she slid off the desk.

The house was quiet, every window open, breeze off the bluff making us feel the silence, like you do on really hot days in Malibu. Out on the grounds the yardwork guys were clipping back the cypresses, moving in that slouchy way of people in the heat, the drenching sun making everything seem slow. Near where we sat, Tim, the tech guy, was doing laps in the outdoor pool, inflicting lazy white stabs of his hands. The water going russhhhh-glunk, russhhhh-glunk, timing how long we'd all been sitting here, waiting for some damn thing to change.

In the room with the suede couches and fireplace, behind the French doors and plants and veranda, the wall-size Samsung was going nonstop. Sam glared at the screen, saying, "Them, right? They're the ones who do this to her. The ones who push her over the edge."

We all kind of looked up, dead-eyed, silent, then back to the yammering screen. It was one of those mornings like we often had in Malibu, drinking, smoking, passing time.

"The *demands*," Samira said. "How they're always on her. It takes everything she's got to *survive*."

She was saying this because of what was on TV. It was playing a special about what had gone down in Tokyo, the implosion of the tour, the awful aftermath. Hospital visits, clinics, rumors. The latest superlong stint in rehab. They had video from the show, the part in the encore where she'd started acting weird, yanking on her hair in the bridge of "Filter Summer," muttering nonsense and missing her lines. The British reporter-guy all up in her business, bugging his eyes and pursing his lips.

". . . provided yet another glimpse into the exorbitant lifestyle of Coco Rios, which for twenty years has had fans wondering, and worrying, about the singer's mental health—"

"Turn it off." Cristal was going through the room, straightening glasses, plumping cushions, doing what the staff had already done.

The TV stayed on. It always stayed on.

". . . was the first time Rios had toured in six years, and the third time the singer had cut a tour short. People close to the star blamed an intensive schedule. But a habit of canceling concert dates and a reputation for instability have become a liability for a performer struggling with public controversy and sinking sales."

"This is rank shite, this." Donal thumped his feet in the empty pizza box, hanging

his head back over the couch, joint sticking up like his personal smokestack. "Next they'll be on about 'er fuckin' tweets."

And they were. And getting into it, too, stuff from all throughout her career. The flameout on her Instagram followers. The American flag thing, the Israel thing, the McDonald's thing, the Jeep Cherokee thing. The time she said that weird stuff about spanking. The interview she did with Jimmy Tarrow, when she pulled his hair and made him cry on TV. The fifty-day marriage to Ronin Double-Z, the so-called feud with Karma Jade. Capping it all by reporting how after the Tokyo meltdown, she'd suddenly "left Twitter," like that was something crazy you did, not something crazy you stopped doing.

Now they were coming to the meat of it all, what everyone really wanted to know. Lowering their voices, putting on that whole TMZ act, looking at the camera soft-eyed and solemn as they rolled out the magic ratings-boosting words. Addiction. Breakdown. Scandal. Collapse. A greedy glisten on their lips. Eyes literally shining. Pretending like they cared. They couldn't wait to pronounce her dead, dump her in the ground, and start streaming their trashy tributes.

We weren't even watching, not anymore. I was on my phone, Donal was on his phone, Cristal at the bar was on her phone. All of us frowning. Because we were reading what the world was saying, which was the same stuff as on TV, but about two million times worse.

"This is what does it." Sam threw down her phone, stomping between the home assistant and drone dock, sucking her cigarette like she wanted to torpedo the whole pod straight up her sinuses. "This constant, relentless, nonstop, ghoulish—"

"Shhh." I got up, squeezing my phone so tight it hurt. I bumped the wall as I ran to the hall, that's how hard my eyes were locked on the screen. "They're here."

Everyone jumped up, then sat back down, knowing it would be weird if they followed. I pushed open the door. At the end of the drive, the gate was jittering back, the black Mercedes whispering through, dark glass making it so I couldn't see her face, only Mikey at the wheel with his e-spex. Ames got out first, then Doctor Ali, spinning on the pebbles in that way he had, leaning over, offering a hand. I caught a flash of leg, one Manolo B grinding the drive, elegant, the way she could make things seem when she was sober. Her hand flapping out to wave Doctor Ali aside. And there she was, golden in the Malibu sun.

"Nikki."

Coming up the steps, she wobbled on her heels, arms bent to keep her bags from slipping. A hand hooked up to claw off her shades. She smiled, leaning in to kiss my cheek. I could have been just another handler, an assistant, a nameless hanger-on. But she grabbed me and held me, shopping bags whapping both our hips.

"Love you," she whispered, and I whispered it, too.

Stepping back, I saw her eyes without the glasses. "They all here?" She looked like she did after a show, hopped up and crackling. "I got something I need to tell y'all."

"They're here," I mumbled, and she swished by, Ames following with the bags.

In the big room everyone jumped up, trying to act like they weren't jumping up, like this was just an ordinary day—which, in a sense, I guess, it was. Samira remembered just in time to kill the TV. Then it was quiet, except for the hum of an automatic mower somewhere out on the grounds. She stood smiling, posed in front of the Chinese cabinet she'd brought from Spain, that look in her eyes that made you feel like it might be risky not to smile back.

I hardly noticed what everyone was saying. Donal cursing the pizza sauce on his socks, Cristal fussing with the cushions, Samira going, "Okay, okay," over and over till I could've screamed. All of us trying not to say what everyone else in the world was saying. Because this was how it was with her, how it had been since we were

kids. When she wasn't performing, people performed for her, trying to make everything seem okay.

I stood close, almost touching her hand. I could feel in my body how she'd held me on the steps, chest pressed so hard to mine that for a second we breathed together. And thinking, now, of a different night, twenty years back, when we first went out with the guys from the label. Manhattan steamy in a boiling June, a big gold sun melting down into the Hudson, like global warming on reverse. They took us to a rooftop bar over the High Line, and we sat under rows of red umbrellas, people going by below like pixels in a game. My beer so wet with condensation, I almost dropped it while the guys were talking. How they talked! On and on, cutting each other off, shooting their cuffs, till I had to laugh, it felt so much like getting picked up by a couple of douchey bros from New Jersey. After a while we didn't listen to what they were saying, just turned our heads, looking at the view over the river, the cliffs of metal and the cliffs of stone, which had always seemed like the edge of the world.

After sundown, in the dusky streets, we went across town to the studio. The record guys still talking and talking, making me wonder how two white dudes in blazers could possibly have so much to say. "Excited?" one asked, grinning like a kid, and that was when I knew it was happening for real. In the sound room they had us run through a number, not recording, just sitting on folding chairs, like she and I used to do in my kitchen. We did the one I wrote for my brother, both of us losing it on the chorus, the two dudes watching with their record-label faces.

After that, they were quiet, not clapping or talking, just licking their lips like we were something good to eat. They wanted her to sing a song alone. She wouldn't do it, said she didn't fly solo, but I told her go ahead, so she took the mike. Trembling, blinking, the hollow in her throat quivering like a bird. "When you're ready," they said, and she shut her eyes. And I swear, anyone who'd been in that room would've known exactly what the years ahead would bring. How she sang, it was like her mama was there in the room with us, whipping the bungee cord across her ass. Like her mama's boy Eddie had her out on the balcony, wanting her to suck Crystal Light off his fingers. She sang like she told me she imagined singing the night those two gringos went after her at Jerome's place, sang like it was happening again and forever, the baseball and piraguas and the church basement parties, the streetlights, the music, Audubon Avenue at night.

When she was done the record guys stood up together, success and money in their smiles. They wanted to go to a club downtown, a place there would be music, cocaine. But we took their info and almost ran, out into the night and the noise and the traffic, back to the park where the lamps were glowing white above the benches. And feeling somehow, for the first time ever, like this whole city belonged to us. At the edge of the walkway she started shaking, hopping up and down with her hands on the rail, screaming over the restaurants and clubs. Instead of celebrating, I saw, she was panicking, cursing the record guys, calling them users, comemierdas, asshole bros, greedy shits. With people around us trying not to stare, I wrapped my hands around her arms. I held her wrists like we did when we were little, when we'd spin in a circle, leaning back, using each other's weight to keep standing.

"Nikki," she said, shaking in my hands, "don't let me ever stop singing, okay? Whatever these assholes do, whatever's coming, don't you ever let me stop singing." And I thought how crazy it was to make that promise, on this night when we knew, finally knew, it was what she would spend her whole life doing.

Now, in the room full of Malibu sun, I remembered the way she'd been that night, the hope and terror in her eyes. I was so caught up, I almost didn't hear what she was saying, until Donal straightened up from pulling off his socks and said, "Wait, *what?* You want to go on tour?"

At which there was silence, everyone waiting, while her smile got big enough to eat us all.

"I mean, this is crazy, right?" Donal swung his eyes around the room. "Am I alone in finding this just a wee bit crazy?"

"I'm feeling way better," she said, smile widening, letting us know she was anything but. "I mean, I'm basically recovered."

"Maybe we'll take it slow," Samira said. "Look into licensing, guest appearances—"

"New material," I suggested.

"We talked about doing benefit work." Samira tapped her finger like a pen against her chin. "I can reach out to Susan—"

"No." Her lip jutted. "Bobby says the numbers are in performance."

"Well, maybe we could lay some groundwork first." Sam strutted behind the couch in her Choos, taking out her phone, bringing up her scheduler. "Starter spots. I'll call up Joan. She loves you, she's been talking forever about blocking out a spread—"

"Bobby says people need to see me up there."

"Maybe Bobby," said Cristal, putting on her bitch voice, "and the rest of that crew, can shove they fuckin' numbers up they butts." She smacked the pillow she was holding. "Girl, didn't you *just* get outta rehab? You wanna dance for those suits when you barely on yo' feet? Coco, you got to think of yourself."

"Maybe we can arrange—" Doctor Ali reached for her hand. But she shook him off. Believe me, I noticed. She pulled away and left him hanging, leaning over with his lips puckered up inside his little beard. Her eyes going big with a kind of wildness, the way I hadn't seen her in years, as she looked over us saying, "There's something I need to tell y'all. Something new we're gonna try."

"But what—?"

"Coco, you haven't—"

Our protests garbled, helpless, confused, all of us trying to talk at once. But under them all was Doctor Ali, his voice like a dribble of morphine, saying, "Coco, please, let's think this through."

She turned away. You better believe I noticed that too. How she ignored him, looking at me with her childhood eyes, saying, "This time, Nikki, we got the fix. This time, it's all gonna be different."

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What she told us that night was a lot to take in. She stood with her hands up, framing her face, chopping and grasping the air as she talked, like a high schooler telling us about a new crush. Her eyes kept fixing on different faces, gathering up little hints of support. Afterward, everyone looked away, side-eyes all round, and I don't think anyone knew what to say. She didn't notice, or didn't care, just gave her giant smile to the room and went upstairs to take a shower. And we wandered off to be by ourselves, to try and figure out what to do.

Me, I went for a walk to the beach, tramping up and down the wood stairs, while the whine of the hedge-trimmers went crawling out over the syrupy blue hues of the Pacific. When I came back, the lawn guys were gone, sun underwater, the whole house feeling like a big held breath. The red light on the security panel by her door told me she wanted to be alone. I went through the hush and gloom to the basement, hearing voices from down in the shadows: Doctor Ali, Donal, and Tim, in the sports center near the workout room, with the overhead lights turned low.

They were talking about the new plan.

"It's ridiculous." Doctor Ali paced with a glass of fizzy water. "It's an idea they put in her head at the clinic. Pima Pao has had it done, of all people. Do I understand the motivation? Of course. Do I condone the procedure? Well. Well, now."

When he saw me coming he pursed his lips, eyes shiny in the dark. The others,



sitting with their backs to me, arched their spines and threw back their heads, teeth and eyes and Tim's hipster glasses twinkling in the glow of the lights. They were gathered in the seating area of the bowling alley, which had been here since she bought the house and which we pretty much never used. Scoreboards dark, lanes in shadow, beer bottles like shiny little pins. They liked to do this, lurk down here, being men together in a cave full of sports stuff. I got a beer from the fridge and joined them, listening to the swish and thump of Doctor Ali's soft-soled shoes.

"They make it sound very simple, of course." He paced the lane, over sprays of painted arrows. "This is why I argued for Passages, or the Dunes, or even, if it comes to it, Betty Ford. Conventional. Established. But these new places up north . . ." He paused, looking off into the dark. "Now it's all tech. And tech is very trendy, very *now*, while drugs are always the bogeyman. They make a good pitch, I don't deny it. Take away the silicon veneer, however, and you're still talking about surgery."

"You'd rather have her doped?" Donal propped his bare feet on the scorer, middle finger jammed in his bottle, swinging it above the floor. His voice got more American when he was drunk, the showy brogue rinsed out. "Dead-eyed onstage like she was on the Euro leg, saying crazy political shit between numbers? A chemical zombie?"

"I don't want her on drugs!" Doctor Ali wheeled around, goggling his eyes at us. He took a gulp of seltzer and moved the glass in wide, urgent circles as he swallowed. "I want to wean her *off* the drugs. Carefully. For good." He set down the glass like it had gotten too hot, stepping back, wrapping one hand around the other, rubbing them as if to make them come clean. "But we have to be cautious. She needs rest. Above all, and I know how this sounds, but she needs to be away from the phone. Nikki knows." His hand stuck toward me where I sat, like he expected me to give support. I blinked, wondering why he thought I was on his side. "We need to have her home," Doctor Ali said, "and keep her steady. Then, *then*, we worry about what's next."

Donal's head rolled toward me, tongue flicking over his teeth. "And who is it keeps her steady, eh?"

"Yes, I see the dilemma." Doctor Ali rubbed a hand down his shirt, smoothing the fabric, and reached for the glass. "We all want the best for her." He sipped carefully, bending over the glass instead of lifting it to his mouth. Watching him, you would've believed he really cared, that he'd been with her through everything, instead of showing up a few years ago to pump her full of junk. "But as a doctor, *as a doctor*, I know there are ways things have to be done."

"Are there?"

We stared. Tim the tech guy almost never spoke. He was always nearby, talking to his team, squatting over gear in his cargo shorts and drivers, doing mysterious tech-person things. If you asked him a question, he'd give you an answer, usually one no one understood. But interrupting? Tim only did that if it was something really big.

He had us all waiting. While we waited he looked at the ceiling, blue hair flopped over his eyes. Until Donal said, "You got a thought for us, Tim?" And Tim nodded, mouth open, like there was something big in his head, but it had to take a while to come out. Then he rocked forward, elbows on knees, saying, "You ever think we could use—?" And paused. And looked us over, face to face. And finished, head tilted sideways, "The holos?"

At which there was another giant silence, because at first no one knew what he was talking about. Then we got it, but couldn't believe it. Until Donal said, "Tim, you shittin' us?"

"No." Tim took off his glasses, rubbing them on the towel around his neck. His eyes were still pink and squinty from the pool. "We have the holos. On backup. We could use them. Alls I'm saying."

"The holos, that's—that's a gimmick, man. We run the holos when she gets pissy

with the dancers. The holos are for when she wants to dance with herself. Fourteen Cocos all in a row and not a one to show her up. That's where you need the holos."

Tim wriggled his glasses up his nose. "We subbed in the holos in Budapest. That time. When she had her, uh, collapse."

"Aye, sure. Cause she had a collapse."

"That's what I'm saying. When she can't go on, we run the holos. When she can, we send her out. Whatever works."

"Are you forgetting?" Donal kicked his feet off the scorer and rocked forward, pounding heels on the floor. "People hated that Disney shite. Global press spat on her for a month. Facebook melted down like a hot popsicle. It was worse than a plane crash, man. Cheating the fans, all that."

"Eight years ago. It's different now. It's not like projecting on a screen. We demoed this last year when I was gigging with ELO-Lite, when Brandine was doing her NCL cruises. Motion-cap, run a GAN on the scans, let the code pick up her style. Omnidirectional scanning and projection. String the kernel on a filament, weight it to the stage, we can move it anywhere. It even sings."

"Sings? My arse."

"Yes, it sings! Listen."

Tim reached for his phone. But Doctor Ali brought a hand down, chopping off the subject.

"You're not really considering replacing Coco with a hologram?"

Tim sat, mouth open, holding his phone. Doctor Ali brought his hand up, poised to chop again.

"Do you know what that would do to her? Haven't we been trying to build up her confidence? No. No holos, no tour, no performances. I prescribe rest. Time alone, with her loved ones. With the proper regimen—"

"With the holos she *can* rest. *And* be alone. *And* tour. Then, when she's ready—"

"Absolutely not. Even if Coco herself would stand for it, what about the fans? Do you think the fans would accept some—some electric substitution for their idol?"

"Do they have to know?"

We all stared. Even Tim seemed surprised at what he'd said, flipping his hair out of his eyes, hunching his shoulders. Doctor Ali shook his head.

"Let me take Coco in hand, find an approach that *manages* her pain without trying to *deny* her pain—"

But suddenly I was on my feet, poised between them, holding my beer in a shaking fist. I hardly knew I'd done it till I saw them staring, impatience in their eyes, like this was a job for men to handle. Not the friend who'd been with her all her life. Not the person who knew her best in the world.

"Nikki," said Doctor Ali.

I wasn't having it. I didn't need to hear anymore about what they thought was best for her. I put down my bottle on the automatic scorer, knowing I had to be careful, controlled, not reveal too much of what I was feeling. My whole body shaking like a jumpy video, wild, unsteady, skipping frames. But that sound, the tick of the bottle, made things clear.

"She wants to go on tour," I said.

Doctor Ali closed his eyes. "If we use the holos—even *if* they work—"

"I'm not talking about using the holos."

The way they looked at me, my God. Like they'd never really seen me before.

"Nikki—" Donal began.

"She told us what she wants. She wants to sing. No holos, no time off, no drugs. She wants to be onstage."

"I don't think you understand." Doctor Ali closed his eyes, pulling a big breath



through his nose. It made me so mad, how he acted, like what he thought I needed was an explanation. “This procedure she’s talking about. It’s not some iPhone app that synchs with your fitness aid. Once they go in there—”

I stood my ground. “It’s what she wants.”

Doctor Ali looked at his shoes, flexing his toes, a sulky boy who hadn’t gotten his way. I could see he was going to explain it all again, the technical stuff he thought I didn’t understand. I picked up my bottle and drank it off and set it down—crack!—so hard, they had to know I wasn’t some ditzzy tagalong. I was Nikki Powell. I’d been here from the start. And I could make decisions, too.

“Maybe,” I said, “we should just go ask her.”

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### 3

Setting up a tour is like launching a spaceship. The crew have to be hired, dancers, transport, security, everything fitting together just right. And even more so with a rig like ours, which not every venue can handle.

Bobby didn’t want to get it all started until she was actually getting through warmups, making rehearsals, handling the stress. The first session with the trainers is when a breaking down’ll happen, if it happens. That moment when things are suddenly for real.

Which meant everything, even basic prep, had to wait for the operation. Bobby flew down the day she went under, arriving just after they took her in. We waited together in a room full of lilies, Bobby pacing by the windows in black jeans, snapping his fingers like he had an idea that was really great but that he couldn’t quite recall. They had a TV up, playing videos of their procedures, lots of happy smiling families. But never the surgery, never the knives. It looped ten times before the doctor came out. Then we went down a long pale hall, past a blue hum of voices and machines, and there she was, coming up from anesthetic, looking years younger with her unfocused eyes. Bobby bouncing on his toes next to the bed, saying this was right, this was great, he absolutely knew it was the right decision. And her looking up, dreamy and empty, too doped on opiates to understand a thing.

After that, the Mercedes, the house, and a long, slow series of quiet afternoons. She was supposed to rest, no work, no distractions. Just life going by like a show we weren’t watching, background chatter on auto-repeat. Donal was off buying shirts for an actress. Tim had a TV thing with Sony. Cristal had her family. Samira was busy. It was only us, and the sun and the sea. And Ames in his office. But mostly just us.

In the mornings I sent away the cook, made pancakes with cornmeal mixed in the batter, like I used to make for my brother on vacation, and crushed-up cornflakes sprinkled on top, and real maple syrup from Montreal. We put our phones in an old Louboutin box, gave it to Ames and told him to hide it, and went to parts of the house she never used, the bathroom with the monsoon shower, the movement studio and VR suite, even the bowling alley, where we drank Diet Coke and tried to remember how to play, neither of us knowing the right way to roll the balls.

We talked a lot about the old neighborhood, little details other people wouldn’t know. Mom’s peanut punch, the murals in PS 115, how we’d sneak out of school into empty apartments, doing modeling shoots with our phones. Mostly, she wanted to talk about my family, the years when she spent every day at my place. Always saying she needed to use the computer, but everybody knew what was really going on. And how my dad had to call her mama’s boy one night, tell him what would happen if he came around again.

On the last night we had an awkward moment. We were on the terrace, watching the clouds change after sunset, when she started talking about Halloween. Describ-

ing the costumes we wore one year, me as a rabbit, her in black spandex, how my mother used the elastic from a pair of panties to fix my mask. "And your brother in his Hulk suit," she said, and started laughing, like he'd been there in the room with us, all those years ago. I had to remind her she'd moved to town when we were nine, right after everything happened. That she'd never actually met my brother.

At that, her eyes got wide and frightened, and I wondered if the surgeons had messed something up in her, done some kind of damage to her brain. But her face changed. She leaned on the glass-topped table, looking over the ocean, so quiet, so intent, you would've thought the past was out there somewhere, hidden in the darkening sky.

"Thing is," she said, "it always *felt* like he was with us. You know? How y'all talked about him. It was like—like you remembered him so well, I could almost remember him too."

We sat so still, for so long, that the motion-sensing lights blinked off. And I thought about what it's like to love someone, how it isn't like its own feeling at all, but some sort of higher-level emotion where you feel every kind of feeling at once.

A month of silence, a month of solitude, a month of movies and staying up late. And then it was time to think about the tour.

Bobby came in on the overnight from Miami, carrying a Filson laptop bag and all his clothes in an over-the-shoulder Shinola, and did what he called a "psych session" in the library, trying to mentally prepare us for the road. Pacing and bouncing, snapping his fingers, talking to his own reflection in the windows. He wanted to see the gauge, how it worked. But we told him all that could wait.

Doctor Ali came and gave her a check-up, declaring her physically fit to travel. I didn't like that, thought he might try to slip her something, but she said she was done with all that.

One by one we called them in, the gang, the crew, the entourage. Donal backed out of the show he was doing and came with a book of samples and his girlfriend and two huge suitcases of stuff he got in Cyprus. Trey was in London, but promised to make time. Cristal was running the social media accounts, putting out what she called "white noise," meaning stuff the casual fans seemed to like, meaning mostly lifestyle links. Now she started dropping teasers, getting folks hyped for the shows. Samira was in her office all day, old-school phoning with potential sponsors, texting on her cell while checking email on the laptop, doing eighteen things at once. Everything just like old times.

The big promoters wouldn't touch her anymore, not after what happened last time. Bobby had to go to what he called "the disruptors," meaning weird, techie firms in foreign cities. We ended up booking through a cybershop in São Paulo. Robots on the phone, AIs to do the scheduling, a bunch of new apps for us all to download. It was touch-and-go till Telefonica sponsored. Then they wanted to launch overseas, South Asia, South Africa, the Middle East, where they were pushing a new lifestyle implant. Thinking, I guess, even if she broke, they'd still get their exposure in new markets. But Bobby held out for Latin America. Wouldn't take anything but Latin America. Latin America was home base, he said. The crowds always showed up in Latin America. The media loved her. Politicos detailed whole private armies, cordoned off ten blocks at a go. "Coco Loco" still meant something there, the good kind of crazy, the kind everyone wants a piece of. Not the joke she'd become everywhere else.

So we booked Latin America. And Europe, and North America, and Asia, planning to finish in Japan. Bobby wanted Tokyo for the closer. Tokyo, where it all came crashing down. Tokyo, where she'd literally died and come back. Tokyo, where she'd make her last stand, face down her demons, recapture what she'd lost.

With the stops picked, the dates nailed down, the announcements made, it was time to tour.

She always liked to start by night. Wind in the dark and a sleepy drone, windowglass cold through our travel pillows, the Mercedes shooting east under the stars on I-15. Camps of water refugees in the distance, sparkling like wildfires on the mountain-sides.

The rehearsal space was in north Vegas, a boxy building like a futuristic hospital. The press had been tipped off by the time we arrived. Paparazzi drones mobbed in like mosquitoes, swarming over the glass barricades. We moved in a world of fiberglass and flashes, walls of white concrete, hologram skies. Until we arrived in that great empty space, huge and hushed, yet weirdly intimate, the temple of the modern music machine.

I watched her as she climbed onstage. She'd been doing okay, running prep without a blowup, even when Ty gave her shit for straining on the high notes. Usually, a critique sent her into a tailspin, and one night she'd gone AWOL in Ventura, wandering down by the flood barriers, trying to score Focalin from rando fangirls. None of that happened now. She didn't even use the gauge. "Got a feelin'," she said to me, laughing, and it wasn't what you'd call a reassuring laugh, but it wasn't exactly a scary one either.

She was in good form the first day. Not giving it all, but hitting her cues, more or less keeping up with the dancers. Good enough that, if you hadn't seen her fifteen years ago, you would've thought this was as good as it got. I sat with Bobby to review the clips while she went off with Ames to find a spa, and Bobby hooked his finger on his chin, nodding, saying, "This is good, this is solid, this is what we like to see."

Next day she had trouble with the steps in "Darediablo," tripped during the bridge and even fell on her ass, after which she gave hell to one of the dancers. The girl cried, there were hugs, it wasn't anything we hadn't seen before. But it threw us off. After that, everyone kept trying not to look at her, expecting some kind of major blowup. "I'm fine, people," she said, looking over the room, like she'd heard someone whispering behind her back. "Really. Y'all don't need to be staring like I'm a knife a bitch onstage." But I could tell people were on edge.

Then she went pitchy on "Make U Dream," tried ten times but couldn't hit the sixth, and on the eleventh try lost her voice.

"You're tensing!" Tyrene shouted from offstage.

"I'm not fuckin' tensing, Ty!"

"I see your throat, Coco, you're tensing!"

"Well if y'all didn't *make* me tense, I wouldn't be tensing, would I?"

"Look, look." Bobby came over, flapping his hands. "We'll come back to it. If it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen."

"I can do this, Bobby."

"It's okay, Coco. Worse comes to worst, we'll splice in the scratch track."

"I don't sync, Bobby. Told you this over and over, I don't sync."

Then we all tried not to look at each other, because ever since we started doing arenas, she lip-synced pretty much half the tracks.

"You can put that shit on when I'm dancing," she said. "But I ain't syncing on my ballads. This is what people come to hear."

"Look," said Bobby, turning around, "we'll take a breather. Fifteen minutes. We'll pick it up with 'Better Believe.'"

Then you could see there was going to be trouble. She cocked out a hip, pulled off her headset, holding it out like something dead. Dropped it to the stage, staring. And stepped on it.

Crunch.

"Coco, goddamn it!" Bobby screamed as she stomped to her room.

Fifteen minutes went by. Twenty. Tim came and scooped up the busted headset. After an hour, we were still waiting. Bobby paced in the hall outside her door, chomping a thumbnail. "Can you go in there, Nikki?" He put on that tone with me, like a reasonable man who's had enough of women's crazy emotions. "Make sure she isn't killing herself in there?"

So I go in, and there she was on the carpet, lying with her phone held over her face, tears and makeup pouring down her cheeks.

I don't know where she got the thing. Samira was supposed to be limiting her access. But I knew what she was seeing on there. I'd seen it myself, every day for twenty years.

"Coco Loco," she said, wiping her eyes. "Always I gotta be Coco Loco. Why they hafta talk about me this way?"

I sat beside her, having no answers. I'd been looking at Twitter too.

"It ain't even the haters," she said, pushing up. "It's these fuckin' vultures. Make shit up 'cause they got no stories. I ain't even give 'em nothing to report! But they don't care, just make it up. 'Member they use to say they was coo-coo for Coco? Like that was a good thing? Now I'm the fuckin' coo-coo."

Before I could say anything, she threw the phone. Chucked it at the wall, so the case chipped and a chunk of glitter went flying. Curled her fingers under her jaw and pushed up her chin.

"I should take a fuckin' razor to my throat. Y'all want this? You got your wish. Give 'em a real fuckin' story to write."

I put my hand over hers, pushed down her arm. She looked in my eyes. I'm sure she knew what I was thinking. The scar on her temple was mostly faded, a small pale line, almost hidden by her hair.

"Do you want to try—?" I began. She closed her eyes, sniffed a laugh.

"Yeah, awright. Let's use the fuckin' thing."

\* \* \*

"So it's this little gizmo?" The baggie dangled from Donal's hand. The gauge in the bottom was still in its packaging, the foam-lined clamshell they'd given us at the clinic. Donal took it out and started poking buttons, aiming it at his head. "Looks like a zapper for the lights."

The gauge wasn't much to look at. Just a palm-sized lump of off-white rubber, a screen inset in a round pink frame. Not the kind of techcessory you'd be flashing at a club. The kind you'd keep at home in a drawer, hidden away with the depression pills and condoms.

"That's more or less what it's for, isn't it?" Bobby took the thing and did what Donal had done, poking buttons, aiming it at his face, even touching an end to his forehead. "Sort of an all-purpose dimmer switch?"

"All right, guys." Samira grabbed the device from Bobby. "Let's not forget what we're here for, okay?" She went across the room, holding the gauge up like a torch, giving a make-believe bow as she handed it over. "Coco?"

And slapped it down, palm to palm. You could see right away the effect it had. Her fingers closed. The device began to glow, pulsing pink, a coal in her fist. She looked at the screen. Lights, camera, activation. I could hear the sound of it throbbing on her palm.

"How's it work?" I said. "You just—?"

"You press this—?"

I stood on one side, Samira on the other. Pointing over her shoulders, making suggestions. She powered it up. Her fingers turning yellow at the tips as she squeezed. The pulsing got stronger. The pink color deepened, rose to red, red to crimson, until the gauge glowed like an orb of lava, shooting beams of light through her hands. She looked up.

"Feel anything?" I said.

“Eh.”

But she did look changed, eyes wider, pupils dark, the lines of stress smoothed out of her cheeks.

“There have to be different settings.” Tim took her hand, angling the gauge so he could see the screen. “Some way to bring up a menu.”

She nodded, but I could see she wasn’t listening. She was focused on herself, the changes happening inside her.

“Is it working?” I had to ask the question three times before she jerked her eyes to mine. Her mouth twitched up in a ghostly smile. Her eyelashes fluttered on her cheeks.

“You know, I honestly can’t tell.”

All of us watching, quiet, listening, as if expecting to hear the difference, a beep of confirmation, a reassuring chime.

Tim grabbed her hand again and pulled it toward him. “What does it do with the data?”

“Data?”

He pointed. “It’s all data, right? The signals it’s intercepting. The buffer it runs on the neural pathways. Like a—a valve that controls how much gets through.” He moved his finger down her neck, through the air, to the device. “All that stuff can be converted into data. Same way a computer turns electrons into code. So where’s it stored? In here?” He lifted her hand that was holding the gauge, her arm moving with his, unresisting.

“I think it mutes it, like.” Donal pointed with both fingers at his head. “The bad juju, eh? Dials it down or whatever, from eleven to seven.”

“Sure. Juju. That’s what I’m saying. The juju’s just variables. Field potentials, chemical concentrations. So where’s it go?” Tim’s finger touched her head again, almost tangling in her hair. “Is it archived? Backed up? Deleted? Gone?”

Like that had been a cue, she opened her fingers. The screen went dark, the pink light dimmed. The device settled, cold white, on her palm.

Her eyes moved around the room, checking faces, as her mouth slowly shaped itself into a smile.

“I think it might be working,” she said.

\* \* \*

Heading onstage she seemed different, somehow, mellower, like her soul had been rebooted. She jogged up the steps. Gave a smile to the dancers. Took the new headset a tech handed over, slipped it over her hair, stood back.

And waited for her cue.

And stepped to the mic.

It was fine. Not her best work ever, but fine. And the next number was fine, too, and the number after that. Even the break before “La Vista,” when the stage guys had to load new props, even that didn’t throw off her stride. Nothing did, not the steps in “1 Wi\$h,” not when the sound cut out before the encore, not even when we came back to “Make U Dream,” and she choked on the sixth and had to drop an octave, but kept on going without a hitch. Everything ticked along like a click-track, one-two-three-four-five-six-seven.

No disasters. No miracles. But doing a show without a disaster, for us, by now, that was a miracle. Having problems that didn’t lead to breakdowns, flare-ups that didn’t become explosions: for her, for us, it was a dream come true. Like going shopping and everything’s on sale. Like hitting every green light on Western Ave.

Like winning a million bucks, in fact. Or, if the promoter was right, sixty-five million. There was money at stake, and Bobby was thrilled. He bounced in front of the stage, making little squeaky noises of excitement, like we’d pulled off the biggest show since *On the Run III*. Between every number, he snapped his fingers, pointing

at the stage, saying, "Yes, this is *it!* You are *on*, Coco. You are *smoking*." Which, in normal times, would've been enough to piss her off. But she let him hug her, the bump of his nose against her headset making the space thump like a drum.

Me, I watched her, every move. The way she held herself during sound check. The glances she gave over her shoulder at the dancers. The way she bent to adjust a strap, or make her hair shake to the beat. It was obvious something had changed. That little device had reached its electric fingers into her brain, opened a valve, and let the bad feelings trickle out.

At the end of the set I stayed onstage. She was chatting with the crew, twisting hair around her fingers, flirty, relaxed, like she got for interviews. When she was done she came around the keyboards. We hugged, holding our bodies apart, sweaty from the heat of the lights. I looked in her face. "You good?" She tipped her head.

"I think I'm . . . okay."

At which we laughed, because okay was fantastic, okay was amazing, okay was something she hadn't been in years.

"Well, okay, then," I said, and we laughed again, just enjoying the sound of the word.

There was one bad moment. Going backstage, we swung by the production office, hoping to say bye to Bobby. And who should be there but Doctor Ali, sitting on the couch with his hands in his lap, looking like some kind of lost prophet. I'd forgotten he was planning to come. He stared at something in his fist, which I realized after a moment was the gauge. We must have left it in the room. Doctor Ali held it up like an egg, balanced on his fingertips. "Looking for this?"

I snatched the thing and passed it to her. He sighed, eyes closed, like a disappointed dad.

"Bobby's been filling me in on your day. Allow me to congratulate you, Coco, on what seems to have been a successful rehearsal." He went on, "Lowering the volume, hmm? Is that the metaphor you've chosen to use?"

She stared at him, gauge throbbing in her fist, pulsing to life like a little plastic heart. Doctor Ali straightened, very slow, as if being pulled from the couch by a string. He said in his rich voice:

"It's in your hands, now. A little machine to suck the bad feelings from your head. I only hope," and his eyes dropped to hers, in a way you could tell he'd been rehearsing this for days, "I only hope, Coco, you know what you're doing."

I wanted to stick out my tongue. He was always so phony, so full of himself. But she flinched as if he'd smacked her, stepping back to let him past.

As he went through the door, Doctor Ali reached down to tap the gauge. "They had this in the Stone Age, too. They called it trepanning. And they were much more frank about their methods. Before they chopped a hole in your head, they had the decency to show you the knife."

Out he went, sticking up his nose, proud of himself for his stupid analogy. I wanted to kick him. Who was he, after all? Nothing but a fancy dope dealer.

"You okay?" I touched her arm. She tossed her head. I put my arms around her. It was almost nice, almost like old times. I could almost ignore how her fist tightened between us, squeezing a burst of red light through her fingers, as if squeezing a bad thought from her head.

\* \* \*

And now the tour lay before us, brilliant and glittering, like a string of Christmas lights wrapped around the globe. Rio, São Paulo, La Plata, Santiago. The thrill of



dawn through a Learjet window. The singing mystery of the road.

We gathered our people and hit our stops, and I won't say it was like old days, but it was better than how things had been. In the shows, she held herself like a professional, hitting her marks, waving to the crowd, smiling for the streamcasts, and boom, into the opener. Everything strictly by the program, steps and changes clean as code, down to the patter between the cuts. Then encore, lightshow, applause, and close. Blowing kisses, left, right, down the middle, and strutting off with a hand in the air. At night, no drama, no fun, no pills, just back to the room and bed and lights out.

The promoters were loving it. The booking folks loved it. The venues loved it. The whole team loved it. A touring crew is like a giant machine, hundreds of people and bots and vehicles all needing to move in sync. And every part of that contraption has to be built around one five-foot woman whose job is to totally wow the world. How do you guarantee it'll work? You can't. You line up the pieces, set them moving, and hope the star can pull it off. And now she was doing it. In defiance of everyone's fears, she was doing it. And people were more than relieved. They were thrilled.

On social media, folks had started using the word "comeback." They'd started using the word "recovered." They'd started using the word "miracle." It was a beautiful thing to see.

Bobby, especially, was over the moon. Back in New York, he watched all the live-streams, shooting off the kinds of texts you expect from a sixty-year-old dude in skinny jeans. "Killer set, kid!" "Ace!" "You go, girl!" "That's my special lady!" "W00t! W00t!"

"He's the fuckin' dad I never had," she said one night, and I laughed so hard I spilled rice on the hotel bed. But her smile was weak, like she didn't think it was funny. That was how she was these days. Muted. Toned down. Her smiles automatic, like there wasn't much behind them. Onstage, she moved like a robot on a track. And when she sang, you could see she was going through the motions, nothing special, nothing more.

She used the gauge three times a day. Once in the morning, once before bed, once before any kind of performance, including a shoot or press event. More if she thought she needed a boost. I'd see her in the shadows, hunched, hands together, like some kind of priestess lost in prayer. And the hot, red light would come leaking through her fingers, rising up to tinge her face.

I thought a lot about Doctor Ali. The way she flinched as he lectured her in Vegas. I wondered how she felt about this new tool, the power of the gauge to pare back her moods, make her the person people needed her to be. Was she happy with the tour? With herself? It was hard to tell with that gizmo in her fist, cutting every emotion by half. How can you tell what your friend is feeling, when most of her feelings have been wiped away?

I had to wait till we were deep in the tour, at the end of the European leg, before I got my answer.

\* \* \*

We were coming in on the dawn flight to Barcelona, punchy from a sleepless night, when she looked up at me, sunrise painting her cheeks, and said, "Nikki, am I doing the right thing?"

I was half asleep, watching the city go by, streets like gritty zigzags below, the ocean an enormous blue blur. Smoke from a protest trickled over the waterfront, making a smudge against the sun.

We'd been on the road for almost three months, and news of her comeback had traveled the world. The fan response spilled out of stadiums, flooded social media, reached the mainstream press. Like a stoplight changing, the narrative flipped. Everyone had expected drama. Absence of drama was a major plot twist. Crazy Coco wasn't crazy anymore. By some miracle she'd set herself straight, and people wanted

to know her secret, the fix for a famously effed-up life. Instead of asking what she'd say to her critics, interviewers asked what advice she'd give her fans. The magazine folks lined up for lifestyle shoots: Coco in Paris, Coco in shawls, Coco with a gentech bamboo theme. Rumors heated up. Maybe she'd found love. Maybe she was having a baby. Maybe she'd open a wellness network, sell her incredible soul-care secrets.

When the truth got out, the networks exploded. Lifestyle implants! It was the new new thing. Comebacks were trending, recovery was hot, taboos around invasive tech had faded, and every celeb wanted in on the action. Karma Jade tweeted that she'd gotten mood-boosters. Case Paley came clean about her glandular clamps. Posey Loyola released a three-hour camshow about her ex-husband's history of IQ-juicing. All the teenfluencers flushed their intro-vision pics and started posting personal journeys about tech-aided self-repair. Even Ronin Double-Z was dropping hints in interviews, *Just letting Coco know, we all do what it takes to be our best selves, and if she's got the skills for it, I'm always up to game.* Everyone turbo-boosting one message. "Coco's example inspires us all."

It was clear what had happened. In her youth, she'd taught the world how to be wild and crazy. Now, her fans were all grown up, and they wanted her to teach them how to be sane.

And here she was, asking if I thought she was doing the right thing. I looked at her lap, where her hands were fussing with the gauge, stroking the surface like a crystal ball.

"Like he was telling us." She narrowed her eyes. "You know? Like, what if I don't know what I'm doing?"

"Like who was telling us?" I asked, though I knew what she meant.

"Doctor Ali."

"You don't need him," I said, a bit too quickly. And seeing how she looked at me, I went on in a rush, "I mean, you feel okay about this, right?"

She tipped her chin, letting her eyes roam the cabin, the buff leather seats, mahogany tables, charger station, VR set. "Just seems, you know, like whatever I do, I always end up doing too much. So? Maybe I'm doin' *this* too much, too. Squeezin' on this thing. Shuttin' out my feelings. It'd figure, uh? Like, I'd be the first person in history who ever overdosed on fuckin' sanity."

She leaned toward the window, muscles stark in her neck, watching the stadium go by below, a green hole punched in the gray cityscape. What she said made sense, but it worried me, too. Like a part of her, a devil inside, refused to allow her to feel okay.

She held up the gauge.

"I looked up that word he used. Trepanning. Know what it is? Like that shit we used to watch on *Discovery*, cutting holes in cavemen's heads. So I'm thinking, y'know, like, what if he's right? What if that's what I'm doin' to myself? Punch a hole in my skull, hit delete, the little ghosts go adios. But also I'm thinking: what if some of those wild spirits are ones I kinda wanna keep?"

"It's not really like that, though, is it?" I was trying to remember what they'd told us in the clinic, the brochures, explainers, orientation vids. All those reassuring people in scrubs. "It's like calibration, right? Like making up for an imbalance."

"Sure." Her eyes grazed mine, slid away. "That's what Doctor Ali told me, too. 'Cept it was my chemicals for him. I hadda imbalance of my chemicals." Her eyes came back to mine. I didn't like what I saw there. Something trapped, a tiger behind glass. "But maybe my imbalance, when I'm up there singing, maybe that's what people wanna see."

I felt cornered. I couldn't deny she was different. Was different bad, though? Was different wrong?

She sucked in air as light spilled from her fist, the cabin suddenly glowing red. And fading, dying, until the worry left her face. The world tipped as the plane angled

down, sky whining around us, her voice flattened out like the cityscape below as she said, "It's hard to know what you're supposed to be feeling, when all you ever wanted is just to *stop* feeling."

\* \* \*

And that night, while we were prepping for the show, it all started spinning out of control.

It was after dinner when I heard my phone buzz. I crossed the dressing room, picked it up. Already tensing, expecting the worst, even before I heard Sam's voice.

"Nikki?" She was breathless, fading in and out, like she was running or jumping or just generally losing her shit. "Please tell me she's with you."

I braced a hand on the wall, kicking off my shoes, but kept my voice steady as I said, "I thought she was with you."

"Shit." The smack of Sam's feet came through the phone, slapping down an echoing hall, as she repeated, a hitch in her voice, "Shit, shit, shit."

I put on my ugly sneakers, grabbed a shirt, and ran out to the staging area. Guys were going by with dollies, crates and amps and stacks of gear. Donal came up, showing his palms. We checked the bathrooms, the lounge, the vending machines, but we already knew where she would be.

"The hotel," Donal said. And we were off.

The evening streets were sodium gold, purple shadows swinging under our feet as we pounded up the access road. Donal poked his phone. An autotaxi scooted up, welcoming us with a clunk of locks. Into the buzzing evening we rode, video ads gleaming red through the rain, until we reached the looming gold glow of her hotel. A woman recognized me, almost called out, but changed her mind when she saw my face.

Lobby, desk, promenade. "This is prime fuckin' timin', this is," Donal said, rocking from foot to foot in the elevator. "Absolutely the best possible time for this shite."

Stepping into the hall, I heard shouts and crashes, strangely muffled by the walls, like someone's cop show turned up loud. The kind of yelling where it didn't matter what she was saying, what mattered was pitch, volume, tone. I started pounding on the door, yelling, "Coco, Coco!" till Samira yanked it open, staring out like a kid-napped child. We shoved in. And there she was, kicking through heaps of room-service clutter, wearing her sweatpants, yelling at her phone. I wasn't surprised to see the bottle in her fist.

"You hear that, Bobby? Yeah, I been readin' it. Here, in what this is, *Der Spiegel*, writin' they opinions like anyone cares. 'At the Olympiahalle tonight, Coco Rios delivered a thoroughly perfunctory performance.' Perfunctory! Tell you what, Bobby, the goddess who made me, she may've made me a lotta things, but she didn't make me *perfunctory*."

A pause, his voice coming squawky through the phone, which she held out level in front of her lips, noticing us with a flick of her eyes. At the sound of what he was saying, her eyes bugged.

"You kiddin' me? You fuckin' kiddin' me, Bobby? It ain't only them. It's all over. Look at this shit. Stiff. Detached. 'Coco Loco may have got her groove back, but some fans say she's lost her fire.' The fuck? The New York *Times* thinks I lost my fuckin' fire?"

And turning, swinging her arm, flinging the phone onto the bed, where I saw Bobby's name in white letters on the screen, and heard his voice babbling up, tiny and pathetic, like a person trapped in a small square hole. Meanwhile she was at the window, sucking the wine bottle, shaking her head, muttering to herself in slurred Spanish. She set the bottle on the glass-protected table, careful not to spill. And seeing how careful she was, I knew it was bad.

"Coco? Where is it? Where's the gauge?" Samira went forward, hands out like a lion tamer. Meanwhile, I grabbed the phone from the sheets, took it to the other half

of the suite and pulled the door shut.

"... need you to understand," Bobby was saying, his voice chopped up by the shaky connection, "they want to see you. That's all that matters. Once they see you, it doesn't matter what they say. But they can't see you at all if—"

"Bobby?" He broke off. I could feel him recalibrating, grinding mental gears, as he switched to a different side of his personality.

"Nikki?" Before I could answer, he burst out, "This is a goddamn disaster, Nikki. How long has she been like this?"

"I don't know." I was annoyed by his tone. "She was fine on the plane."

"Well she's very much *not* fine now. This is worse than Paris. Good crapping Christ. If we let her go out like this, she'll spend half the show giving lectures to the audience. What happened to the gauge?"

"I don't know. I think she might've stopped using it or—"

"Oh, she's definitely stopped using it. She told me in no uncertain terms she stopped using it. Said she feels drained. Of her essence. Absurd. It's flat-out absurd. She's been going through every gossip site in the world. The tabloids, Twitter. Even, Christ, the *Times*. It doesn't make sense. The response has been positive! Overwhelmingly positive! But she latches on to certain words, sees what she's determined to see. Did she tell you where she put the thing?"

I explained to Bobby I didn't think it mattered. If she didn't want to use the gauge, we couldn't make her.

Bobby blew out a breath, making a dark rippling sound go through the phone. I knew he was trying hard not to freak out.

"You've got to talk to her, Nikki. It's got to be you. We can't have this. We simply can't have it. Not at this late stage in the game."

I lowered the phone, knowing what he'd say if I let him go on. Naming the hundreds of people on the payroll, sponsor, booker, venue, fans. I listened, but I didn't hear anything from the bedroom. Only Samira's murmur through the door.

I told Bobby I'd see what I could do. And went back through the sliding door.

She was on the bed, hunched in a sprawl of dishes, looking at her naked toes. She seemed ashamed now, subdued, like a scolded child after an epic tantrum. But when she got like this, her mood could change in a flash.

Samira was beside her, leaning over with a hand on the bed, whispering. "You're not a fake." She pressed the bed to make her point. "Why would you think that about yourself?"

"Because." A wave at the window. "*They* think it."

"No they don't. You don't know what they think. Anyway, who cares what they think? You know it's not true. Isn't that what matters?"

"Do I?" A flash of moist eyes. "*Do* I know that?" She lifted a fist, squeezing air. "Pressin' a switch to shut off my feelings? Squeezin' a button to power down my brain? You know what it's like? Like I'm hearing, moving, singing, talking, but all this time, I'm feeling nothing. Like I'm only a puppet, jumping around, while the real me is off away somewhere, watching from a million miles in space."

"You must be feeling *something*, though. Or it wouldn't bother you."

"That's the *only* thing I feel. This feeling like I wanna rip my hair out, 'cause all my other feelings got flushed away. And I'm lookin' at myself from out in dreamland, saying, 'Hey, where's Coco, where'd she go?'"

Samira looked at me with pleading eyes. Both of them watched as I crossed the room, holding out the phone, unsure who would take it. Samira moved first, slipping it into her bag.

"How's Bobby?"

I shrugged. "About like you'd think."

There came an awkward moment, Samira looking from one of us to the other, trying to read the signals shooting between our eyes. Over by the door, Donal and Ames were waiting, Donal holding a platter he'd picked up while trying to tidy. "Coco," he said, taking a step forward, but stopped, because her eyes were on mine, and she hardly seemed to care who else was in the room.

"Guys." Samira made the word a whisper. She slipped between us, gathering up Donal and Ames, and pushed them out into the hall.

At the click of the latch, it was like a spell lifted. She got off the bed, went and grabbed the wine, came back and splashed it into two paper cups. We sipped together, slurping, like years ago, when we'd drink grape juice in my kitchen, putting on French accents, pretending to be rich.

"Over there." She pointed. I went to where she showed me, yanking pillows off the couch. The gauge was wedged between two cushions, a plastic lump, looking vaguely indecent, like an artificial organ someone threw away.

I brought it to her, but she just stared at it, lifting her cup for another sip.

"What'd he tell you, uh? Come up here and tame the tiger? Put that crazy-ass bitch on her leash?"

I rested the device in my lap, running a thumb along the edge. I could see how it might be soothing to hold it. The plastic softly textured, like an egg. I wanted to squeeze it. I did. It dimpled around my fingers, satisfyingly springy. Without her touch, though, there was no effect.

"That skinny-ass potbelly white boy, he already calculatin' his losses, uh. Add it all up, how much it cost him when the talent get her crazy on. I'm like one o' those worms that shit out silk, I'm cryin' thousand-dollar tears." She swept a spot on the bed, dishes tinkling, and lay down with the cup on her stomach, wrapped in both hands. "Member when we started playin' at Rico's? All the people in that little room? Damn, yo, that joint was *packed*. All them jumpin' when we did Bey, bitches swayin' on they skank heels, fallin' all on each other, lit as fuck. We went out back, I's flyin' yo. Hit that grass so hard I ain't even know if I had shoes on. You put me in the car, I was just watching the lights, thinking, man, this is what I wanna do, this is all I ever wanna do." She lifted her head, tipping her cup to take a sip, wine slipping down her cheek like cough syrup. Wiped it off, lay back. "No script, in those days. No schedule. No company bosses sendin' they texts. Know where I thought we'd be by now?"

"Where?" I snuck a glance at the time. She sat up, smirking.

"Playing arenas. Rich. And loving it." Then her smile went away, and she looked at the gauge, which I held in my lap. And reached for the wine and poured another splash.

"People are waiting," I said. "Not just Bobby. Everyone."

She nodded, looking around the room. That was when I knew I had her. If she didn't argue, I had her. It was only a matter of time.

"That thing." Her chin pointed at the gauge. "Know what creeps me out about that thing? Like, I use to use it once a day. Then that got to be too slack, so I started squeezin' on it twice. Then three times. Four. Now, it's like, every hour I'm on that plastic, pumpin' the bad feelings away. This morning, I thought, Nah. I'm'a see what it's like, just rolling as me. I'm'a see if I can do this. Twenty minutes, it was like my head cracked open. Forty minutes, I'm ready to jump off the roof. Alls I wanted was to get my hands on that fucker, hold tight, and make the bad shit disappear."

I touched the device, the cool smooth plastic. "It's not supposed to be addictive. It isn't a drug."

"Addictive, not addictive, I dunno. Alls I know is, I can't even be my own self no more. You know what that's like? Like you wake up one morning, you're so fucked up, you can't even be your own real self?"



I put down my wine, feeling whatever I said next would be the kind of thing you remember for years. That I'd look back on this moment and wonder, What if I said this, what if I said that, what if everything could have been changed?

"Turn up the volume, turn down the volume." She wiggled a thumb. "Like a machine."

I wanted to say something soothing and wise, but my phone was buzzing, lighting up the sheets, Bobby's name glaring up in bright letters. I waited, but I knew something had been lost, a moment, a connection, an opportunity. She glanced at the screen.

"You better take that."

Afraid I was making the wrong decision, I swiped off the call and sent a text.

WHAT?

His answer shot back.

SAMIRA'S ROOM.

Pause.

WE HAVE A SOLUTION.

\* \* \*

Down the hall, Samira's door was propped open, one of her Yeezys wedged in the gap. Donal was inside, Sam, Cristal, Tim the tech guy. And Bobby's face on the table, peering out of a Macbook screen. I kicked away the shoe, shut the door, went across the room and leaned in front of the webcam, waving.

"Is that Nikki? Is Coco with you?"

"No."

"Good. Not that I mind having Coco here, of course, but this will be easier . . . well, to be honest, everything's easier without Coco around. Which is what we have to discuss."

I wedged in between Sam and Cristal on the couch, ready to fight, but not sure what I'd be fighting *for*, exactly, or even if I had it in me. For the first time, I wished I had a plastic egg of my own, to hold and squeeze and make my feelings go away.

"The thing we need to face," Bobby said, "is we're already in damage-control mode, here. There's a schedule, a very tight schedule. Even if Coco gets her act together *now*, we're already delayed by at least an hour. That's too much. That's enough to get people talking. With Coco's reputation—"

"You knew it when you booked her, mate. Coco Loco, that's the brand."

"I know that, Donal. And I'm very supportive of Coco's unique, um, personality. But when we've already made a series of commitments—"

"It isn't like she's making it up, is it?" Donal looking around the room. "Mind, I'm not saying I want Coco to suffer. But you look at her, you watch her, you can see there's been a change."

"Perhaps that change," Bobby said, "is called being a professional."

Donal turned to me. "You see it, Nikki. I mean, people are glad she's back and all. But it's not like they don't notice the difference. And there's no way *she's* not going to notice *that*."

"Enough. We're past the philosophical questions. We need to put on a show here. Tim?"

Tim got up from the table, flopping blue-tipped hair out of his eyes. There was no point in him standing, not really, and after a moment, he sat back down. "Uh . . . yeah?"

"I hear you have a suggestion?"

Another blink, another flop of blue hair. "You mean the holos?"

"Oh, fuck me." Donal rolled his eyes. "Haven't we had enough o' the bleedin' holos?"

"The technology of simulated performance," Bobby said, "has made tremendous leaps in the past ten years. There are virtual performers who sing, who improvise—"

"You sound like a trade expo, Bobby. You ever seen this hologram o' his?" A jerk of Donal's head at Tim. "Thing's a mannequin. Stiff. No life, no style. Steppin' around like a *Far Cry* fan mod. And the singing. Oi! You know, you've seen it."

He raised his eyebrows at Samira and Cristal, who grimaced, nodding, like people



who'd eaten at a terrible restaurant and couldn't find words to describe the food.

"I wouldn't put that uncanny-valley shite in a reply GIF, Bobby. You send it on-stage, you'll be startin' riots." Bobby was making eyes like a vice principal, face frozen in the laptop screen. He said through a buzz of static, "Tim?"

"That's . . . more or less correct." Tim pushed his glasses up. "We've been trying to find the right reinforcement regimen. It comes down to the training data. Do we have the right sets, do we have the right weights? The dancing, we've been able to improve that part. The singing—"

"It's go-time, here, Tim. It's the fucking finish line. I thought we had a solution. Is this thing ready for prime time or what?"

Tim's expression said everything. He got up from his chair again, flipping back his hair.

"Sit down," Bobby snapped, and Tim sat. "I don't see any choice." Bobby's voice lashed out of the laptop speakers. Somehow his goofy appearance, shrunken chest, his spiky white hair and Clark Kent glasses, made him seem more menacing, like an evil gnome. "We've tried the gauge, we've tried the soft touch. Tim's miracle fix is a no-go. I'm out of options."

"You're not callin' off the tour, man?"

"Calling off the tour? Jesus Christ on a goddamn *stick*. We're not calling off the tour. Donal, what's wrong with you? I'm calling Doctor Ali."

Bobby reached for his phone.

"No!" I shouted. Bobby's eye rolled to me, black and beady on the laptop screen.

"You have an objection, Nikki?"

"You can't—he's not—"

"He's a drug dealer," Donal said.

"Thank you!"

"He's a drug dealer who makes twenty thousand on retainer. He's got half of Silicon Valley ringing him up to handle their life-extension complications. The man, as we speak, has Chandler Fong in his basement, hooked to a drip with two broken hips. I'm calling him."

"I'll talk to her, I'll explain—"

"You're going to have to do more than *explain*, Nikki. At this point, I don't care if the girl has to be tranked into a coma and danced across the stage on fucking wires. I'm getting my tour." He glared. Suddenly his face changed. "All right, I'm sorry I said that. But look. We tried these other options. I don't give a flying fouter for this authenticity nonsense, the soul of the artist, passion, whatever. We're putting on a show. It's not doing Coco any favors to indulge her like a spoiled child who—what? What is it, Tim?"

Tim was standing again, shuffling across the carpet, like a child coming out of his bedroom to announce he'd pooped his pajamas.

"I—"

"Spit it out."

Tim pushed up his glasses, looking straight at me, as if what he had to say was something only I would understand.

"There may be another way."

\* \* \*

Heading back to the venue, the streets were packed. The car pushed through a throng of protesters, parting seas of staring eyes. I peered at signs I didn't understand, translations overlaid in smartglass, political jargon, names of politicians. Mikey dimmed the windows and took over from the autodrive, guiding us through a dense police line.

I faced her, doing my best to explain Tim's plan, while the car lurched at every

light, stopping with a force that almost threw me off my seat.

"See, it's all just signals, right? The stuff in your brain, neurons, cortex, whatever. They can intercept it, and it's like—like they're saving it. They can keep track of what's being blocked."

Her face turned away, nodding, as a wave of voices crashed over the car. I saw masses of people crammed in a sidestreet, waving flags and painted shirts, faces white with unintelligible rage. The car jerked forward and they were gone.

"Or a phone call." I tried to remember what Tim had told us, the technical details I didn't understand, blizzards of jargon and acronyms and code. "Like pirating a signal, okay, or tapping a feed, or—"

"Whadda they wanna do to me, Nikki?" She fell back, eyes closed, voice drifting up like something vaporous, smoke or steam or a cloud of ash. "They wanna change the settings? Put me on a permanent fix? Make it so I never go coo-coo again?"

"No! Nothing like that. They'll archive it, is all. Save the data. Like a backup."

"Jesus."

"Then, when you're ready, you go back and access it, wait till the time is right and—"

"Yeah. I get it. Savin' up the feelings for a rainy day. Aye-yai-yah, give these people a year, they'll have they fuckin' radios in our spines, be drivin' us all around like Mario Kart." She pushed herself up. "How's it work? I open up the app, press play, I start ugly cryin' in my pasta? What's the catch?"

"No catch. They're already capping your dances for the feedback sessions. They've got film and audio they're taking for the docs. What they do is, they put it all together, click-click-click, and you have the whole package. Recordings of what happened. Recordings of your feelings. You run it through the implant, load the VR, match it all up, and you're set."

She rolled her eyes like I was fifteen again, talking too much on a Coca-Cola high, trying to convince her the guy I liked was cuter than the guy she liked. And huffing a laugh, mouth pulled into a smile as her head rocked on the upholstery.

"Never lose a thing, huh? How's that work? I sit home all night, watching movies of myself, letting Google and Apple and all them people tell me what I'm supposed to be feeling? How's that any different from how I'm already living?"

I didn't say anything, but watched her expressions, the car bumping down the ramp to the garage. Fluorescents slipped over us, icy white, the noise of the street now like an ocean far away. We slid to the crash-posts around the exit. Ames heaved out of the shotgun seat, looking down through tinted glass, then over his shoulder at the steps to backstage, the imminent noise, the waiting crowd.

"That night at Rico's." She was looking out the window, into Ames's stomach, but with music in her voice, like she was looking back in time. "I was so messed up. We acted fine, like it was me bein' me, but man, it ain't right to get that messed up. I remember you almost had to carry me home. Pukin' on myself and shit. And all those other times, those other nights." Her eyes rolled to me, sheened with reflections. "You really want me to go through with this, Nikki? You really think this is the right thing to do?"

I felt for her hand. Lifted it, squeezed it. Buying myself a little time. Because I was trying to remember what Tim had told us in Samira's room, the risks, the requirements, the firewalls and links. But all I could think about was Doctor Ali, saying with his soothing voice, "We'll beat this, Coco. I promise you, I swear, we will beat these feelings."

"I want what you want," I said. She pulled her hand back, nodding, looking away, like I'd said something completely different. And got out of the car, and went past Ames, up the steps without a word. Getting out after her, I had to steady myself on Ames's arm. My legs were so shaky, so numb from the drive, I felt like I'd stumbled into someone else's life.

It was okay, that night. Not great, not even good, but good enough to get us through. We were so tired, we moved like windup toys, ticking through steps, obeying the beat. I knew, somehow, wrapping up the encore, that this was a preview of shows to come. We wouldn't blow away the crowds like we used to, wouldn't even really satisfy them. But we could do this. We could pull through.

Not that everything went as planned. Not that there weren't any glitches on the way. But the rhythm of a tour has a power of its own, a necessary pace, a kind of automatic logic. Time breaks down into manageable moments: wind through a window, a chilly dream of dawn, the salty darkness of a hotel balcony over an invisible sea.

Tim knelt with his Mac, battering keys, opening ports and altering settings. And after that, it was easy. When she felt the need, she stopped, squeezed, and her feelings flew away, archived for later in the cloud. A relief, a release, a reassurance. Nothing sacrificed. Nothing lost.

It got to feel normal. It got to be routine. Like the coffee runs, the catered meals, the lighting guy who spent his breaks napping in a big ATA case. The sight of her hunched in a bathroom stall, light beams discoing through her fingers, lips parting in a sigh as the buffer hit home.

Soon, no one noticed the long dead hours when she'd sit like a zombie in the jet, warm Diet Coke going flat in her hands. How she'd forget to leave the stage after a show, unless I came and touched her arm. How, when she sang, it was strangely empty, a copy of a copy, an act about an act, all significance drained away. She played her part. We played along. The money came in. The show went on.

By the time we landed in Tokyo, it didn't seem weird that I had to take her hand, help her down the steps of the plane. We crossed the tarmac, and there he was waiting for us, our old nemesis, Doctor Ali.

He looked a lot older than when we'd last seen him, streaks of gray leaking back from his temples, skin pinched into wrinkles around his eyes. He stood by the rental like a TV magician: chin up, chest out, arms tightly folded. Bobby, beside him, had aged a lot, too, potbelly now too big to be sucked in, round face puffy and pale in the sun. He rose on his toes as we came forward, snapping his fingers, sticking out his gut.

"Nikki, Nikki, let me explain."

I squeezed her hand. She pulled away, floating in a cloud of scarves that rippled out from her body in the wind. She lifted a hand. Not in greeting. It was like the vague, valedictory gesture of a ghost. These days she was always smiling. I knew why. Smiling was easy. Smiling was simple. Smiling kept the world off her back.

Doctor Ali dropped his arms. "Coco?" There was a thickness to his voice.

She stood gazing up at him, silent in the sun.

"I want to cover all our bases." Bobby darted his eyes between us, bobbing on his toes. "We have the gauge, we have the scratch tracks, now we have you. *Both* of you. We couldn't have done this all without you."

It was just his usual BS, but it made me feel sour, tainted inside, like I'd accidentally eaten an endangered animal. I watched her with Doctor Ali. Both of them leaned back slightly, like an old divorced couple with a lot of heavy baggage, getting reacquainted after years apart. Bobby took off his glasses.

"I think it's best to have a doctor here. Not to make prescriptions, not necessarily. Just, you know, to be on hand."

I could hardly focus on his voice, the scene was so full of unspoken thoughts. Doctor Ali was walking backward, studying her. She watched him go. She clutched the gauge. Faint pink light leaked into the sun. Not squeezing, exactly, not hard, not like she used to, but forcing out a steady pulse.

"It's a backup plan." Bobby licked his lips. "I mean, we're all about the backups,

right?" He tried a laugh, but it broke into a cough.

Doctor Ali frowned. Really, I didn't much care that he was here. I knew Bobby's style, dragging people around the world, mostly just to show he could. We'd been on tour six months. My ability to feel things was pretty much tapped out. And it seemed to me that Doctor Ali looked beaten, like a fighter who already knew he'd lost.

"What have you done?" He was looking at her, but I could tell he was talking to me. "Nikki, what have you done to her?"

Before I could answer, Bobby bounced between us, flapping his hands.

"Enough, enough. Come on, people. It's Tokyo. We made it. Isn't this a cause for celebration?"

Doctor Ali was still backing away. And I could see in his eyes that awful question repeating like a bell, an alarm.

*Nikki, what have you done to your friend?*

\* \* \*

We took Bobby's rental to the hotel. The city went by in sharp bright lines, almost too big, like an entire modern country crammed into one single town. Bobby sat up front with Mikey, chatting about closure, communication, symbolic blah-blah-blah. In back, it was me and Doctor Ali, and her between us, smiling her soulless smile.

Ten minutes from the hotel, Bobby twisted in his seat, tapping his glasses down his nose. "This has been a truly stellar achievement, people. Really. I extend my congratulations to you all."

"Achievement." The word dripped from Doctor Ali's lips.

"I include everyone in that sentiment, of course."

"And Coco?" Doctor Ali stared at the back of Mikey's seat, where an inset screen showed pictures of parks, shrines, various local attractions. "Do you believe Coco has done her part?"

"Of course I include Coco."

"It seems to me, if you'll forgive my saying so, that Coco has given more than anyone."

Bobby clacked his glasses shut against his chin. His naked blue eyes blinked at Coco until she said, finally, "I'm fine, really." Weak and automatic.

Bobby pointed with his glasses. "See?"

"Unbelievable," Doctor Ali hissed. "Simply unbelievable."

I couldn't take it. One hour in, I'd already had enough of the guy. "Hey. Medicine man. You got something you wanna say to me?"

"And what, precisely, do you expect me to say to you, Nikki? I mean, really, what is there to say?"

"You know, you had your turn, okay?"

"My turn. Of course. That *is* how you would see it."

"My God!" I lunged against my seatbelt. "You wanna start with me? Come on and start with me, you alligator-shoe wearing fuck."

"Children, children," Bobby sang.

"No, really, I'd like to hear your thoughts on this, Nikki. I'd really like to hear how you rationalize what you've been doing to your friend."

"I'll put your medical license up your—"

"Now, now." Bobby's glasses traced a circle. "You're being absurd. This is fine, it's all fine. There are dozens of respectable people who are very happy with Doctor Ali's services. And there are hundreds, thousands, who use these new devices, and they're all very happy, too. So it's fine, people. Everything's fine."

"Thousands," Doctor Ali breathed. "My God."

"Yes," Bobby said, "and do you know why that is? Half of North Hollywood has gone on the squeeze."

"The squeeze?"

“Isn’t that a wonderful phrase? I’ll tell you what I think. I think it’s because of Coco. People looked at her, they saw Coco’s example, and all the damaged little lovelies of Beverly Hills said, ‘My, my, my, we want some of that.’”

“It’s very trendy, I’m sure.” Doctor Ali sniffed. “In another month, those same people will be toxifying their guts with the latest microbiota craze. But in the meantime—”

“Sour grapes,” Bobby tilted.

“In the meantime,” Doctor Ali said, raising his voice, and again Bobby cut him off.

“It’s a beautiful thing. Once again, everyone wants to be Coco. Why? Because of *us*, people. We did it. It’s the greatest tale in history, the tale of the comeback kid.” His glasses flicked at me. “I’ll hand it to you, Nikki. We couldn’t have pulled it off without you.”

I made myself smile, wondering why it felt so wrong to hear what was obviously right. Across the seat, Doctor Ali turned and glared, looking like an evil wizard, thunderbolts in his eyes. Then something gave way, and he sank back, looking at the gauge where she held it in her lap.

“On that point, at least,” he said, “we’re in agreement.”

While through it all, she sat between us, smiling her dead smile.

“Really, people. Really. I’m fine.”

\* \* \*

The show was still three days away, but the whole crew was already in town. Not only Bobby and Doctor Ali, but Bobby’s ex-boyfriend, his ex-boyfriend’s boyfriend, and Tyrene and Trey and the chef we got in Naples. And the fans with their families, the stalkers with their drones, the chasers who just wanted to be part of the moment. Ronin Double-Z was gaming live in Makuhari, Gustavo Estevez was talking movie deals, Karma Jade had booked three days at an art Airbnb in Omotesando, taking sick pictures and dropping sick slams and doing everything possible to reboot the feud. And all the posters in the bus stops said, *She’s Back*, with pictures of a black silhouette, silver eyes, silver lightning bolts zigzagging from her hair.

Most of the crew was in the Hilton by the venue, but a few of us were across town, in a swankier place removed from the madness. Behind sound-absorbing drapes and polarizing smartglass, among planters of real hyperosmic jasmine, it was easy to forget about the world outside. I spent my afternoon with ambient subsonics, therapeutic vibrations in my bones, thinking of helicopters over the Hudson, rumbles of trains under Harlem streets. I was chill like winter when I went down that evening and saw Doctor Ali in the hotel bar.

He was sitting by the windows, sipping something that looked strong, the top three buttons of his shirt undone. I stood by his table, glaring down, letting him know things weren’t over between us. He waved at a chair. The place was almost empty. Years ago, I’d been impressed by joints like this, the tropical hardwoods and rare-fiber fabrics, the air they put on of being oh-so-exclusive. Now I noticed the people in the chairs: old, rich, tired, and wasted.

“I’ve come to accept,” Doctor Ali said slowly, “that you sincerely believe you’re doing the right thing.”

I took out my phone and ordered a beer, watching him watch me with his dark eyes.

“Do you believe,” he said, lifting his glass, “that this new Coco you’ve created is someone the old Coco would have wanted to be?”

His nut dish was empty. No ice in his glass. He must have been waiting here a long time, I figured, maybe for me, maybe for anyone.

I leaned back as the waiter set down my beer. “She’s doing what she wants.”

He sighed in that snooty way he had, looking out at the sprinkled lights. “You know, I don’t believe there’s such a thing as a true self. A single, authentic version of

a person, enduring from year to year? No. But I do believe there can be multiple versions, and that some of those versions can be better than others." His eyes swung to me. "How did it happen? Was it gradual? Sudden? Did anyone restrain her? Did you start by arguing, reasoning, bargaining, and finally realize you had no choice?"

My foot was shaking under the table, tapping a rhythm on the single leg. It bugged me, how right he could be about some things, how incredibly wrong about others.

"You know, there's a well-documented problem with these devices." Doctor Ali touched a napkin to his lips. "When Coco uses the gauge, the effect is gradual. The implant calibrates to input. It doesn't taper off gradually, though. The brain fights to return to equilibrium. Over time, pressure builds. A break point comes. The patient experiences a surge of emotion. The natural response is to use the gauge again. As usage continues, the crash intensifies. Gauge use becomes constant, reflexive, sometimes continuing even in sleep." He clunked down his glass. "It's not Coco's fault, Nikki. Not yours. Not anyone's. It's the way things are."

I tipped my bottle to hide my eyes, disturbed by how much sense he was making. I reminded myself he was a doctor, an expert, used to dishing out this kind of lofty talk. I put down my beer.

"And what you did? With your pills? Was that any better?"

He closed his eyes. "No. No, it was not any better. I'm not trying to assign blame here, Nikki. I'm trying to tell you I understand."

"You don't, though. You don't know how she was, when we first got started on this game. Going round the clubs all night, always trying to meet meet meet. And being treated like the trash of the earth, not even human, just ass and tits. You weren't there when her mama would go at her, she'd come down all hunched, barely able to walk. But she could sing, right? She could always sing." I pressed my palms to the table. "You never saw her in her prime. Only how she is now. After you got your poison into her."

He opened his mouth like he wanted to argue, but shut it and put a fist to his lips. "Look at her, Nikki. Look at her face, tell me that's the friend you remember. Watch her perform, tell me that's the performer you remember. Tell me the person who got off that plane is the Coco Rios who used to play with you—"

"You don't know what you're talking about, okay? Maybe you look in her eyes, that shit seems unnatural, I dunno. But she's doing it. She's onstage, under the lights, she's where she always wanted to be. We get her home, we'll load up those backups—"

"Ah, yes, the backups. Tell me about these famous backups."

"Nothing to tell. We got it all saved. Every mood, every feeling. So when she's ready—"

He grabbed his head, laughing to himself, like someone forced to listen to a lunatic on the street. It was so incredibly rude, it sent me right over the edge.

"All right. You wanna be like that, be like that. But listen—"

"And who's in charge of these backups, hmm? Is it Tim? You sucked out your friend's soul through a straw, you gave it to Tim? Straight into the hands of the nearest mad scientist?"

"Oh, that's real scientific, *doctor*. Thanks so much for the medical opinion."

"Nikki," he said, but I was on my feet, slamming down my beer so hard it foamed.

"Just stay away from her, okay? You keep your chemicals to yourself."

"Nikki," he said again, but I was already moving, gunning for just about anywhere else, so fast I almost forgot to stop and add the drink charge to my room.

\* \* \*

The crews were at the venue. The band was in the lounge. Bobby was across town at the label, working on a promotional deal.

The whole long day stretched out before us, packed with things we ought to be doing, but nothing we absolutely *had* to do. Cristal wanted to go to a selfiespot, take fan-service shots for the channels. Donal was freaking out about potential wardrobe



blowups. Samira had meetings all day with the promoter, firing off interview requests.

Me and her? We snuck away after lunch. Crept out, powered down our phones, and ran giggling through the hotel halls. We rushed through the lobby and down to the garage, taking just Ames and one of his guys, not telling anyone else where we were going. Found a taxi that knew the town, hit the switch, darkened the windows, and whirred out into the Tokyo streets.

She wanted to see the Meiji shrine. Always had a thing for mystical places. We told the car to come back in three hours, left our phones, and went strolling up the path, under the wooden gate, into the shade. Both of us rolling in our off-brand sweats, cosplaying like the girls we used to be. Everything around us breathing with silence, the wooden buildings, the whispery trees, even people going up the stone steps, talking shyly like children in church. You could feel history coming out of the ground here, a thousand thousand years of ghosts.

We washed our hands and went into the shrine, the gloom and coolness and the soft stony echoes, but there wasn't much to do except be silent and respectful, so we went back out, deeper into the forest, crunching along the pebbled paths. In a clearing, a lake spread brown under the ginkgo trees, fat gray fish popping up to taste the air, reminding me of fans at a limousine window, all those eyes and open mouths. Then, farther on, we came to a place where the hush of the trees was almost scary, like one of those shows where the whole world ends, no one even remembering the days of civilization.

"You like this?" I asked, and she nodded, not speaking. No interest at all in her eyes.

"Pretty, isn't it?"

"Very," she said, but that smile of hers had nothing behind it.

I took her hand. I led her to a bench. A couple of old folks sat nearby, holding phones and canes and little medical monitors. The sun came sprinkling through the leaves. I felt her hand flex as she squeezed the gauge. Off and on. No rest, no end. The pink light making a stain on my skin.

"Do you always need to use it?" I turned her hand to see the screen. "I mean, you could stop if you wanted to, right? You don't always have to be on the squeeze."

"I'm okay, Nikki." That lifeless voice.

"Sure, I know, but . . ." I felt my face twisting, eyes growing hot with the pressure of tears. I didn't want Doctor Ali to be right. But a part of me—it's hard to explain—a part of me didn't want him to be wrong, either.

"Coco?" I squatted in front of the bench. "You're okay with this, right? All of this. It's what you want, isn't it?"

"I told you, Nikki, I'm perfectly fine."

"Sure, sure, but . . . no one says you *have* to do this. You do have a choice. You know that, right?"

She stared, not moving. And maybe I imagined it, but I could have sworn that smile of hers faltered. Like a little ghost, hiding behind her eyes, was peeping out, signaling to me. I pried open her fingers. "Here. Let me."

Her hand fell open like a rose. Holding her fingers, staring at her eyes, I took the gauge from her open palm. Her face hung over me, still, unresponsive. Like a pool of water on a windy day, her cheeks and lips began to shake. She trembled. Her eyes filled up with tears. The change was so subtle, so silent, so slow, I almost didn't notice when she finally broke down.

"You're okay, baby." I held her hands. When she reached for the gauge, I put it in my bag. "You're okay."

"Nikki!" she cried. It was like an alarm, something forced out of her. Her head wagged, wild-eyed. People were staring. She clawed my arms, her fingers hurting. But I held on.

"Shhh. It'll pass. I promise, it'll pass."

Before I knew it, she was wrapped around me, head on my shoulder, hands on my back. Not reaching out, but giving in. I sat on the bench, stroking her back, saying, "Baby, baby, you're all right, you're okay." Whispering, touching my forehead to hers. "Just give it time."

And as the slow seconds passed, I felt her change, her shoulders relaxing, head hanging down. Maybe she didn't have the strength to keep fighting. Maybe she didn't have the will to resist. Maybe each of us has a limit, and we can only hurt so much. Her arms went limp. She began to weep, chest heaving without a sound, the way people cry at the end of a film. Then that, too, ended, and she settled against me like a child.

"There," I said. "It's over. There." Trying to show her it was all manageable, there were surges and crashes, there were highs and lows, but nothing had to be forever, nothing had to last. We stood up, the park feeling cleaner now, brighter, like a city after a summer storm. I put my hand on her shoulder. She snorted a laugh.

"Guess I had to get that outta me, huh?"

I reached into my bag for the gauge. I let it rest on my open palm. The plastic looked gray and faded, now, ugly, smudged from weeks of constant use. She held out her hand. I plunked it down. She made a disgusted noise in her throat.

"Man, oh, man, this little bastard."

"You don't have to use it."

"I do, though." She shook her head. "If I'm 'a get through this. I do. For now."

"You know what'll happen, anyway, if you stop."

"I think I always knew."

"But now you know you can handle it."

"That shit was bad, Nikki." She pressed her lips together. "Real bad."

"Temporary, though."

She frowned. "Yeah. Temporary." She turned the gauge over and gave it a squeeze. "Guess you're never really done, huh? As long as you're living, you're never really done."

I should have asked her what she meant by that. I should have pushed her to say more. But her fingers tightened, the light leaked through, and that defensive emptiness came back into her face.

I gathered up the straps of my bag.

"Whatever happens, we'll make it through, right? The two of us, together. We always make it through."

She nodded, but she was looking away. It was late afternoon, the light almost gone, sunbeams shooting gold through the trees. She gestured up the path.

"Bobby'll be flippin'."

"Yeah. And Sam."

"This was good, though, Nikki." Turning, she nodded with an air of finality, as if we'd come to the end of a show. "To have this. For me. I think this was good."

Like an idiot, I smiled. I held out my arms. We hugged, but it wasn't like it had been. It was quick, perfunctory, almost formal. She leaned back, hands on my shoulders, eyes moving searchingly over mine. Whatever she was looking for, I guess she must have found it. She turned away and set off up the path. I was stupid enough to smile as I followed, telling myself it was my name she'd called, my hand she'd held in her moment of crisis, that it was me she'd really needed all along.

\* \* \*

I remember the rest of that time like distant history, a childhood trauma blurred by the years. Not that I can't reconstruct what happened. But a few small instants glow

so bright that everything else has receded into shadow, details lost, the meaning unclear.

I know we left the park after five. I know she was using the gauge at the time. I remember the glow of it, swinging in her fist, a pendulum timing our progress up the path. The hot new fashion that was lighting up sidewalks in LA, London, New York, Berlin. All the pretty pale girls of Brooklyn, marching to class with their thousand-dollar stress toys, holding their broken hearts in their hands.

We got to the hotel around six-thirty. I remember checking the time on my phone. I left her room and went down the hall, apologized to Cristal and Sam, and had dinner by myself in my room. It didn't seem crazy to leave her alone. She still had the gauge. Pumping out that pink light. Steady. Calm. Not great, but okay. Taking her treatment. On the squeeze.

It must have been early morning when things changed. I know it was noon when I got the first buzz. And shrugged it off, because it was Bobby, being his usual panicky self. The second buzz, too, I wrote off as nothing special, the usual pre-show jitters and jumps, a long text garbled with stress emojis. Bobby was like this on the road, busy and bored and excited at once, spewing frownie-faces over every little glitch.

When the third buzz came, I figured I'd see what was up, and left the hallway meeting I was in and made my way back to the hotel, telling myself it couldn't be what it sounded like, she had the gauge, she was on the gauge, I'd seen her yesterday using the gauge. One show to go, and we'd be back in the States, resting in Malibu, reading the press. Two of us. Together. Like it had always been.

So I didn't feel scared when I left the elevator, even when I heard the shouts. All the doors in the hall were open, propped by suitcases, walls bright with sun. People were milling around like disaster survivors, pointing, whispering, poking their phones. I glanced into an open room. Bedding everywhere. Drawers pulled open. Piles of socks.

"See?" Donal pointed. "Like a whirlwind came through."

"What happened?"

"What happened?" Bobby came hopping down the hall, keyed up and flushed like a raging red elf. "You're seeing what happened. Your friend went on a rampage."

"Coco?"

"Who else?"

"Where is she?"

He didn't answer, just bounced down the hall, pointing into room after room. "Look at my shirts! Ai, ai, ai. This is completely unacceptable. Showtime in six hours. My God."

"We've got time, anyway." Donal leaned against a door, sweeping toiletries in a pile with his foot. "It's not the ninth hour like she usually does."

"Do you know what she must have done?" Bobby skipped from door to door. "Do you know? Gone to the cleaning staff. Charmed them out of the master key. These stupid, star-worshipping . . . I could literally explode. Nikki, I'm turning this over to you. This is on you."

I checked my room. Bags open. Clothes everywhere. The dresser drawers had been yanked out and emptied. My bathroom stuff was scattered over the bed. "What exactly do you want me to do, Bobby?"

"Do I know? Does anyone? She's Coco. Went around looking for drugs, I suppose. Have any of you been stockpiling drugs? Mind, if you have, I will literally kill you."

"Not me." Donal showed his hands.

"Don't touch that shit." Cristal shook her head.

"Well, unless Nikki has been speedballing on the side, we're in the clear on *that* point, at least. We've got to get her back on the gauge. That's all there is to it, she's got to be on the gauge. It's too late for Doctor Ali. It would take him an hour, with this traffic, just to get here."

"Where is she?" I said again.

Bobby pointed. The door to her suite was shut. A couple of balled-up tissues lay outside, a trail of evidence leading to a crime. I knocked. No answer. Knocked again.

"For Christ's sake," said Bobby, "someone must have the spare key."

I realized that person was me. And stuck the keycard in the slot and opened up.

Her room, at least, wasn't totally trashed. Just dark. A white square outlined the drapes. I waited by the door for my eyes to adjust, then eased it shut and made my way to the bedroom, navigating around the wood chairs. The bed loomed out of the dark, a dim blob. I fumbled at the drapes.

"Nah, nah, nah." From the bed. "Don't."

I left the drapes fall. I stumbled over. She was tucked under the covers, arms folded on her chest, face a dim splotch in the center of the pillow. A shine of sweat marked her upper lip. When I sat on the bed, she groaned, not in pain, but as if my presence had reminded her to breathe.

"Coco?"

"Hoo, boy." A raspy laugh. "I am *fucked* up, Nikki. I am *real* fucked up." She struggled to pull her hands from the sheets. "This shit? They don't put enough warnings on this shit."

"What'd you take?"

She flapped a hand at the nightstand, stifling a giggle.

I patted the top. Nothing. Flicked on the lamp. Still nothing. I pulled open the drawer. And there it was. The top pried off, so when I picked up the bottle, the pills spilled out with a rainstick sound, pebbling the bottom of the drawer.

"What's this?"

"Dunno. You find out, you better tell me. I'm 'a ask him. Bro, where these blue boys been all my life? Coulda used this shit back in the old days. We ever met in eighth grade, shee-ah, these little blue boys and me coulda been best friends." Another giggle, fading to a sigh.

"Where's the gauge, Coco?"

"Gauge? Who knows? Call Silicon Valley, tell 'em we got a runner." Laughing. "No, seriously. Over there. In my bag."

I went to the corner, where a reading nook had been set up: armchair, tea table, floor lamp, charger. I grabbed her Hermes and rummaged in the bottom. Pulled out two wine bottles, rummaged again. "There's nothing here."

"Right there. You holdin' it."

She pointed at the wine bottle in my fist.

"Yeah," she nodded, "bring that on over."

"You know what?" I slammed down the bottle. "No."

"Aw, Nikki."

"I'm not doing this for you."

"Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad. I'm honestly not. But I'm not doing this."

"Well, *I'm* mad." She rolled her head. "Me and that man, we gone have words. Had this shit on him the whole time, he never shared. Takin' Ambiens and technology and shit, all these years I coulda had real relief."

"What'd he give you, Coco?"

"Ask him. I can't read that shit." Waving at the pill bottle. "Bro been stiffin'. I'm 'a tell him, son, you fired. Let go for criminal neglect of the star. Then I'm 'a rehire him, pay double, and tell him to hook me the fuck up."

"Unbelievable." I grabbed the bottle. "Just unbelievable."

"Nikki." She groped for the wine as I stormed past, calling again as I reached the door, "Nikki!" But I left her. The simple, unchangeable truth: I left her.

Bobby pounced when I came out. “Nikki? What’s going on in there?” I skipped past and strode down the hall, while he trotted behind me, clenching and unclenching his hands. “What happened? Is she back on the gauge?”

Samira and Cristal stepped out of their rooms. “Nikki?”

“Not now, not now.” I thundered past. I had the pill bottle gripped in my fist. In the elevator I looked at the label. She was right. The paper was half rubbed away, only a few clear letters remaining.

In the lobby I went straight to the street. Bobby wasn’t kidding. Traffic was intense. Crowds had spilled out into the road, blocking cars. Paparazzi drones were an infestation, crashing, colliding, violating codes. The Tokyo stalkers were crazy tech-savvy. Whole fleets of robots came swarming the barricades, climbing the buildings, crawling underfoot. Municipal countertech swooped in to zap them. It was World War III in a Chiyoda intersection, scaled to the size of a Star Wars playset. The size of the crowd attracted more crowds. Things had reached that level of craziness where people were taking videos of other people’s lunatic attempts to take videos.

Someone saw me, pointed, shouted, and the whole crowd gave out a rabid scream. Then they realized it was only me, and the scream cut off like a broken link. Then they realized it was *me*, actually *me*, and the screaming started up again.

“Jesus.” I went back to the concierge. “Get me a car?”

“To where?”

“Out of here.”

As I headed to the garage, Bobby popped out of the elevator, craning his neck, scanning the scene, but I slipped out of sight before he could catch me.

I gave the driver my destination. We bumped up the access ramp. The whole neighborhood was jumping like a riot. A bunch of politicians were in town for a summit, a protest was going by city hall, and then there was us, our show, our crew. Three events, concert, motorcade, protest, had jammed the municipal algorithms. Every intersection was a jigsaw of cars. My driver kept flipping on and off the autodrive, canceling recommended routes. Texts and alerts rapid-fired through my phone. I shut it off, not wanting to think about what was happening anywhere else.

Ten blocks from the goal, I ditched the car. I ran, passing the venue on the left, a glimmer of green behind the buildings. A robot like a steel giraffe was stilting through the gaps in gridlock. The hotel where the crew was staying loomed like a huge tan tombstone ahead.

In the elevator I checked the room number. My feet burned with fresh blisters. Sweat poured down my face. I took off my shoes and hooked them on my fingers, wishing I’d had more time to prepare.

After all the noise and excitement outside, the hotel floors were eerily still. A vacuum cleaner moaned somewhere, bumping and thudding against the walls. Glancing out a window, I saw the arena, a metal pinwheel in a mass of trees. Projectors twinkled on the roof, warming up for the night’s big show. In the sky, a Japanese teenager danced, a ghostly ad in the dynamic glass.

I limped on my sore feet, reading room numbers. 1405, 1406. At Room 1408, I pounded, waited. That son of a bitch had better be here. . . .

When the door opened, I didn’t hesitate. I shot in, spun around, slammed the door, and punched him in the chest.

“What’d you give her, you quack piece of shit?”

“Nikki? What—?” He backed away, looking at the bed, the lamp, as if searching for clues to why I was here. A towel was draped across his shoulders, hanging in two white stripes down his chest. His hair was dripping, plastered in black stripes across his forehead. Something seemed to be wrong with his face, the lines uneven, features off balance, and after a moment I realized what it was. I’d caught him in the middle

of trimming his beard.

He grabbed the ends of the towel, tugging them, moving his lips but saying nothing. "What'd you give her?" I repeated.

I was still clutching the empty bottle. I took a step forward and chucked it at his face, catching him in the forehead. The bottle went flying. He touched his head, blinking, more surprised than hurt.

"You couldn't let things stand, could you? Couldn't sit back and leave her alone."

I was so worked up I couldn't even talk straight, could hardly get enough air for the words. He looked down, still touching the spot where the bottle had nicked him.

"Nikki, I think you must be confused."

"Confused? I'll show you confused! I—" I broke off, pacing in front of the beds, hands balled in fists. "We coulda been fine. But you had to come with your—your pills and your—you had to have her." I turned on him. "You just had to have her, all for yourself."

He fumbled at the air behind him, feeling for the bed, keeping his eyes locked on mine, as if I might try to knife him in the back. I noticed a humidifier puffing in the corner. Two orthopedic slippers had been tucked under the bed. There were colored paper shades on the lamps, a framed photo of his kid on the nightstand. Little touches, minor adjustments, to make the place feel more like home.

He rubbed the corner of his mouth as he watched me, scratching the untrimmed parts of his beard.

"I think you'd better tell me what's happened, Nikki."

The way he sat there, measuring his words, it made me want to push him off the bed. All these years, I'd been the reasonable one, the woman who behaved responsibly. And look where it had gotten me.

"You want to know what happened? I'll tell you, doctor: *you* happened. We were fine, her and me, until you came along. Miracle cures and chemical imbalances and—and all those promises you made. But when it was my turn, when I was the one helping her, you . . . you couldn't let me have her, could you? You couldn't sit back and let me have her. Because nothing I do is ever enough."

He lowered his head, pinching the bridge of his nose, and sighed like a father disappointed in his child. I could have smacked him. I really could have killed him. I spun away.

"She was doing okay, she was going to make it, and now—"

Something inside me broke. I plopped onto the second bed, bouncing on the mattress, letting my breath out in a whoosh. I wasn't even angry anymore. I'd spent twenty years as the girl in the background, playing accompaniment, singing backup, taking care of everyone's affairs. I'd lived my life in a supportive role, and I just couldn't do it anymore.

The humidifier huffed. A vacuum droned outside, pausing to bump three times at the door. Around the corner that led to the bathroom, I saw bright light reflecting in a mirror, the icy span of a vanity top, his razor and comb and a row of hair products, and dark little whiskers swept neatly in a pile. He was silent so long I was sure he must be staring, but when I looked over, he was looking at the floor, still pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Why?" he said at last, looking up with a sigh. "Why is it always the doctor to blame?" He blinked at me, his handsome face haggard. "Did I tell Coco to do this tour? Did I pressure her to book these shows? Did I push her to strain herself, night after night, so Bobby and his people could make a pile of money?" When I didn't answer, he got to his feet. "Am I the one spreading rumors online, or doctoring photos, or leaking gossip to the press? Was I the one," and his voice rose, "who took a belt to that girl when she was a child, or abandoned her, or God forbid, assaulted her at a party—?"

"Don't," I said.



"Then tell me, please, Nikki, why am I the one to blame? Why, when I've been trying all these years—" He broke off, dragging a hand across his eyes. "Do you know what I saw, when I met Coco? Do you know what I felt had been delivered into my hands? A wounded bird. A broken soul. And do you know what I told myself, the day I undertook her treatment? That I couldn't change the past, couldn't undo what had been done, but I could, at the very least, ease her pain—"

"You never believed in her." I jumped to my feet. "I knew it. I knew it. You never believed."

"This is what I do, Nikki. I'm a healer. I heal. Whereas you and your associates—"

"Bullshit. I call bullshit on that."

"In this grand romanticized industry of yours—"

"Bullshit you're a healer."

"It was you who did this." His voice dropped to a hiss. "Get that through your head. It was you, Nikki, who enabled her. You who pushed her. You who've been with her from the beginning, using her, clinging to her—"

"Me?" I heard my voice rise to a scream. I fell to my knees on the carpet, frantic, scrambling under the bed. "Me? I did this? Me? It was me?" I found the bottle and clawed it out, pushed myself up, slammed it into his chest. "*This* was me? You piece of shit."

I drove the bottle as hard as I could into his chest, wanting to hurt him, literally kill him, stake him through his arrogant heart. When I stepped back, panting, the bottle dropped, and he caught it on his open palm. His fingers wrapped around it. He watched as I backed away.

"She doesn't belong to you," he said. "I'm sorry, Nikki, but she doesn't." And he opened his fingers and looked at what was in his hand.

He turned the bottle over three times, running a thumb along the plastic. Squinted. Rubbed what was left of the label. He went to the bedstand and opened a drawer, took out a suede-trimmed glasses case, lifted out a pair of wireframes and shook them open and slipped them on, and clicked the reading lamp above the bed, angling the adjustable stem.

"This isn't anything I prescribed," he said, darting a glance over his glasses. He went back to the label, pooching out his lips. His eyebrows came down like a final judgment. "You say she's been taking these?"

"Just now. Today. If you didn't prescribe them, then how—?"

"What dosage?"

"Dosage?" I felt as if the walls had dropped away, the floor, ceiling, every part of the building, leaving me lost and floating in space. "I don't know the dosage. She's just been taking them. If you didn't give them to her, where did she—?"

"Interactions?" He stood, crossing the room in three strides, pausing at the closet to step into his loafers. "Other active substances? Has she been drinking?"

"I—"

When I didn't finish, he looked over, reading in my face what he needed to know. He held up the bottle.

"These are benzodiazepines, Nikki. These are Bobby's anti-anxiety meds."

\* \* \*

The traffic was worse now, cars backed up in every street, blitzed-out drones lying shattered on the sidewalks. Our taxi wandered far afield, making a route change every few seconds, backtracking, searching for optimal streets. The sun glowed red behind the buildings, the stain of evening already in the sky.

Doctor Ali spent the ride on his phone, checking what looked like medical apps, answering calls with his face averted, talking too low for me to hear. I didn't ask who he was talking to. I was having trouble just sitting still. Every light on the road was like a warning of disaster, every car horn made me jump in my seat. The chaos outside

and the chaos in my head combined into one big whirl of distractions. He put away his phone and we rode in silence, but there wasn't any anger between us, not now. We were like two soldiers heading into battle, nothing to say except what was obvious, nothing to share except our fear.

When the hotel appeared, he told the car to pull over, coming around to help me out. Whatever else you thought of the man, he was always courteous, our Doctor Ali.

The crowds had mostly cleared away, heading to the venue, or out to eat, or wherever journalists go when they aren't invading other people's privacy. A few stragglers held up their phones, tracking us as we ducked through the doors. In the lobby, Doctor Ali took his time, walking slowly past the desk. I realized he was forcing himself not to run, deliberately putting on a casual performance. For my benefit? For the press? The staff? All I knew was that it made me more scared, wondering what he was trying to hide.

Then we were riding up in the elevator, holding our breath until the bell dinged. The hall was empty. Doors closed, the mess cleared. Our feet thumped softly on the carpet. At the suite door, Doctor Ali turned, waiting. I blinked at him, wondering why he didn't go in.

"The key, Nikki," he said gently, and I took out the card and handed it to him. He pressed my shoulder as he put it in the slot.

The room was dark. The light from the door swept over wood tables, hints of marble, fabric, glass, the glossy shoulder of a vase. Doctor Ali reached in and patted the wall, and the lights glowed on. I could already tell there was something wrong, a special stillness in the air. Like every speck of dust, every molecule of oxygen, the beams of light themselves, were all standing still.

We went in the bedroom. The covers were thrown back, kicked in a wad at the corner of the bed. Wet spots made dark blotches on the pillow. Doctor Ali paused at the dresser, hefting and shaking an empty wine bottle. The Hermes handbag was on the carpet, tissues and candy spilled out like guts.

I went to the bathroom. The door was ajar, a scalpel-thin line of light slashing out. I pushed. It wouldn't move. I used my weight. Something was blocking it on the far side. I got it open enough to squeeze through. And then there was no doubt, no uncertainty, no question. Whatever the doctors said later at the hospital, whatever journalists reported in the news, whatever it says in the official biography, or the gossip sites, or the fan accounts, about the last minutes of Coco Rios's life, I'll always know how things really ended, curled up there on the bathroom floor.

It's hard to be sure what happened next. I remember Doctor Ali kneeling with her, touching her face and lifting her hand, and how I knew just by watching him that something was off. At some point, he must have called the paramedics. It took me by surprise when they came bustling in, bringing their gurney, their medbots and monitors, all their advanced and useless tech. One sat me down and had me look in a camera, talking through a translation app, asking questions I couldn't follow. He seemed to think I was the one who needed help, or maybe he was worried about my mental health. After tapping something into his phone, he went away, and someone else came up, talking about what would happen at the hospital, how Japanese medicine was the best in the world, they could fix almost anything these days. I must have looked like I didn't understand, because he touched his translator, had it speak in three languages, then patted my shoulder and shuffled away. By then, they'd already brought out the gurney, her head rolling limp with something covering her face. I called out a question, but no one answered. It was Doctor Ali who told me the truth, kneeling in front of me after they'd gone, holding my hands and repeating the words until I finally understood.

Strangely, it wasn't her music I thought of at that moment. It wasn't the years we'd spent in the clubs, or the first big tour overseas, when we stormed through Paris like

we owned the continent, jumping in the public fountains at the Louvre, ordering cakes in the Rue de Passy. It wasn't the soft summer days in Malibu, or the nights in New York when I'd help her get home, using fistfuls of napkins to wipe her chin.

No, it was a night from much further back, a time in fifth grade when she first slept over at my place. We'd made a nest of our blankets on the floor, lying with our heads almost touching on the carpet, whispering secrets in the dark. I told her about my brother that night, how he'd always been the family clown, standing on chairs to do impressions of our father, putting on grownup clothes to make us laugh. But when I finished, she was silent for a time, then said, "You always do that, you know. You call him your brother. You never actually use his name."

"Deon," I said. And it was like a release, something opening in my chest. Until before I knew it I was telling her everything, how I'd been the one who was watching him that day. How I'd left him for a second, only a second, to take the trash out to the chute. But when I came back I couldn't find him anywhere, not in the living room, not in the kitchen, not even going through the place room by room, calling his name, getting angry, then worried, then angry again, as I checked the closets and under the beds. Until I went in the living room and saw the open window, his Hulk doll sitting there on the sill, and the roofs of the city stretching below. And then the sound I made was so loud, so long, that it might have been coming from the air itself, the whole sky opening up to scream his name.

She said nothing, as I talked, just listened, her eyes glittering in the dark, and reached out at one point and put a hand on my cheek. And that was what I remembered, years later, as I sat in her hotel room with Doctor Ali. How she'd always been the loud one, the interesting one, the one who demanded and received attention. But when I needed it, she listened to me with so much care, such intense concentration, it was like the whole world had fallen silent.

What happened next is a bit of a blur. I know at one point Doctor Ali went to the hospital. I remember him standing over my chair, explaining something with his hands on my shoulders, while I blinked and nodded and echoed his words, though I wasn't exactly sure what he'd said. He touched my shoulder and pulled me to my feet, and I realized he was taking me to my room. When he closed the door, I went to the window and turned off the smartglass, looking down at the unfiltered city, thinking about the millions of lives that were still being lived in that spill of lights.

I must have been standing there a long time, but it seemed only seconds before someone knocked, a voice called, "Nikki?" and I opened the door to look out into Donal's worried face. The hall was empty. That surprised me, somehow. No police, no tape, no crowds, just lights and carpet running up to her door, like she might still be in there, waiting for me to find her.

"Nikki?" He pushed past me. "People are going crazy out there. Bobby said he got a text from Ali. He said to come check on you. He said—" Donal peered into my face. "So it's true? Well, shit. God, Nikki, I'm sorry."

I must have said something, because the next thing I knew, he was slumped against the door, air going out of him in a rush. "Where is she, then? The hospital? God, what a night." He turned away, leaning sideways on the wall. "How about the media? They get any word?"

I took out my phone, but the screen was dark, not even a pixel. I remembered I'd turned it off.

"Fuck 'em, right?" Donal said. "Fuck 'em all. I guess we better tell Bobby. Oi, this is a mess."

He took out his phone but didn't tap anything, just stood staring at the screen. "No," he said, "no, we'll go in person. That's the way to do these things."

We went out the door and down the hall. Everything seemed to be moving in jumps, time skipping like a broken file. One second we were going by the doors, then at the elevator, then in the garage.

“Tell you what, Nikki, they’ve gone crazy over there.” Donal led me to a red smart-car. “Bobby’s looking like the guy on YouTube who eats all those red peppers and things. What happened? She took something?”

The car seemed to hover instead of driving, floating through the Tokyo streets. My brain was struggling to keep up with events, stuck somewhere in the recent past, not wanting to deal with what was happening in the present. Donal thumped the seat. “They’re in a state of panic. Going on about the gauge, the gauge, we’ve got to get her back on the gauge. I told them, people, it’s a bit of plastic, it’s not the thing to pump out her guts. But Bobby . . . the man’s in an altered state. It’s legitimately disturbing. If we don’t get there soon—”

The blare of a car horn blasted him silent. City workers in Day-Glo vests were loading aluminum barricades in a truck. Ahead, the lights of the venue glowed purple, winking behind a fence of trees. A banner overhead proclaimed *She’s Back* in gold letters, rippling in the evening wind.

The pre-show music was thumping through the walls, a rumble in the concrete corridors. Donal led the way to the backstage entrance, where a man in a headset rushed to meet us.

“You found her?”

“This is Nikki,” Donal said.

The man touched an earpiece. “Go in.”

“This is Nikki Powell. The keyboardist.”

“I know. Yes? I have her.” He turned, adjusting his headset, jamming the earpiece deeper in his ear.

“Where’s Bobby?” Donal asked, but the man ignored him, striding ahead of us down the hall.

“This is what she’s wearing?” he asked over a shoulder.

“Onstage?” Donal bugged his eyes. “You mad?”

“Five minutes.” The man slapped a door.

“Now listen—”

“Five minutes,” the man repeated, showing five fingers, and backed out and shut the door.

“Fuckin’ brilliant. Well, I guess I’d better call Bobby.”

“We can’t.” I struggled to make the words come. “Donal, we can’t do the show.”

“I know.” He turned, phone to his ear. “Where is that canny bastard? Course we’re not doing it. They’ve lost their minds.”

“They can’t,” I insisted. “Not after—”

“They’re trying, Nikki. They’re up there now, getting it ready.”

“She’s gone, though.”

“That’s not going to stop them.” He blinked. “The holos, Nikki. They’re loading the holos.”

I fumbled for a chair. I managed to sit, digging my hands into the grubby cushion, the world going loopy and loose and limp, spinning into strange new shapes. Donal seemed to be falling away, voice receding as he said, “It’s that creature. Tim. He’s got the data. Those signals you’ve been saving. Training his, what do you call it, his model. Saying he’s got it to performance standards. Bobby swallowed that shit like sweet cream. They’re up there now, putting in the settings, stringing the filament. Christ!” He shook the phone. “Where is that little prick?”

On cue, the door opened, and Bobby came in, puffed up, pink-faced, a skip in his step like he got when he was happy. He saw me and threw out his arms, eyes popping.

“There she is. Miracle of miracles. And why, Donal, does she look like a rat’s rear end?”

“You can’t do this, Bobby.”

“We’re doing it. It’s happening. Whether she goes up there or not.”

“It’s not right.”

“It’s a fait accompli. Lord, Lord, you could at least have fixed her hair. And what

in God's name does she have on her *feet*?"

I struggled up, feeling like I was floating. "The holos, Bobby? Really? Tonight?"

"I heard from Ali. He made it clear, there's nothing he can do. We tried the gauge, we did our best. Now we simply have to adapt."

"You're a monster."

"Look, Nikki, this has been a long time coming. I've previewed the models, I've seen them perform. Tim has done truly wonderful work. I promise, if you could see this thing in action—"

"He's been running trials," Donal said. "Through the tour."

"Equipment checks." Bobby flapped a hand. "Nothing terribly involved. Proof of concept. If I didn't tell you, it was because I knew how you'd react. And don't get testy, Nikki. You did your part. You helped us get the data—"

"Her data," I said.

"Of course, of course—"

"Which you've been using. Without her permission."

"Really? Who do you think signed the forms? Look, Nikki, I understand this is sudden. But when Coco recovers—"

I grabbed a chair as it sank in. They didn't know. Doctor Ali hadn't told them. A text had been lost, a fact omitted, or someone had simply gotten confused. They didn't know what had been carried out of that hotel room, waxen, unmoving, already gone. I felt the wall under my palms and groped along it, heading for the door.

"No, no."

"Really, Nikki, don't you think you're overreacting?"

"You don't understand. You don't—he didn't tell you."

"Understand what? Honestly, I think Coco will be pleased, when she hears how we swooped in and saved the day. I mean, God, Nikki, if you could hear that thing *sing*—"

I almost knocked Bobby over as I crashed through the door. I ran, pounding through the bleary halls, past the crew, the assistants, the handlers, the techs, a row of attendants who clapped as I dashed by. I grabbed the stair railing and scrambled up, slipping in my flatsoled shoes, reeling to the stage doors, which I opened with a bang. I could already hear Samira's voice, and Cristal's, and Trey's, and all the others, calling out of the darkness ahead, the weight of a thousand expectant souls pressing on the throbbing air. I shot past the guard, pushed open the curtains.

Near the steps to the stage, in the crew pit to the right, I saw glimmers of laptops and gear and equipment twinkling into a huddle of faces. Tim's glasses swirled with reflected light. I pushed him aside and squatted at his laptop, where strange bright patterns had begun to dance, showing simplified views of the stage. He touched my shoulder and pointed at the lights.

The band had already taken their places. Omar sat with his sticks on his knees, tightening the hi-hats, waiting for his cue. Peter stood stage left in his vest, the keys on his Fender catching twinkles of light. The dancers had all lined up in their places, the piano, the props, the screens and stacks, ghostly in the limited light. The opening music swelled from the speakers, filling the space with recorded strings. A backing track began to pulse, the opening beat of "Darediablo." Cheers rose, a stamp of feet. Arpeggios trickled from above, the riff I'd written twenty-eight years ago, inspired by the finger exercises in my beginner piano book. And then she appeared, in a column of light.

She wore the dress she'd had on in Rio, a sheath of scales, like a waterfall of knives. Coalescing in the darkness stage right, she shimmered at first, just a little bit, like a vision conjured by an uncertain spell. A smallish woman—magazine writers were always commenting on her height—with a restless demeanor and a cloud of black hair. She shimmied to adjust her dress. Shook out one hand, then the other. Rolling her shoulders, cracking her back. Like she'd done in real life a thousand times.

The band smashed into the opening chord, holding the notes, Omar whaling on his symbols. The lights blasted down like hot white ice. She waited in the wings, counting out four beats. Then stuck out a leg where the crowd could see it, wiggling a foot, like an old-time striptease. The cheers rose higher. A hand in the air, she strutted forward, waving at the band.

"There it is! Come on, gimme a hit!"

They struck another chord, blasting out a wave of noise like a release of captured lightning.

"Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about. You feel that, Tokyo? I said do you fuckin' feel that? Where's my boys? Lemme hear that bass. Uh. Uh-huh. There it is. Yeah, lay it on me."

The music surged over and into and around her, and she basked in it, head tipped back, arms thrown open to embrace the song. It was like how she'd been in Paris, years ago, on our first time in Europe when we played the Bataclan, like the way it had been at Rico's in the old days, before we knew anything about performing. Or Rome, or Rio, or Buenos Aires, back in the years before everything changed. She bobbed her head, thrashing the spotlights with her hair, radiating a fierce commitment that couldn't be controlled or contained. Her hand jabbed out.

"Come on, drummer-man, lemme hear you. I love it. Oh, yeah, I love that. 'Member this, people? 'Member how I brought you the love in twenty-four, when this fuck-up of a world didn't know what was coming? 'Member how we all made this planet stomp? We shook the pillars of the fucking globe, people. 'Cause I love you, you know I love you. Tell you what, we gone do it all again, just the way we did back then, and this world *still* doesn't know what's coming. 'Cause when you ride with Coco, baby, it's always as good as the first time."

The crowd was feeling it. The band members too, looking at each other with strange crazy grins, like they already knew this was going to be a good one. The dancers jumped into their routine, picking up the charge of her energy, moving with a slinky, dangerous intensity that seemed to fight the restraint of the beat. She paced like an Amazon in front of the stage lights, flinging out her hands, reaching for the crowd.

"Lemme hear you, people. Come on, let's hear you. You a part of this too. Yeah, we all a part of it. Oh, I'm feeling you. Yo, I hope Karma Jade's in the house, 'cause we gone show the bitch how it's done. There it is. Man, I feel your heat, I can feel that shit right on my skin. Here we go. *Darediablo*. This is our moment."

And there it was, the wildness that had stalked the world from London to Sydney, Osaka to New York. The zeal for life, the uncontainable passion, the fierceness and strangeness that had made us all dizzy, and drunk, and slightly deranged, and feeling like we'd be young forever, just from the power and danger of her voice. Like we'd been seized, for one moment, by a charmed insanity, a redeeming madness, a divine loss of control.

She lifted her hands.

As the song ramped up for the opening hook, I made my way up the stairs to the stage. No one stopped me. No one seemed to care. Except her. She turned and looked over her shoulder, and I almost didn't notice that her eyes were strange, that her feet weren't quite making contact with the stage, that if I looked too close, I could see the stage lights shining through the specter of her smile. She laughed, and it was all right there, the city streets and the clubs and the crowds, the men on the sidewalk playing dominoes at night, and a fifth-floor walkup where two young girls were sitting on a bedroom floor, one with a keyboard, one without anything, waiting for the music to come.

I went to the keys and took my place. The beat ran on, the notes rang out, the lights poured down like melted jewels. She nodded, once, and turned away.

And with her fists at her sides and her face to the light, she sang.