

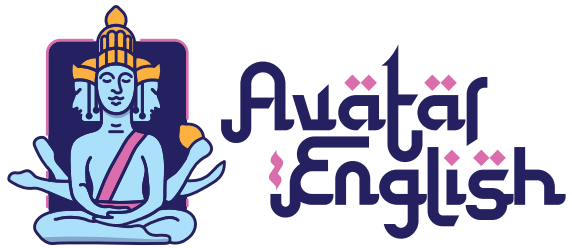
# The Rise of the Baker's Dozen

## Chapter 1:

Coco the Singer  
the Chocolate Finger



By Arnu Rausi





One year previous



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Coco the Singer  
the Chocolate Finger



# Chapter 1

It was the day of the 232nd Annual Biscuitville festival, and while everyone else was celebrating, Coco sat alone at her dining table flicking through her photo album.

The book was an unfinished collection, starting from when she was a tiny baby up until a few years past. Apart from numerous photos, the album contained old fan mail letters too—a fine selection from the countless messages which used to overflow from her letterbox. She opened some of the letters and read the loving words.

‘When I grow up, I want to be just like you,’ wrote Caeli, age nine.

‘Your songs get me through the hard times.  
Much love,  
John.’

‘My wife never stops talking about you and how jealous she is. How do you get your hair so good?’ Michael inquired.

Then came her favourite letter of all.

‘Every time I see you perform, I’m 100% sure you can’t get any better. Yet somehow, with each following performance, you always prove me wrong.

Yours truly,

Bobby.’

Coco remembered meeting Bobby after one of her concerts.

"That was truly breathtaking," he said. "The best performance in the history of Biscuitville."

Coco puffed. "Oh, please. My third note in the second chorus sounded like a cat being tortured."

"How can you say that?"

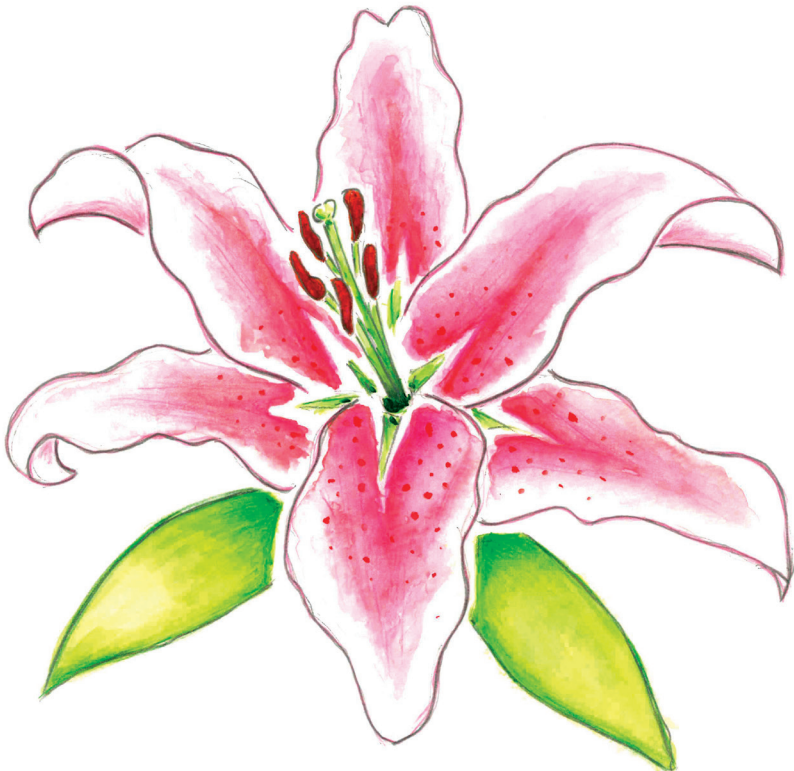
"You must've been too far back to hear it."

"I was standing in the front row."

"Well, it was mighty kind of you to say, Bobby."

She held the messages to her heart. Her lips wobbled and she sniffed repeatedly. Then came the tears in their thousands. She banged her head against the table numerous times, the vibrations knocking over a vase on the surface. Water gushed out and a single stargazer lily fell to the floor. Coco rushed to her feet, scrambling to rescue the beloved bloom.

"I'm so very sorry! It was an accident. Please forgive me!"





She gave the stargazer lily a full revision, checking for any damage. The long, soft petals and delicate stamen were all still intact. Her heart took rest. She leaned forward and took a long inhalation of the flower's scent, succumbing to the heavenly, seductive and dominating aroma.

She ran to the kitchen and refilled the vase with water from the sink. Looking out the window, she searched for the flower's mystery sender. He or she had managed to sneak a new bloom on her doorstep each week, evading Coco's discovery with creepy success.

Only the grass in her front garden stared back at her; grass that never used to exist, previously stomped into extinction by a stampede of wild fans. There was a day when Coco had to hide in her own house, incapable of even looking out her kitchen window without causing hysteria. A wagon used to come and collect her on festival day, aware of the frenzy she created and the protection she required. That wagon was obsolete now that the flocks of fans had migrated to other pastures.

She returned to the dining table, drying it with a cloth, and delicately replaced the vase and flower to its exact location. She looked around the house for something to clean but everything sparkled and shined, with each piece of adornment perfectly angled and positioned.

Coco huffed at the stargazer lily. "It's just me and you, with nothing left to do," The flower took no offense at the comment, she loved how accepting it was. She turned the page in her photo album, an image of herself as a child with her now deceased parents sent her on a blast through the past, the memories flooding back.

Age nine, three a.m. in the morning. When most were fast asleep, Coco would be wide-awake, frantically combing her hair, until interrupted by a very concerned father.



He yawned while rubbing his eyes. "What are you still doing up? It's well past your bedtime!"

Tears would roll down her face. "My hair is full of knots! I can't go to school looking like this!"

Her father was too wise or too tired to argue; only Coco's eyes witnessed such minuscule detail and both knew there was no convincing her otherwise. Nevertheless, he stayed with his daughter and filled the air with compliments.

"I love you for everything you are," he would say. He gave a giant hug. Coco, however, continued to check her reflection in the mirror over her father's shoulder.

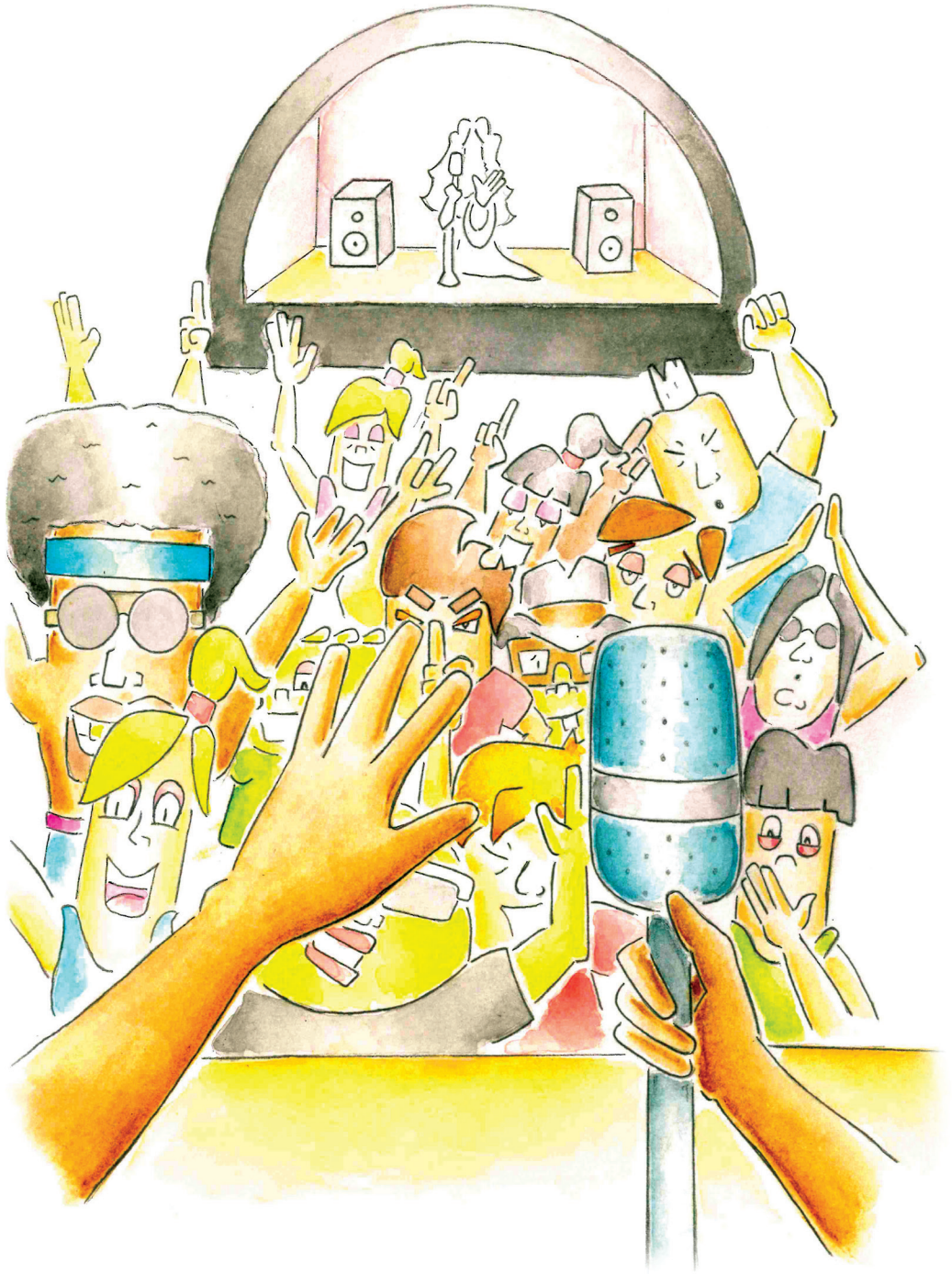
The next picture showed Coco between her old singing coach and Mother. At age fifteen, the clock struck midnight. Although singing practice had finished many hours ago, Coco repeated the same melody, over and over, refining each note until her parents nearly lost their minds.

Her mother begged for a break. "This must be the thirtieth time you have sung that same tune, Coco! Take a rest for everyone's sake!"

"Perfection doesn't take a rest, Mother."

"Your dedication knows no end."

Another cuddle, but again, Coco's mind was elsewhere, reciting the lyrics in her head and getting the timing just right.



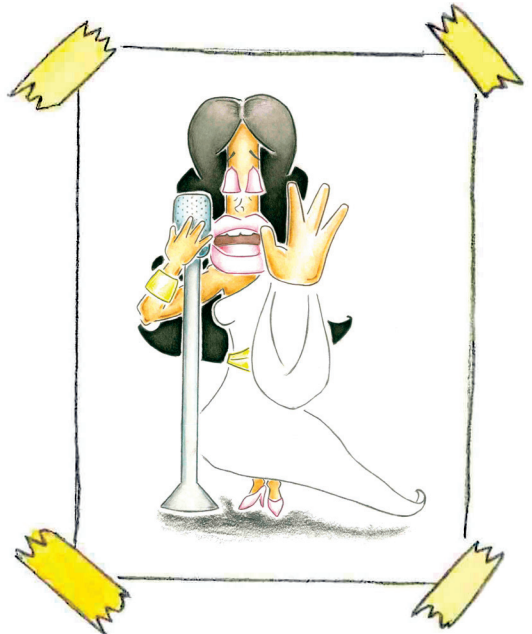
The following image was a photo of herself performing the opening song at the 220th annual Biscuitville festival. In her late twenties, Coco hit her peak. Her black hair shimmered under the intense stage light, and not a wrinkle or speck disturbed the ceramic smooth surface of her face.

She was divine, and had the undying attention of the entire audience who danced and sang along to her every word. The crowd's faces filled with delight, hands reaching out to her, desperate just for a touch of their idol. She stretched a hand out in return, yet kept a safe distance so they couldn't grab her.

As she captivated the crowd, Coco's attention was drawn to a sight only her eyes witnessed. Stood on an opposing stage was a ghost, and although the face was featureless, the outline was enough to suggest it was an apparition of herself. Dress, posture, silhouette and style matched perfectly. The faint white figure extended an arm in her direction, desperately attempting to communicate with Coco, but she turned a blind eye to the vision.

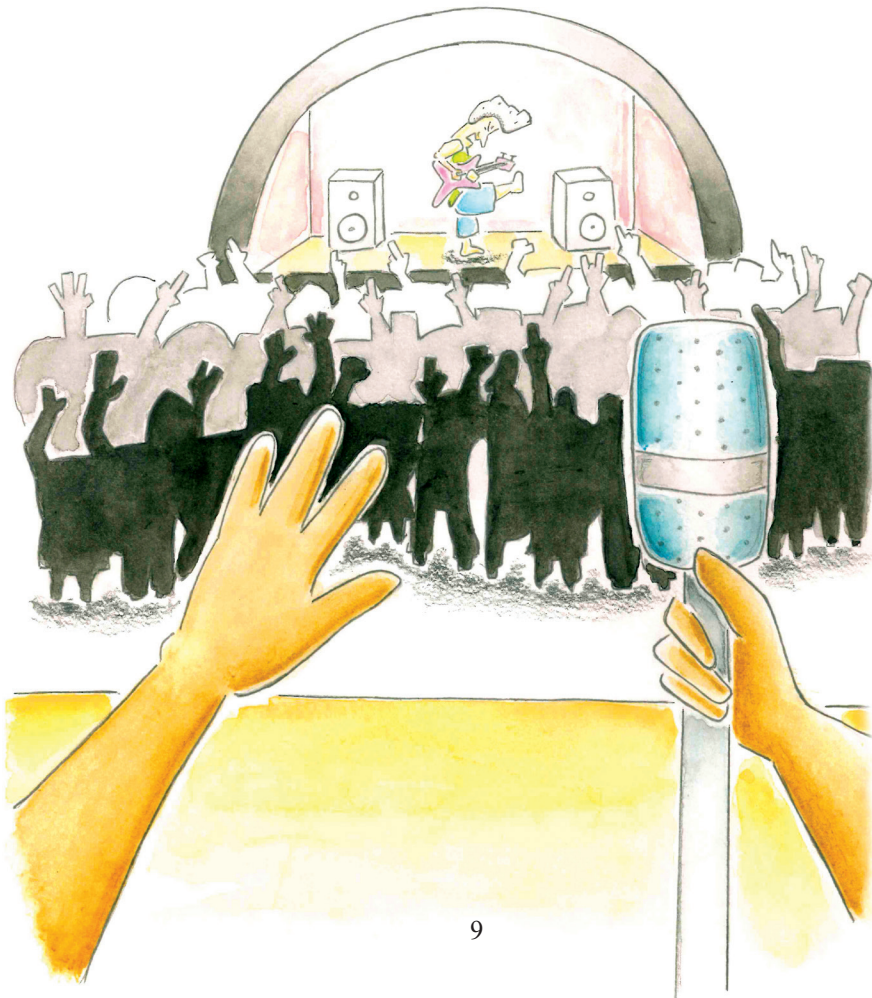
Three years have passed since the last time Coco played at the annual festival. No picture existed of that final performance, but the memory was just as marked in her mind as any image she had in her album.

She remembered looking at that particular, ghostly crowd, whose distant shadows wiggled their butts in her direction.



The opposing stage was no longer empty, her apparition replaced by a young musician playing some outlandish rock music. He jumped around the stage energetically while slapping away at his electric guitar. Without asking, the rude rocker had borrowed her fans' devotion. Three long years have since gone by and he still hasn't given it back. Coco reached out to the crowd, desperate for just a touch, but they kept a safe distance, so she couldn't grab them.

The visions faded as she snapped out of the daydream. Her return to reality was greeted by empty pages at the end of her photo book. Her faint reflection in the shiny plastic cover was the only visible image; a depressed, worn face, covered with wrinkles and blemishes spoiled the page. Coco slammed the book closed.



A letter flew out from inside and onto the floor. She picked it up and opened the folds. It was from her ex-boyfriend, declaring his forever, undying love. The words blurred and became unreadable as Coco's eyes filled with water. She ripped up the letter and threw the pieces into the bin.

She looked at the stargazer lily and frowned. "Where are you now that I need you more than ever? You were supposed to be waiting for me in the bookstore."

The flower remained silent, incapable of answering Coco's demands. The thought crossed her mind of delivering the same shredded fate to the bloom as she had to the letter. But what would that achieve? The stargazer lily was an innocent victim who meant no harm.

Coco stroked the soft petals and sniffed the flower's sweet aroma. "What we need is a change. After all, you can't be the only beautiful one in this house."

The exquisiteness of the stargazer lily filled Coco with envy. She knew that the flower would wilt away with time. Yet, being that a fresh replacement arrived every week, the flower held an eternal vibrancy and youth. Why could Coco not be so blessed?

Age forty, alone at home on festival day with just her flower for company, her desperate times called for drastic measures. What she needed was a makeover. If she were as beautiful and radiant as she had been in her younger years, her popularity would surely return. She had heard about the Teabags and their magic potions 'Whatever the flaw, illuminice-tea has the cure,' claimed their famous slogan. Would it hurt just to ask and find out?

She gave the flower a kiss. "I'll be back soon." She grabbed her money and marched out the door.

## Chapter 2

As Coco entered the Tea Bar, she could not help but be impressed by the massive number of customers that filled every inch of space. It was as if her previous herds of fans had now crammed inside one small room.

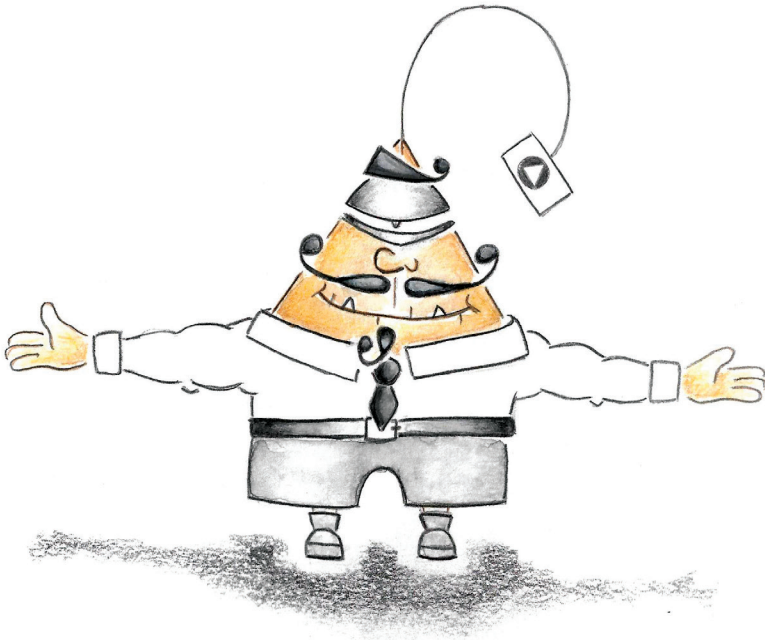
Coco squeezed through the crowd. Previously, she had stayed away from the Tea Bar, knowing the commotion her presence would cause. No-one even recognised her now, or took any notice. Most were only focussed on keeping their places and ordering more tea.

She found Le Nag Bag behind the bar. "Can we have a private conversation?"

He grinned. "Of course, madam. Follow me."

He escorted her through a padlocked door and down a hallway. They arrived to a grimy office; dust covered every surface. She reluctantly took a seat, perching on the edge, and tried not to get too distracted.

Le Nag Bag held his arms out wide. "How can I assist?"



She rose to her feet and clasped her hands together.

“My fame is done and dusted, along with my youth. Is there any way you can restore my beauty? Please, I’ll do anything.”





Le Nag Bag held his hand out to offer support, yet she refused the invitation of physical contact. "Oh, my dear Coco, what a situation you find yourself in. Luckily for you, I am sure we have le cure." He withdrew his hand and then disappeared behind his extraordinarily large desk.

Bottles rattled as he rummaged through a drawer. "Aha! Voilà!" he said.

Coco craned her neck to see over the desk. "What is it?"

Le Nag Bag rose to his feet. "Le perfect remedy." He held out a triangular green bottle with a large singular eye design on the cover.

"Apply this ointment all over your face and it will restore your splendour to its former glory."



Coco went to take the bottle, but Le Nag Bag pulled back just before she could grab it. "Tut tut, Coco. Miracles don't come for free. This product is five hundred doughs, and we have a payment first policy."

Coco took a step back. "Five hundred doughs! That's what I earned in a whole year!"

"And this lotion is my lifetime's work." Le Nag Bag said. "Quality comes at a cost, surely a lady of your prestige is aware of this. You can take it or leave it, madam."

She paid the large fee for the lotion, convinced that being youthful again would bring back her popularity, and that was priceless.

"Thank you so much," Coco said.

Le Nag Bag courteously bowed. "Of course, my Coco. Remember, whatever le flaw, illuminice-tea has le cure."

She hurried back to the Tea Bar and dashed to the ladies' room. Over the sink, she doused her face with water. She took one last look at herself in the mirror, placed her hands together, and prayed.

"Please bring me back to life."

She squirted the lotion in her hands and applied it over her cheeks which produced a bubbly wash. She felt her skin immediately tighten. Wrinkles and blemishes vanished without a trace, dimples filled out and her skin shined, all signs of ageing disappeared. Confident of her new magical product, she lathered her entire face, scrubbing deep into every last pore. Once finished, she quickly rinsed herself off, removing the majority of the bubbles.

Looking in the mirror, she appeared radiant and young again as promised by Le Nag Bag. Delighted with what she saw, she continued to gaze and admire herself, checking every fine detail. However, so eager to see her own image, she forgot to remove all the bubbles, and when the soap entered her eyes, it immediately itched and burned.

The pain swiftly intensified, her eyes converting into raging balls of fire. Her vision diminished to a fuzzy blur—dimension, focus and colour no longer existent.

She felt around frantically until finding the sink and washing her eyes out repeatedly. Yet her attempt was futile in reducing the pain. She shouted for help and tried to walk towards the exit but slipped and went flying through the air. Mid fall, her head collided with the sink, knocking her out cold.

## Chapter 3

A heavy jolt awoke Coco from her unconscious state. She could feel herself being carried by each limb, but by whom and where, she was clueless as the room was pitch black. She opened and closed her eyelids, but the darkness remained.

“What we gonna do wif her, boss?” a husky voice said.

“Just shut up and follow my lead! And don’t say another word.”

Coco took a good guess as to who was carrying her. “What happened? Where are you taking me?” A forceful hand covered over her mouth, leaving her blind and mute. Struggling to breathe, she bit the hand hard.

“Argh!” the husky voice grunted.

A cloth was shoved in her mouth, jamming her jaws open. No more questions, no more biting, no screaming for help—all she could do now was bury her teeth into the fabric in absolute frustration.

A handle squeaked and hinges creaked. A gentle breeze and whiff of fresh air let her know they were about to enter the outside world. She felt the Sun’s rays hit her skin feet first, heating her chilled body. As she was carried forward, the warmth passed up her, finally arriving to her face. Pitch black immediately transformed into brilliant, blinding white. She again opened and closed her eyelids yet still no change in sight; no shape, colour nor dimension filled the void.

She was carelessly dropped to the ground. The carriers grumbled but shared not a word with each other or Coco. The cloth was quickly snatched from her mouth and Coco regained her breath. The sound of heavy footsteps became fainter, hinting that the carriers were deserting her. They showed no sympathy for her welfare.

Coco screamed out. “WAIT! I can’t see a thing! What happened to me? I know it’s you, Le Nag Bag. Answer my questions!”

After a small delay, he finally responded. "You got what you requested, Coco. It's not our fault if you misused le product. Le instructions clearly specify not to let le soap enter le eyes."

Coco hyperventilated with panic. "Will I ever see again?"

"We will attempt to develop a product that may return your vision, but that will be for another day and another price. *Au revoir, Coco.*"

The thought of being abandoned and blind accelerated Coco into a world of anxiety. "Don't leave me alone!" A handle squeaked and hinges creaked. A door closed and the footsteps faded in volume until they could be heard no more.

"Come Back! PLEASE!"

Silence was the only response. Coco pleaded to the Gods for this to be just a terrible nightmare, yet the heavens also remained mute. There was no waking from the dark reality, her world of colour reduced to a smoky white haze disturbed only by murky grey shadows. She rubbed her eyes frantically, yet it was useless. She banged her head with her palm but the only result was a headache.

At a complete loss, she curled up in a ball, rocking back and forth, almost ripping the material of her dress as she gripped tightly. Alone, lost and blinded, Coco had no idea of where she was or if her sight would ever return.



## Chapter 4

Submerged in sorrow, Coco sat on the floor sobbing uncontrollably. Like a sunken shipwreck, abandoned and destroyed, she hit rock bottom, no salvage foreseeable. Her wails of agony echoed, she hoped the calls of distress would stretch throughout town.

“My dear, what is troubling you so wholesomely?” an unknown male voice said in a gentle tone.

Coco jumped at the question. She rose to her feet, using a wall to help her up. “Who said that?! Are you talking to me?”

“Yes. What’s causing you such bother? Can I be of assistance?”

“I can’t see a thing! My career as a musician is over and I have nothing left!”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I know of your fame. There are no songs which bring me more joy than yours. You are the incredible Coco the Singer the Chocolate Finger, if I’m not mistaken?”

Coco fell to the floor, incapable of holding her weight. “I used to be. But now, I’m just a blind old woman with no one who cares about me. I just want to die!”

“If you can envisage such cruelty then you’re not as blind as you think. Try to see the purity of life. Surely, if you can see death and darkness then you must remember life and light to compare them by?”

Coco huffed. “Everything I ever worked for is gone! Everything I ever was is gone! There ain’t no light or life left in my world.”

“There’s much more to life than what we first perceive. If you don’t get lost in the illusion, and look a little deeper, you’ll see the true beauty of this world. Let me show you. Give me one minute and I shall return.”

The sound of his footsteps disappeared in the wind. Again came the tears in their thousands. She felt them run down her face, salty as they poured into her mouth.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps returned, each one louder than the last. She begged for it to be the stranger. This time, the Gods were listening.

“Smell this,” the man said with his hand on her shoulder. She immediately recognised the odour. The aroma of an unknown love, seduction and dominance—the stargazer lily. Could it be the mystery sender or was it just a coincidence? Possibilities ran wild until the stranger continued to speak.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s my favourite. How did you know?”

“If love had a smell, that would be it. Take my hand and rise again to your feet.”

He immediately embraced her with a hug so intense she felt it through to her bones. The protection of his arms wrapped around her and the comfort of his hands caressed the back of her head. His touch was gentle but his grip firm, providing love and security at the same time. She had not felt such tenderness and warmth since the cuddles she’d once received from her parents.

“How will I ever get through this?” she wept, her heart breaking over and over. Her thoughts scattered, the nightmare situation still too surreal to accept. The man’s tender gestures had temporarily soothed her woes yet they were far from enough to help her see through her problems.

The mystery biscuit had one more request. “I want you to sing, Coco.”

“Forget it! I’m not in the mood to sing for you right now! No-one wants to listen to me sing anymore!”

“I’m not asking you to sing for me, or for the entertainment of others. Sing for yourself. Don’t be controlled by the opinions of others. Let your fears guide you, not hold you back.”

Her ordeal had her so stressed and lost that she yearned for release, and melody seemed like the perfect remedy. She started softly, expressing the blues of her blindness and the abuse conducted by the Teabags. The realisation of her predicament led to words of anger, mistreatment, and rejection. Gargoyle monsters flashed before her, laughing hysterically through their sharp-edged fangs and split tongues.

More terrifying visions plunged Coco into uncharted depths of buried emotion. Screams of rage and shrieks of sorrow drove her to her most profound point. There was no hiding now, her blindness allowing no escape.

Trapped in a dungeon, Coco saw herself as a prisoner shackled at the hands and feet. A crowd observed her with curious faces, like she was a piece of artwork on display. Coco screamed for assistance, yet no-one reacted or came to her aid.

A mirror then appeared before her, and behind her own reflection, her previous fans admired and adored her while she frowned and bemoaned at her every slight imperfection. The crowd faded away, along with the mirror, until all physical matter vanished. The search for unattainable perfection had sucked every pleasure out of life, leaving her with nothing. What remained was just vast hollow space with no light, no direction, no ground, no gravity, no point of reference.

Engulfed in the void, her voice was her only company. With it, she was never alone. Her throat tingled, and with no words left, she surrendered and sang pure vowel sounds. She extended each vowel for as long as possible, and while the sounds held no meaning, they resonated with everything they touched. Every word, every scream, every laugh, every pain, every pleasure, the sounds had accompanied her every emotion and expression.



Unable to see anyone observing her, Coco disappeared into the magic of her own voice. Her heavenly singing elevated her mind, body, and soul. A sense of liberation vibrated through her, causing the previous demons to screech and hiss. She continued to sing louder and louder until the gargoyles washed away and evaporated into the black.

Floating alone in emptiness, a bright white spotlight shone from beneath her feet. Floral mandalas spiralled upwards from the light, creating a vortex of geometric patterns all around her. Surrounded by the wonder, she let go of control and connected with the all-embracing immensity of the universe. Her body filled with gratitude, igniting her heart and setting alight her soul. All her life, she had been searching for perfection, only to now discover she had been living in it the entire time.



She continued to sing to her heart's content until a loud metallic clang sounded from down the alley, followed by a short, sharp male shout. "Ouch!"

"What happened?" Coco inquired, unsure for a moment if it was the unknown helper.

He giggled. "Someone just walked into a lamppost. He must have been too amazed by your angelic voice."

Vibrations still pulsated through Coco's veins, tingling her skin and freeing years of tension, making her feel lighter and liberated. Her feet barely touched the floor and the world no longer felt the same. She melted in a total sense of rebirth. "There really is much more to this world than what the eye can see," Coco confirmed to the mystery man.

She took a deep breath through her nose, the scent of the stargazer lily again consumed her. She walked in the direction of the smell, knowing she drew closer as the fragrance intensified. She held her hands out, feeling for its location. Once she found the flower, she touched the petals with great delicacy, her fingers softly running over their silky texture. She cupped the base of the bloom while giving the flower a kiss.

At the bottom of the stem were the hands of her hero. As skin touched skin, the vibrations intensified throughout Coco's body. Her heart expanded, growing warmer and beating faster. The stranger remained motionless, frozen and stiff. Coco ran her hands over his wrists and up his arms, drawing herself in. She was so close to her saviour she could feel his fresh breath on her face.

Everything about him aroused Coco, his charm a magnetic field that pulled her closer each second. They were nose to nose, a proximity she normally found too close for comfort. But not now, not in this moment, not with this man.

"Thank you so much for your help," she said.

"I have only helped you discover what was already inside you. And, may I add, that was the best song I have ever heard. It sounded like the Voice of Nature."

Blood rushed to Coco's cheeks, warming her face. "That would be a beautiful title for the song. I hope you don't mind if I use it?"

"On the contrary. It would be an honour."

"I'd love to repay you, and get to know you a little more." She went weak at the knees, desperate to know if he felt the same. His touch, intelligence, and manner had her infatuated. While her problems were far from fully solved, she knew she was on the right track thanks to the direction of this charming man. "I would offer you something to drink at my house, but I have no idea where I am! Could you take me home, please?"

The man took her hand. "It would be my utmost pleasure."

Coco exhaled a huge sigh of relief. She was so desperate to know everything about him that her blindness could wait. "What's your name?"

"Oh, my dear, I've had many names in my life."

\* \* \*

Coco lay on her bed, her hero by her side. What felt like a soft feather ran up her legs. Her back arched upwards, drawing her ever closer to the sweet sensation. He seemed a master of his work, finding all of Coco's delicate spots with ease.

He continuously held the stargazer lily under her nose, converting the fine fragrance into his own seductive and enticing odour. His touch was as soft as the flower's petals, yet his manner as dominant as its aroma.

In the arms of her hero, Coco was home. The environment was a warm temple, the most nurturing of climates that would have her blossoming all year round.

Melting in pleasure, her only wonder was if she would have felt such depth if she wasn't blind.

