

❧ PROLOGUE ❧

31 DECEMBER 2024

THERE'S SOMETHING DANGEROUS in the air. It shimmers in the night, wrapped in the warm, humid breeze. I stand on the kerb outside my cousin's house waiting for my sister, Nik. She texted me minutes ago that she was around the corner.

Behind me, music thrums through Sadie's little two-storey townhouse and reverberates through the soles of my feet. I inhale sharply and peek through the foliage of paperbark and palm trees and glimpse Athe Moon glowing down at me.

Aka Mol and Athe Ray met under a full moon; there's this gorgeous anniversary photo of them by the Esplanade, pointing up to the glowing round grey in the sky. Mum realised she was pregnant with Nik while looking at the moon through a telescope – said that when her eyes locked onto the orbiting mass, she felt something *more* flutter in her stomach. For my family, it is a signal of all kind love.

The night isn't young anymore and I wonder what the moon is trying to tell me. *Go home, Zillah. Your soul is too old for this.*

Or maybe, *Stop trying to impress your big sister, Zillah* – even though I’m only a year younger than Nik.

A flash of lights makes me jump. A car rolls down Sadie’s street and stops abruptly a few metres away from me. I can’t see who is inside, but I know it must be Nik and her friends coming from another party.

Tonight was supposed to be our first time partying together for New Year’s. Tonight was supposed to be about us. Instead, midnight is twenty minutes away and she’s just now rocking up.

The headlights turn off. I see someone unfold themselves from the driver’s seat and slam their door shut.

I hesitate a moment before scurrying over.

Relief blankets me when I see Nik stepping out of the other side, but it only lasts a second. She’s swearing under her breath, and anger practically shakes like dust from her body. She kicks the car door closed and shoves past the fella who drove her here.

The streetlights fall on Nik’s dark skin, and she looks like magic. Her electric blue make-up sparkles, like crystallised stardust.

‘Nik?’ My voice carries softly, fragile.

She looks up, surprised, and when our eyes meet something passes between us. I know, through the psychic sibling connection she’s always trying to convince me of, that something isn’t right. Nik’s not just having a random argument with someone – she’s *off*.

‘Hey,’ Nik’s friend says, moving to stand stiffly beside her.

‘Luke?’ I ask.

I haven’t seen him in years, and the few times I was around him, he was nothing like ... this. Sure, he’s grown taller and broader, and his light brown hair is slightly longer. But now, he’s clearly rigid with anger.

‘What’s going on?’ I ask them.

‘Nothing, sissy,’ Nik says, sharp one. ‘C’mon, let’s go.’

Nik pulls me away from Luke without a goodbye and I stumble along with her. When I glance over my shoulder, his fury has melted and all I see are his eyes shining with hurt. He gives me a half-hearted wave before getting back in his car. I think there is someone else in the back seat, but I can’t see them properly.

‘Did youse have a fight?’ I ask Nik.

She grunts and pushes Sadie’s front door open. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

I want to argue. To pull her to a stop and ask if she’s okay. To get an answer out of her. But Nik’s always marched to her own drum. Humbugging her for answers will only make her less likely to tell me.

Suddenly, I’m so tired that I just want to go home. I don’t care that midnight is only twenty minutes away. I don’t care that Nik is finally by my side. I want my mum or uncle to come grab me. I want two-minute noodles and buttered white bread.

Everyone’s sitting out back, where red, blue and yellow lights filter through the dust and darkness above their heads. The colourful bulbs are strung along the patio’s tin roof, intertwining with the wooden beams. There’s also a white tube light barely helping to illuminate everyone at the glass table, it’s so full of bugs and dirt.

Nik strides out and settles into a seat at the table, smiling at the cries of surprise and joy from everyone else here. I wearily slide into my chair across from her and pick up my Cruiser.

We’re listening to old eighties and nineties music, which is Nik’s favourite: Boyz II Men, Brandy, Bob Marley. The music is almost

as loud as the kids around the table. Sadie, who graduated last year, invited us over the moment her parents left for Townsville for New Year's.

'Finally here,' Sadie teases, standing with her silver bag of goon and rounding the table to give Nik a hug from behind.

Nik drops her head back and opens her mouth. Sadie holds the bag over her face and presses the dispenser, so the red liquid drops right down Nik's gullet.

Nik laughs and then nearly chokes on the bagged wine. Sadie cackles and moves to the next person while Nik straightens and gives me a wink while accepting a beer from someone else.

'You right, ah?' Nik asks, kicking me under the table. She wipes the missed alcohol from her lips. She's got the ghost of a smile on her face – the smile she does for the others – but the sparkle in her eye is just for me, silently asking if I'm actually okay.

I nod and tip back my own drink. I've been nursing this one for two hours because I don't wanna be drunk when the uncles pick us up later.

'You ready for your new school, sis?' Sadie asks when she gets round to me and leans against one small bala's chair. He's my age and has been silent next to me all night, his phone glued to his face, leaving me to sit awkwardly, wishing someone else was sitting on my other side.

'Yeah,' I say, and I look to Nik while I speak. Her jaw is locked and she's hyper focused on peeling the label off a beer bottle while one of Sadie's friends chats her up.

Mum isn't exactly happy with me for coming home for my last year of school. She thinks I've 'abandoned' my prestigious spot at a fancy boarding school. But she did technically give in.

Still, I've had to put up with Mum grumbling about it all Christmas. *If you wanna leave that school, you better work your din off here.*

'That school' was some deadly private school where the uniforms fell to my ankles and the tie near strangled my neck. And I was one of five Black kids. I'd gone there since I was thirteen. Don't get me wrong, I loved it – the academic challenge, the access to multiple university libraries, the endless support and mentorship from teachers – but I just couldn't do it anymore. The loneliness was eating at me.

Nik got to come back to Cairns because she was kicked out of 'that school' years ago. And because Mum had decided to keep Nik back when she was in preschool, the two of us were in the same year, despite our age difference. We'd always thought it was the coolest thing.

'Oo,' Sadie says. 'Good!' She claps my shoulder and goes back around the long table.

I lean over the table. 'Nik—'

'All right then,' Nik interrupts me, directing her talk to everyone else. She pushes back from the table and wobbles a little and smiles weakly at Sadie. 'I gor ledoun pas.' She steadies herself against her chair.

'Lie down?' Sadie asks. 'But the countdown?' She waves her Apple watch around. There's only ten minutes to midnight.

'Aren't we going home?' I hiss at Nik. I stand up too, but the others don't look at me. I've barely said a word all night and they lost interest hours ago.

'Lounga.' Nik shakes her head. 'Too drunk for Mum and Awa Chris. Sleepy.'

Nik's little frown makes me think she's confused about the fact that alcohol can make you tired.

After a quick look around the table where only Sadie smiles at me with the concern I feel, I shake my head at Nik.

'Nik, what's going on?' I ask.

Nik groans and it's so loud everyone stares at her. 'Youplamina boring.'

I flinch and the others snort and start arguing with her, thinking she's joking. But panic ripples up my sternum. I can tell I'm losing Nik in this moment. She's slipping away.

'You wanna know what I've been doing?' she asks me with a sly grin. 'Wait pas.'

She disappears inside, emerging a few seconds later at the small balcony above us, wiggling her fingers. 'Yooohoo!' she calls.

Below her is the small swimming pool, tucked into the townhouse's backyard. 'Oh no,' I say.

Sadie shoots me a worried look, but we're all frozen as we watch Nik brace her hands against the balcony railing.

'Don't you fucking dare, Nikola!' Sadie shouts as Nik pushes herself up and onto the other side of the railing.

They used to do this when we were kids, if our parents weren't watching too closely. The cousins would stand on the balcony and then jump the short distance to the water. They were so light that they didn't run the risk of hitting the cement bottom. I never did it. I've always had too much sense for that.

UB40 is buzzing against my skin and I'm shaking my head and screaming at my silly, drunk-off-her-head sister.

'I'm calling Mum!' I shout. My voice is laced with a sharp, wicked something that's been brewing in my heart all holidays.

I've moved here, back home, and Nik hasn't been interested in hanging out with me at all. She snuck out the night I arrived and refused to take me with her. She hasn't let herself be left alone with me and when she does let me tag along, we hardly ever spend time with the rest of the family. I've been following her around Cairns like a lost dog all summer and I haven't had a chance to ask her why she's been avoiding me. I know *something* has been happening. We've spent years apart since she left our boarding school in Brisbane and lately, I've been left wondering if it's put a lifetime of difference between us. Do we even know each other anymore?

The moonshine glints off Nik's too-wide smile, the shadows carving patterns across her face.

I step closer to the balcony, afraid that if I move, she'll jump.

But I don't have any time to decide what to do.

Nik's gaze shifts from us and her skin seems to shimmer before she closes her eyes and falls off the ledge.