



THE MAKING OF

Sweet Roots

From Lopinot to Zürich, and the girl who started it all

HEIDI ALERT



WELCOME

A note from me

Hi friend,

Every book has a story behind the story. This is mine.

Sweet Roots is a YA novel about sixteen-year-old Kola Mohan, who fights to save her family's cocoa estate in Trinidad's Northern Range. Before Kola existed, though, there was a cocoa estate where I got married, a question I couldn't stop asking, and a trip to the self-proclaimed home of chocolate.

In these pages, I'm sharing where *Sweet Roots* came from, what's real and what's imagined, and how I found the artist behind the cover. At the end, you'll get to read Chapter 1 before almost anyone else.

Thank you for being here. Kola has been waiting to meet you.

With love, Heidi



LOPINOT, TRINIDAD

Where it started

Years ago, my husband Gordon and I headed up into the hills of Lopinot for a long holiday weekend with friends. We were going to Cafe Mariposa, which was a fairly new bed and breakfast back then.

We fell in love with all of it. We fell for the family who ran it and for their food, which was all homemade and almost all of it infused with cocoa. We fell for the estate itself: the hummingbirds, the hiking trails, and the river running through it.

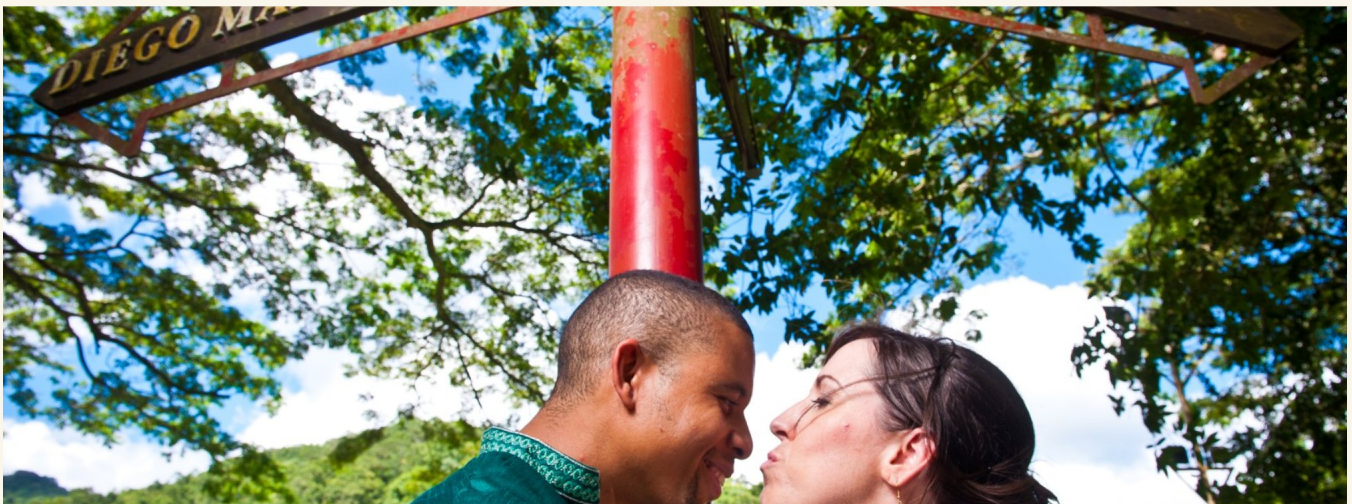


THE TABLE, SET FOR OUR WEDDING DAY

Gordon and I were the first couple to be married in the amphitheater.

I've always loved supporting local and discovering new places, and this one stayed with us. Over the years, the family kept building and dreaming, and eventually they added an amphitheater behind the main house.

We'd had our engagement shoot there too. We wanted something intimate, local, and rooted in the land. It was perfect.



I didn't know it yet, but I was already collecting pieces of Sweet Roots: the smell of a cocoa estate in the morning, the warmth of a family that feeds you like you belong, and the pride of people who grow something extraordinary.



OUR HANDS, COCOA BEANS,
LOPINOT

*But cocoa doesn't
grow in the US.*

BEFORE ZÜRICH

The question I couldn't shake

Part of Sweet Roots began far from any cocoa tree.

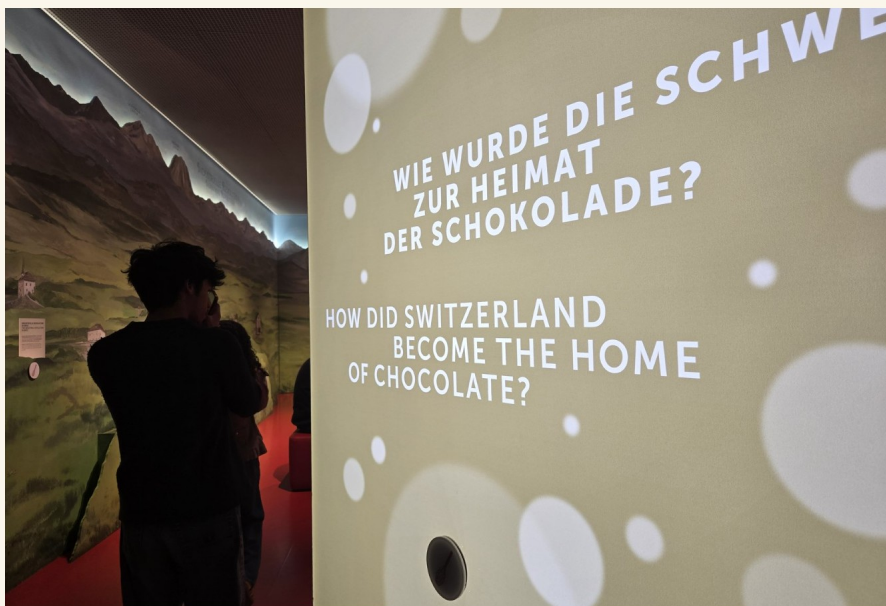
I was working in corporate America when I overheard someone talking about the large agricultural company they worked for. He loved that they made chocolate. But I knew the company was based in the US. My first thought was simple: *but cocoa doesn't grow in the US. It's a tropical plant.*

So where does it come from? And who is getting paid for it?

The more I learned, the more troubled I became. Systems built centuries ago still shape who profits from chocolate today, and too often they leave the people who grow it with the least.

This isn't abstract for us. Gordon spent twenty years as an agronomist in the Caribbean, working in sugarcane and rice. We both feel a deep tie to the people who work the land.

That question became Kola's question: **who gets to tell the story of chocolate?**



L-R: THE QUESTION ON THE MUSEUM WALL. AN OLD CHOCOLATE FACTORY, ITS NAME STILL PAINTED ON THE SIDE.

ZÜRICH, SWITZERLAND

Going to the source

To tell this story properly, from every side, I went to Zürich. Switzerland is world-renowned as the home of chocolate, and it calls itself that too.

That's not a criticism. Switzerland is a beautiful place, and it has earned its place in the story of chocolate through centuries of craft and innovation. But that story has another half, and it starts in places like Trinidad's Northern Range.

Sweet Roots brings that half forward. It's about balance: honoring what has been built while looking honestly at what it has cost, and at who was left out of the story along the way.



A COCOA TREE, INDOORS, IN SWITZERLAND

I already knew the spoiler going in: Switzerland can't grow cocoa.

What's real, what's fiction

REAL

- Trinidad's Northern Range and its cocoa estates
- The Cocoa Panyol, Trinidad's Spanish-speaking cocoa families
- Cocoa tea, the taste of a Trini morning
- Growing, fermenting, and drying cocoa by hand
- The economics of who profits from chocolate

FICTION

- Kola Mohan and her family
- The village of Iya and Miss Dean's shop
- The Sweet Roots estate and Granny's recipe
- The international chocolate competition
- Every judge, rival, and billionaire Kola meets

Kola is fictional. The industry she's up against is not.



THE CHARACTERS

Meet Kola

Cover art by Kokab Zohoori-Dossa.

Kola Mohan, 16

She livestreams life on her family's estate as "Cocoa Kola" to fourteen loyal viewers. Determined, a little dramatic, and absolutely sure her Granny's cocoa tea can change everything.

Granny (Hyacinth Mohan)

The keeper of the land and the recipe. Her hands carry decades of cocoa, and her silences carry even more.

Mum (Iris)

She's holding the bills, the bank letters, and the hard truths, and doing it all out of love.

Freddie Lezama

Kola's best friend since they were small enough to hide under Granny's kitchen table. He usually has the link saved before Kola finishes the sentence.

Mrs. Matthis

Kola and Granny call her "Negativo." She has never said anything positive about anything, especially the Mohans.



THE THREE PURE CHOCOLATE BARS MY IN-LAWS BROUGHT FROM JAMAICA

THE ARTWORK

Finding the cover

When my in-laws came to visit from Jamaica, I asked them to bring some local chocolate if they could find any.

They arrived with three bars from PURE Chocolate, a Jamaican company that grows its own cocoa *and* makes the chocolate. Each bar had a stunning wrapper, and each one was by a different Jamaican artist.

I fell in love with Kokab Zohoori-Dossa's design. So I reached out to her, and the rest is history.

It felt right that Kola's cover would come from a chocolate bar made by the people who grew it. That's exactly the point.



KOKAB'S ART ON THE GINGER & SPECULAAS BAR

COVER ART BY KOKAB ZOHOORI-DOSSA
KOKABZD.COM



AN EARLY LOOK AT SWEET ROOTS

Chapter 1

Advance draft. The final text may change.

Kola

The cocoa doesn't smell like chocolate. I used to think it would. I used to imagine the whole estate breathing out something sweet and dark, the way a bakery smells from the street. But walking here in the early morning among Granny's cocoa trees, what you get is green. Wet soil and green and something underneath it, earthy and alive, that only becomes chocolate after blood, sweat, and tears turn cocoa into something that melts in your mouth. That's the part nobody tells you. But that's the story I'm determined to tell.

"This is your girl, Cocoa Kola, coming to you live from the sweetest spot in Trinidad & Tobago: Miss Dean's shop in Iya!"

I hold my phone up high, angling for the best shot of Miss Dean's weathered storefront with its hand-painted sign and the green mountains behind it. The morning light is doing something extraordinary, filtering gold through the immortelle tree out front and catching every knot and crack in the old wood. I nearly have the exact frame I want, and then a chicken walks into the shot.

"Go away," I whisper.

The chicken does not go away. It pecks at something near Miss Dean's doorstep with complete indifference to the fourteen viewers currently watching my stream.

"Okay, Cocoa Crew, you're seeing authentic village life right there." I pivot the camera smoothly to where Miss Dean is arranging fresh hops bread on the counter behind the glass. "Miss Dean, give the people a wave!"

She looks up, raises one eyebrow, and offers the patient smile of a woman who has been tolerating my filming for the last six months. “Morning, Kola, and... Kola’s internet friends.”

“Cocoa Kola,” I correct gently. “To the fans.”

“Mmm.” She goes back to her bread. Miss Dean is sixty-something and has absolutely no interest in being a content creator, but she lets me use her Wi-Fi because my grandmother’s family has been in Iya for as long as anyone can remember, and also because I buy something every single time I come in, even when money is tight, which lately it always is.

This is the only spot in Iya with reliable signal. The router is ancient and the connection cuts out whenever it rains and you have to stand in a specific spot near the left side of the counter or you’re not guaranteed anything, but I have learned the angles. I’ve been learning the angles since January, when I started the channel.

“Today, we are talking about what makes Trini cocoa different from anywhere else in the world.” I zoom in on the steaming mug on the counter. It’s Granny’s blend. “This right here is what I’m talking about. Sunshine dipped in chocolate.”

Freddie chuckles in the background at my favorite phrase for cocoa tea.

“Freshly grated cocoa from our estate, warm milk, nutmeg, cinnamon, bay leaf, a little cane sugar.” I lower my voice like I’m sharing something precious, because I am. “Sweet Roots is my grandparents’ recipe. We grow the cocoa from trees that are four generations old. We ferment it, we dry it, we grate it. Everything is done on the same land, the same red earth, right up here in the northern hills.”

I hold the shot for a moment. In the mug's steam, in the mountains through the window, in the particular quality of light at this hour, I can almost see what I want the channel to be: the real story of Trini cocoa. It's not what you find wrapped in fancy packaging at the grocery store, or even the version in the fancy hotel brochures. This is all ours. The villages. The small farmers. The women who have been doing this for a hundred years with no awards or recognition.

"Think you got enough footage?" Freddie asks from behind me.

He is sitting on Miss Dean's front step reviewing the angles on his own phone, which means he has been watching the stream numbers. I know by his tone that they are not where we hoped. Fourteen viewers. Thirteen, now. Twelve.

"There is never enough footage." I hold the mug shot a beat longer, then end the stream and turn. "But we need to get back home. I want to try shooting from up by the fermentation shed while the light holds."

"No Wi-Fi up by the fermentation shed."

"I know that, Freddie."

"Just checking that you know that."

He reaches for one of the fried bakes Miss Dean has set out without being asked. She always sets out two when we come in, one for each of us. He folds it in half and bites. He is taller than he was at the start of summer. Not dramatically taller, but enough that I noticed one morning and then I couldn't stop noticing. Freddie has been my best friend since we were small enough to hide under Granny's kitchen table together, and the fact that he is suddenly a person with actual height feels like something I didn't agree to.

"My followers want live content," I say. "Recorded stuff doesn't get the same engagement."

"How do you build followers if the live content only reaches twelve people?"

"Fourteen. It was fourteen."

"It was twelve by the end."

I sigh and pick up my own bake. It is still warm, and I eat half of it before I answer. “You build slowly. You stay consistent. You find the thing you do that nobody else does, and you do it until people can’t imagine not watching.” I say this with more confidence than I feel. “That’s the theory anyway.”

“Eh, eh! Come quick, child!” Miss Dean’s voice cuts through from inside, sharp and excited. “Is a big chocolate man on TV!”

Freddie and I both look up at the same time.

The small television mounted in the corner of Miss Dean’s shop is usually showing cricket or the local news or, on Saturdays, whatever Bollywood film she can get. Today, it has a news reporter standing in a fancy hotel lobby in the capital city, Port of Spain. The reporter is standing beside a man in a cream linen suit who looks both distinguished and extremely warm. The crawl across the bottom of the screen reads: JEAN-PAUL DUBOIS, CHIEF JUDGE, INTERNATIONAL CHOCOLATE AWARDS.

I keep my livestream off. Fourteen viewers feels wrong for the moment, but I take out my phone and press record, just for myself.

“The team is here in Trinidad & Tobago over the next few days,” the reporter says, “as they search for the best-tasting chocolate this nation has to offer.”

The TV camera pans across the hotel’s gleaming ballroom, showing elaborate chocolate displays and well-dressed people mingling beneath crystal chandeliers. It’s a world away from our little corner shop in Iya.

“Ah, you see.” Jean-Paul leans into the microphone. His French accent is thick, and his hands move when he talks. “This is more than just a search. It is... how you say... a celebration! Trinidad & Tobago cocoa, it has something special: the terroir, the history. It is why we begin our worldwide journey here. And the competition this year is evolving. Thirty percent of the judging rubric will be based on Community Engagement and Digital Storytelling. We want to see how you share your cocoa’s soul with the world.”

I stop breathing.

Community engagement. Digital storytelling.

I look at my phone. I look at the TV. I look at Freddie, who is looking at me with the specific expression he gets when he already knows what I'm thinking before I say it.

"Community engagement," I say slowly.

"Digital storytelling," he says back.

"That's—"

"The channel."

"That's literally the channel."

On the TV, the reporter says there is an information session open to the public and a live virtual portal for interested participants. Freddie is already pulling out his phone, fingers moving before she finishes the sentence.

"Getting the link," he says.

"Cocoa Crew," I say to my still-recording phone, mostly to myself, "I think this is our shot."

I quickly pack up the small cooler and thermos with the remaining cocoa tea I brought from home.

"Hey, you always leave that here, and I'll wash it," Miss Dean says with a wink.

"Of course." Everyone knows Granny's cocoa tea is the best. "Thanks, Miss Dean!"

I run out the door with Freddie matching my pace.

We race up the countryside road toward my house, past a man prodding his single cow and a maxi taxi packed with passengers. I almost trip over a neighborhood dog taking a nap in the middle of the road.

"Sorry, Brownie," I call out, picking back up my pace.

"Got the link saved, and the meeting is at seven tonight," Freddie calls from behind me, but he's keeping up easily. Those long legs of his that shot up over the summer give him an advantage now.

We crest the ridge. Below us, the valley opens up in the particular way that always catches me off guard, even though I've seen it ten thousand times. The cocoa trees in the rows, the old immortelle trees standing above them with their orange flowers, the house tucked into the green with the mountains behind it. The galvanized roof bright in the morning sun. From here, it looks like a postcard. From here, you cannot see the rust stain on the east side, or the patch where Granddad ran out of original timber and used what he could find, or the hole in the corner of the fermenting shed that lets in the rain.

I slow down as we approach the house. Not because I'm tired, but I can hear the voices.

Mum and Granny are in the kitchen, which is not unusual. The sharpness in both their voices is.

I put my hand out, and Freddie stops beside me without me having to say anything. That is a thing about Freddie. You don't have to say everything.

"—three months behind, Ma. Not one. Three." Mum's voice has the edge it gets when she's trying to stay calm and failing. "The bank called yesterday. I didn't know how to tell you."

We ease closer, staying lower, using the big mango tree at the corner of the kitchen as cover. Freddie shoots me a look. I mouth: I'll explain later.

"Three months." Granny's voice is so quiet I can barely hear it over the birds squawking overhead. "Horace." She says Granddad's name as if he's still around. "Horace, you did not leave us in a good position."

There is a pause. I imagine Granny at the stove. Her back to the room. The way she gets when she is gathering herself.

"The buyer from Port of Spain," Mum says. "The man who bought the last batch of cocoa balls. Mr. Thompson. He keeps saying the payment is coming. Next week, next week. It's been six weeks of next week. That's five thousand dollars we're owed, Ma. Five thousand dollars that should have gone to the bank a month ago."

“I know about Thompson.”

“The bank is giving us to the end of next month. Six weeks.”

I feel the number land somewhere in my chest. Six weeks.

“Six weeks to what?” Granny asks. Though from the way she says it, she already knows.

“Until they start foreclosure proceedings. If we can’t bring the account current—”

“They would not dare. This land—”

“This land has a loan against it, Ma. Papa took that loan ten years ago, and we’ve been paying it, and then cocoa prices dropped, and we started falling behind, and now.” A long breath. “Now we’re here.”

I know about the loan. I’ve always known about the loan in the vague way you know things that live in the adult world. They exist, they matter, they are not your problem. Ten years ago, Granddad had big plans. He was going to build a drying shed, replace the old fermentation boxes, put in a proper road down to the lower grove. He did none of it. He died instead, suddenly, of a heart attack on a Tuesday morning in the lower grove, and the loan stayed and the plans went with him.

I whisper this to Freddie, fast and low. He already knew the shape of it. He has known our family too long not to, but he did not know the number. Six weeks. His jaw tightens.

“That bank job interview,” Mum continues, “it’s not just about having more income. It’s about having a steady income. Something reliable. I can’t watch us lose everything because we’re holding on to a dream that’s not paying the bills.”

“This land has been in our family for four generations.” Granny’s voice sounds faraway.

“And what good is family land if we can’t afford to live on it?” Mum’s voice is fierce now, desperate. “I have to think about Kola’s future. She’s sixteen, starting Form Five in high school. She needs stability, not the constant worry about whether we’ll have a roof over our heads.”

The silence that follows feels as heavy as wet-season rain. I can't stay quiet anymore. I burst through the door, Freddie right behind me, my words tumbling out like a burst bag of channa.

I tell them about the competition and the channel and the digital storytelling component and the thirty percent and the virtual portal, all of it tumbling together.

"Slow down, Kola," Mum says, giving me an eye that says she knows we were eavesdropping.

"There's a competition. An international one. The judge—Jean-Paul Dubois—he's here in Trinidad right now, today. They're visiting estates tomorrow. And thirty percent of the judging is community engagement and digital storytelling, which is—"

"Kola."

"—which is basically what my channel is, what I've been building, and if we could get him to come here, or if I could just get our cocoa to the tasting—"

"Kola." Mum's voice is not unkind. It's the voice she uses when she needs me to hear the next sentence. "Six weeks."

The words stop me.

"We have six weeks to catch up three months of loan payments," she says. "That is the situation we are actually in. Not the situation where a competition changes everything. The situation where we need money, specifically, and soon, from a source we can count on."

I look at Granny. She is watching me with an expression that looks a lot like sadness.

"Granny. Sweet Roots could win this."

Freddie holds up his phone, speaking for the first time. "Already got the Zoom link for the information session."

Granny automatically stands to pour him some cocoa tea from the pot on the stove, and he accepts it gratefully, though his attention stays on me.

It's then that I see Mrs. Matthis on the small TV in the kitchen. "Wait, what is Negativo doing there?" I ask. She's talking to the same reporter who interviewed the cocoa judge. I turn up the volume.

"I can't believe you have Kola calling Mrs. Matthis that, too." Mum sighs at Granny, but there's no real anger in it, just exhaustion.

"We have to be careful about who is claiming to produce our cocoa," Mrs. Matthis declares in our sweet, sing-song Trini accent, though she has a distinct lilt that gives her away as from the affluent west part of the island. "Our industry is stifled by a lack of cooperation with established producers who have the infrastructure and experience to meet international standards."

"Meaning only she and her garden club members qualify," Granny mutters.

Mum walks back to the kitchen table where a pile of bills sits next to the bank notice.

"You see?" Mum asks quietly. "Even if we could enter a competition, we don't have the resources to compete with estates like hers. We can barely keep up with our own."

But I'm not ready to give up. Not when I've just seen the answer to our problems on TV.

"We call her Negativo," I explain to Freddie, who is sipping his cocoa tea quietly, "because she has never, in the entire history of cocoa in Trinidad, said anything positive about—"

"Enough," Mum says. She takes the remote and turns off the TV. "Stay away from that competition, Kola. And stay away from anything that involves Lydia Matthis. We don't need more trouble right now."

She picks up the pile of bills from the table. I see the bank letterhead on top, the red text. She heads into the living room.

The kitchen is very quiet.

Granny lowers herself into her chair at the kitchen table. She looks, in this moment, her full age.

“Granny,” I say, moving to sit beside her. “What if this competition could change everything? What if we get Sweet Roots the recognition it deserves?”

Granny tries to smile, but I can see the worry in her eyes. “My dear girl, sometimes you need to know when the game is already won... by someone else.”

“Is that why you stopped entering competitions? Because of *Negativo*?”

“That story is for another time.”

“Granny—”

“Not today.” But she says it gently. She puts her hand over mine on the table. Her hands are the most worked hands I know. They’re rough at the palms, dark at the knuckles, the left ring finger permanently stained brown from decades of handling fermented beans. “Tell me instead what scheme is forming behind those eyes.”

“Me?” I try to look innocent, but Freddie snorts into his cocoa tea.

From the living room, I can hear Mum on the phone. Interview time. Documents to bring. I think she has already decided. I think she decided before this morning, maybe before this month, and the interview tomorrow is just the visible part of a decision she made quietly a long time ago.

I do not say this out loud.

“If the judge cannot come to us,” I say, “Sweet Roots has to find its way to the judge.”

Granny’s mouth does that thing that is almost a smile. “You sound like Horace.” She says it like it’s a warning and a compliment at the same time.

She does not tell me to stop. She does not agree. She just squeezes my hand once and stands up, and her face closes off in the way it does when she’s made up her mind not to look at something directly.

“Stay far from *Negativo*,” she says, and goes back out to her trees.

I sit in the kitchen with Freddie, and he gives me a true smile. “I’ve got your back, no matter what.”

I nod, determination settling in. I pull up my Cocoa Kola account. Fourteen followers waiting on the next post. Fourteen people who came to the channel for something and are still showing up.

“What are you typing?” Freddie asks.

“Get ready, Cocoa Crew,” I say aloud as I type it. “We’re about to take Sweet Roots to the world. Everything depends on it.”

I add the cocoa pod emoji, the chocolate emoji, the hashtags. I hit post before I can think too hard about whether it’s true. It’ll post as soon as I get signal.

From the living room, Mum’s voice confirms her interview time. From the yard, the sound of Granny moving through the trees.

Freddie is quiet for a long time. Then: “We’re really doing this.”

It’s not a question. He knows me well enough not to ask.

“Six weeks,” I say.

“Six weeks,” he agrees.

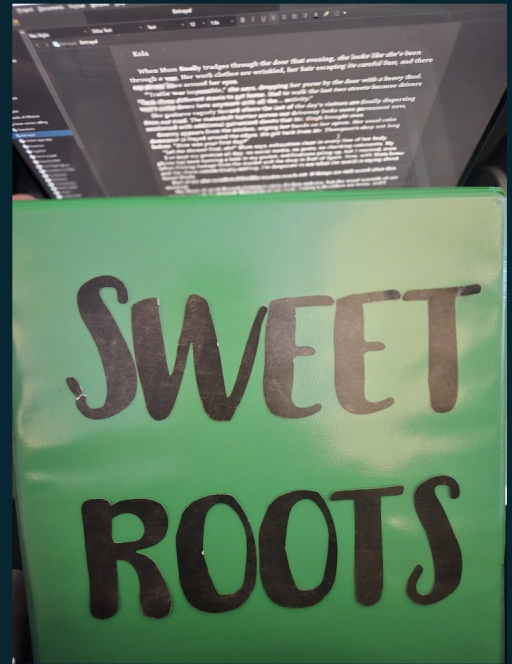
Outside, the cocoa trees sit in the rows, heavy with pods, smelling like green, smelling like earth, smelling like nothing yet. Like potential. Like something that has to be worked into what it is going to become.

I know that feeling.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Sweet Roots is coming in 2027.

You'll hear about it first right here in Heidi Alert: release news, cover reveals, and the occasional cup of cocoa tea.



MY SWEET ROOTS BINDER, AND A DRAFT IN PROGRESS

INSTAGRAM

[@heidialert](https://www.instagram.com/heidialert)

WEBSITE

heidialert.com

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Thank you for reading. With love, Heidi