

## Chapter One, Part One “Once Upon a Time in a Place Called America”

**Twelve Years Ago**  
**Saturday, July 25, 2026**

If the history books ever needed a photo labeled “ideal 2020s cyberteen,” they’d just need a photo of Diana Constantinos tonight, glowing under the pink lights at *BanhME!*

Her black button-up from Connie’s Diner was tied above her midriff, paired with a miniskirt printed over and over with the same two lines of text:

*C:\>AUTHORITY*  
*Bad command or file name.*

She’d even teased her black curls into the iconic look of the decade - an anarchic Einstein-perm that some aging Millennial had sneeringly labeled “the fork-in-socket look.”

Di was the hot one, the cool one - the dark, twisty, alluring older sister that fourteen-year-old Nina could barely aspire to match.

Hindsight would change things, but to a geeky freshman who hadn’t quite grown into her liquid-crystal jacket, Di was as close to an actual goddess as Appleton, Wisconsin would ever get.

There was a massive “vintage” arcade in the decidedly non-vintage shopping center across the street. After dinner service at the family diner, they’d spend hours playing the old pinball machines. Then they’d always come to *BanhME!* and chow down on Vietnamese food, probably because it was the opposite of the menu at Connie’s. A bit of the present after a lifetime with one foot in the past.

Time spent purely in 2026 was hard to come by when life revolved around a 1957 diner with a 1985 jukebox and four generations of Constantinos family history.

That was the year before Nina fell in love with Star Trek, two years before she got contact lenses, and about thirty minutes before she figured out the rest of her life.

“There aren’t many things I’m going to miss about this town,” Di said through a mouthful of pork belly and jalapenos, “but Mrs. Xiong’s sandwiches might be one of them.”

“Thanks,” Nina deadpanned. “Nice to know I’m somewhere behind pork-belly on the priority list.”

Di laughed so hard that she blew bubbles in the purple bubble tea she was sipping. “You’re

beating the sandwiches - barely - but what I'll miss most is coming here with you."

Nina tried to smile. "Still wish you'd go to UW-Madison. You could come home on weekends."

Di's eyes dropped. "I know - but Alabama has an awesome Criminal Justice program."

Nina played with her straw and caught sight of the sleeve of her mood-ring jacket, the bright blues and greens graying out. "You're doing it to get away from Mom and Dad."

Di slurped a few tapioca bubbles without making eye contact.

"Maybe."

Nina glared at her, then silently went back to her sandwich.

"Yeah, okay!" Di exploded. "I want out! There's nothing here. There's nothing for anyone." She dropped her voice to a whisper, "Unless you're C.J. and you were born to inherit a freaking diner."

It always stung hearing Di talk about their brother like that, or about Connie's Diner, but she wasn't wrong.

Nina tried to muster a response. "We have cops and lawyers here. Isn't that what you do with a Criminal Justice degree?"

Di let out a sardonic half-laugh. "Right, I could run the Appleton homicide squad and binge on donuts waiting for my one case per year."

Nina looked down at the table and took a long sip of her smoothie, letting the bubbles roll around on her tongue. Finally, she looked back at Di.

"I'm here."

For a second, it looked like Di might cry herself, but she blinked a few times and recovered.

"Come on, Short Stack, I'll be around in the summers," Di took Nina's hand, "and we'll video-chat all the time."

"I guess, but we can't hang out on the roof and talk about boys anymore."

Di chuckled. "You're not going to miss me venting about Jake."

Nina allowed herself a tiny smirk. "No, I won't."

"Besides, you're going to be off to college in a few years anyway - knowing you, I'm guessing Harvard."

Nina rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well first I have to survive freshman year.”

“You’ll be fine,” Di said firmly. “You’re smarter than me and C.J. put together. High school’s going to be a breeze.”

“Not if Jen Palazzo keeps making her boyfriend shove me in lockers.”

Di fixed her eyes on Nina. “Leave Jen to me. But seriously, don’t you have any big dreams? I remember how excited you were about space camp – you told everyone you wanted to be an astronaut.”

Nina shrugged. “There’s no such thing as astronauts anymore, remember?”

“Right,” Di exhaled. “What about writing? I’ve seen your fan-fic – it’s good! You could write the next big Guardians of the Galaxy movie.”

“Because the world totally needs cinematic Rocket Raccoon slashfic.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Nina sighed, “making it in Hollywood sounds like a solid career plan.”

“I’m serious,” Di scolded, reaching into her purse. “Here, let me show you something.”

She produced a small book, its cover wrapped in bright turquoise duct tape. Diana’s Diary was scrawled across the front in permanent marker. Nobody had ever seen inside that thing, not even Nina. Di opened the back cover and pulled out a weathered photo.

“Remember that trip to D.C. we went on?” Di asked. “You were what, six?”

“A little,” Nina said. “I remember the Washington Monument, and Uncle Spiro’s dog eating Harry Hippo’s head and then throwing him up on the carpet.”

Di almost spit out her tea. “I forgot about Harry Hippo. Anyway, I was on this kick about growing up to be a spy, taking sneaky pictures of everyone. Got this at the National Cathedral.”

She placed the photo in the middle of the table. Two women, youngish. The first was black with silky hair, wearing a silver sundress and smiling broadly. The other, in the foreground, was white and sported a leather jacket and a tight brown ponytail. Her smile was toothier but more nervous. Both were backlit by a stained-glass window.

“They sat next to us at the service.” Di pointed at the woman with the ponytail. “She noticed me snapping her picture. I asked her if she thought little girls could grow up to be spies, and she said I could be anything I wanted.”

“That was nice of her.”

Di stopped for a second and stared at Nina.

“You seriously don’t recognize them?”

Nina looked again, drawing a blank. “Should I?”

“They’re TV reporters, Nina. For WWN. You probably see them on the diner TVs every day.” She pointed at the woman in silver. “That’s Toby Carsten. She’s the afternoon anchor now. And that,” she moved her finger down the photo, “is Priscilla Davis. She’s the Political Editor.”

Nina picked up the photo and squinted at it. “They do look a little familiar, now that I think about it.”

Di took the photo back and carefully placed it in the diary. “I didn’t recognize them, but after we got back, I saw them on a Time Magazine cover.” She leaned over the table, eyes firing up like tiny diodes. “Did you know Priscilla’s dad didn’t even want her to be a reporter? She came from a town even smaller than this one.” She planted her index finger firmly into the picture. “They weren’t just being nice to me, Nina, they actually got their dreams - for real. That’s what I want. Don’t you?”

Nina tried to muster a nod. Dreams were okay, but they weren’t as good as sisters.

Di took Nina’s hand and squeezed it. “Look, Short Stack, promise me you’ll get a dream. Get the hell out of this town and do something big - as big as you possibly can. Will you promise me that?”

Nina had never really thought about being anywhere but Appleton. This was home. Her parents were here. The diner was here. Why would she go anywhere else? But maybe a dream wouldn’t be such a bad thing. She had to grow up to be something.

She looked up at Di, offering her little finger and a faint smile. “Pinkie promise?”

Di raised her hand but didn’t get a chance to accept. Instead, her eyes got wide and her hand dropped to the table.

That was when Nina heard the glass shatter.

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A half hour later, the flashing lights outside *BanhME!* weren’t pink neon, they were red and blue. The driver of the U-Haul truck had apparently fallen asleep at the wheel pulling into

the parking lot, and now his vehicle was embedded in the glass front of the restaurant. Nina and Di had both given statements to the police, and Nina's color-change jacket had been replaced by a foil blanket from a firefighter who'd noticed her teeth chattering and informed her that she was in shock. Now, she was just shivering on a sidewalk full of broken glass.

A local TV crew had set up in the parking lot just outside the police tape. There were lots of big lights and cameras, so bright that Nina had to look away.

That was when a voice came from behind her. "So, you're the two kids from inside?"

Nina jumped. She'd just gotten control of the shivers but felt them starting again. She turned to see a woman in a blue windbreaker emblazoned with *WAPL News Now*. Her blonde-highlighted black hair was a mess from the wind, but still looked shiny in the siren-lights.

"Oh!" the reporter said, jumping back. "I am so sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"Look," Di cut in. "My sister is in shock, and she's not going on camera."

The woman held up her hands. "I wasn't gonna ask. Just wanted to see how you're doing. That must have been pretty gnarly."

Nina felt her teeth starting to chatter. "It was pretty bad."

"I bet," the reporter stuck out her hand, offering a sympathetic smile. "I'm Ally Talamantez, by the way."

Nina gave it a timid shake. "Nina Constantinos."

"I think I know how you feel," Ally said, "close encounter with a tornado. So much broken glass from the hail."

Nina's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really," Ally nodded. "But you know what? After that, I realized that not a lot scared me anymore. Made me a better reporter."

"Alejandra!" a cameraman's voice boomed. "Pre-show live hit! Now!"

Ally rolled her eyes, and yelled back, "*Un minuto*, Miguel!" She put a hand on Nina's shoulder and said, "It's gonna be alright, kid." Then she sprinted back to her set in the parking lot.

Planting her feet squarely in a halo of bright lights, Ally picked up a cordless microphone off the ground and stared down the camera.

“A horrific scene tonight as a truck plowed into this local Vietnamese sandwich shop. Diners and staff are lucky to be alive and unharmed, but this popular South Appleton hangout has been literally shattered. I’m Alejandra Talamantez, and we’ll have all the details live at ten.”

Nina looked on, feeling the shakes lessening. She wasn’t thinking about the truck anymore, or the crashing. All she saw was Ally, standing in a sea of broken glass – totally calm, shining under the lights. How did she do that? How could anyone be that collected in the middle of a mess like this?

Nina took a deep breath and scanned the parking lot again, trying to see what Ally saw hear what she heard. Flashing lights, police walkie talkies, sirens. To Nina it had all been scary but thinking about how this must look to Ally - this scene was straight out of a movie. It felt...exhilarating...powerful...it felt awesome.

And the shivers had stopped.

Ally’s segment drew to a close and the cameraman stepped away from his rig. That was when Nina threw off the foil blanket and started running into the parking lot.

Di rushed after her. “Nina, what the -”

Nina was too busy shouting. “Ally! I feel better! Can I go on TV?”