

Chapter Nine, Part Three “Connections”

8:11 PM

“Babycakes, that new brunch diner on H Street is, like, *totally* malted-”

“My boys were so nuked last night - and then these hot kittens show up and we’re like, hot dog -”

“Would you *look* at this poodle, Doll! Hand-on-heart, I got it fifty bucks at H&M clearance.”

Vinya tapped her fingers against her leg, trying to tune out the conversations in front of her. The line to get in to *Zuko’s Garage* was moving even slower than usual, and the Brill-speak was as thick as the bubble-gum vape fumes. It was enough to make Vinya seriously contemplate violence. Not that it was unexpected. *Zuko’s* was the beating heart of the Anacostia Strip, and the Strip was one of the country’s leading Brill districts.

“Have you downloaded the Chinettes new single yet?” Vinya heard someone say behind her. “I got the Vinyl 45 and just, like, hit some Dooley and pinked out on the floor of my apartment listening to it on repeat-“

She had almost reached the front of the line when the bouncer stopped a petite blond wearing a polka-dot headband and a satin scarf.

“Nice laces, Dodie.” the burly man deadpanned.

“Excuse me?!” the Brill shot back.

Vinya dropped her eyes to the blonde’s feet. Sure enough - tan wingtips with pink laces.

The bouncer pressed a button on his smartwatch and spoke into it. “Get Cassie out here. We got a Dodie in need of a pat down.”

“The f***?!” the Brill protested. A female security guard emerged from the bar and somewhat gruffly searched her person.

It didn't take long for "Cassie" to find the ten strips of hallucinogenic tabs hidden in the girl's bobby-sox.

"Take your Dooleyed-up butt somewhere else, buttercup!"

Looking up, Cassie noticed Vinya in line and yelled, "Yo, V! Wassup? Why you waiting in line?" She turned to the bouncer, "Let her in Charlie!"

It did pay to be a regular. And Vinya was *very* good at making friends in places like this. Two months in town, and the bouncer waved her past security.

Inside, Zuko's had everything a Brill could dream of. Live girl-groups, live orchestra, all piped through a period-accurate 1963 microphone and sound system. It was analog heaven, and Vinya's inner-DJ had spent hours drooling over the equipment, even if it wasn't really her style.

She pushed her way across the checkerboard floor to the strains of "Da Doo Ron Ron," passing under the '57 Chevy Bel-Air that hung from the ceiling. Just getting to the front was an adventure, given that the room was a veritable zoo of ponytails, bomber jackets, headbands, and pomade.

Reaching the edge of the bar, Vinya saw her favorite bartender at the far end leaning on the vintage soda fountain and flirting with two enraptured co-eds. "Hey, Rat!" she shouted.

The startled bartender looked up, then his face brightened. "Vinny! Long time no see!"

Elijah "Rat" Conlin was one of about three people who could refer to Vinya as "Vinny" without losing teeth – and he got away with it entirely on charm.

A spindly 24-year-old half-Korean - Rat had a taste for absinthe, a degree in philosophy, and too much swagger for his own good. He wore a black, James Dean-style leather jacket, and had his hair greased into a slick quiff that dangled down almost to his eyebrows.

Bartending was only part of his hustle. He also had an office job with the company that owned Zuko's and a few other venues – which made him Vinya's number one source in DC's growing underground music scene.

Vinya had had a whole network of people like Rat back in L.A. She'd built a career by chatting up bartenders and hospitality staff. Right now, however, Rat was her only *local* connection.

He dropped the two girls he'd been working on like hot potatoes and rushed to give Vinya a hug. "Where you been, girl?"

Vinya laughed. "Oh you know, doing normal stuff, moving, watching the Pope get elected. That sort of thing."

"I saw that," Rat replied, "Legit dropped a glass I was cleaning when I saw you come on." He made a shattering noise as he spread his hands. "How the hell you pull that off?"

"Long story," Vinya planted herself on a barstool, "*Very* long."

"I've got time," Rat said smoothly. "So, what can I get you? Chocolate-Lavender Malt with a little Grey Goose? Absinthe Float? You don't even want to know what we're putting in the Egg Creams tonight."

Vinya shot him an "*Are you kidding me?*" glare. "I'll have my usual."

"Right," Rat sighed, grabbing a martini glass off the back shelf and slickly pretending to pour liquor into it. Then he added in some ginger ale and grenadine before ceremoniously placing the glass in front of her.

"One Shirley Temple, conveniently disguised as a Cosmo so that nobody knows you're such a square."

"Thanks, Rat," Vinya said with a sarcastic wink, taking a long sip. "It's swell that you're so eager to mock my lifestyle choices."

"Oh no, I get lifestyle choices," he said. "You choose not to start drinking, I choose never to stop."

"So," Vinya took a sip of her drink. "Believe it or not, I'm here on business."

Rat held up his hands. “Absolutely not. Deranged Poodle tickets are super-gone. No favors.”

Vinya rolled her eyes. “Dude, I had backstage passes nailed down before you knew they were coming.”

Rat gave her a pouty lip. “Why do you have to hurt me like that?”

“Because your pain gives me life, darling,” Vinya replied, setting down her drink with a conspiratorial grin. “Actually, I’m working on a *story*.”

“And what makes you think that someone like me would want any part of that?” Rat said with a smirk. Then he leaned over the bar, “Tell me everything.”

Vinya leaned in. “What do you know about the Rev scene?”

“Rev scene?” Rat ended the spy-games by recoiling. “I know enough not to screw with it. I do underground – but that scene is wack-daddy. Also, it’s not in D.C. yet – thank hell.”

Rat looked genuinely spooked, but something about that made Vinya want to keep pushing. “Everyone’s telling me it’s about to blow up – like huge. You’re telling me there’s not one club in the area?”

Rat thought for a second before responding “I’ve heard rumors. If it does show up, it’ll hit the hood-burbs before the city. Someone said you live out in Fairlington now, right?”

“Yeah,” Vinya said, “neighborhood sucks, but I got a ton of house.”

Rat nodded. “True enough. Anyway, what I’m saying is if Rev were here, it would hit you before it hits me. And it’s underground as all hell - they wouldn’t touch a mainstream club with a ten-foot pole. I heard one neighborhood it was just, like, overnight they started hearing the stuff – people rapping about beheading drug dealers. Then the gangs hit the streets and started ‘policing,’ he made finger quotes. “No thanks, soul sister, not interested.”

Vinya let her thoughts marinate in grenadine for a few seconds before she spoke again. “Well, I’m only in it for the music. I have to get an article done on it before the first big

albums drop out of the major labels. You said there's no clubs in the area – so where do I look?"

Rat chewed on his lower lip. "I didn't say that. I said there were none in D.C. I've heard some rumblings from people who do stuff in the suburbs – like way out in P.G. County." He leaned on the bar and dropped his voice. "But seriously, Vinny, are you sure you want to mess with this bag?"

Vinya steeled her gaze at him. "You're telling me you're not the least bit curious?"

8:33 P.M.

Normally, Nina would have thought an outdoor date in the middle of February was beyond stupid - but so far it didn't suck.

There were worse ways to spend an evening than wrapped in a huge blanket, sitting on a log, sipping hot chocolate out of a thermos. It was a warm-ish night for this time of year - about 45 degrees - and Aiden seemed to be executing quite a complex plan to make it all work. He'd brought along the firewood, hot drinks, and a cooler full of food that he now had roasting over an inferno of a campfire.

He'd also started off the evening by handing her the taser that he apparently kept in his truck, so that was empowering to have on her hip.

Aiden returned from the fire with two metal plates of trout, along with a few skewers full of grilled vegetables.

"And for the lady," he said in his best fancy-waiter impression, "We have the grilled trout with house seasonings, and fire-roasted vegetable medley. Bon appetite."

Nina giggled a little, "Why, thank you, sir. Be sure to give my compliments to the chef."

"I'll be sure to relay that."

Nina patted the seat next to her and Aiden sat down – obviously being careful not to get too close.

That was nice of him, but he was missing the point. She'd decided very early in the evening that she was going to keep this puppy.

Nina poked at the fish with her fork, noticing that Aiden had roughly cut off the fillets on her plate and discarded the head, while leaving his own fish whole.

It wasn't the best fish she'd ever tasted, but it wasn't charred to death either. Given the ambience, she was willing to forgive some slight overcooking.

“So,” she picked up the conversation, “What don't I know about the mysterious Aiden Healy - other than that you don't think I can handle a fish with eyes?”

Aiden chuckled and looked down at his feet, “Sorry - you never know with that.”

“I'm joking,” Nina mock-scolded. Either he wasn't picking up on the hints or was too afraid.

She searched for some sort of suitable first-date inquiry - her interview skills mostly failing her. “Seriously, though. What's the dream? There's got to be some reason you're here.”

She discarded her over-warm blanket and scooted a little closer, feeling her thigh brush against his. She felt him tense, as if he were thinking about moving away, but then he relaxed.

He shrugged and kept staring into the fire. “Not sure I know anymore. Mostly I just wanted to go where the news was, tell the story. I'm doing that and they're paying me pretty well. Past that? I know I don't want Ty's job. Maybe I could do NaQuan's. That might not suck - big crew, ten cameras, call all the shots - go home to the same place every night. That sounds like the life.”

Nina giggled, using it as an excuse to slide an arm around his waist. “Wow. Aiden Healy, producer to the stars. You know you might have to wear something other than a t-shirt.”

Aiden didn't draw back but didn't do much to reciprocate - although he did put his hand on hers. Either he was really interested in the fire, or something was eating at him.

Probably the latter, as he immediately changed the subject. "What about you? You have your head screwed on too tight to get sucked into the bright-lights-big-city thing - what put you here?"

Now it was Nina's turn to stare at the fire, although she did take the liberty of resting her head on Aiden's shoulder. It felt like the natural thing to do - like she'd done it before.

"Don't know," she said thoughtfully. "A month ago, I would have said the dream was national correspondent on a major network. Be Madison like you said. Now? I'm not even sure Madison wants to be Madison. How about we knock off Priscilla and I take her job? Want to be my producer?"

Aiden smiled but still didn't shift his gaze, "Sure, you can be the talent and I can be the-

Nina had had enough. She brought her hand up to Aiden's bearded chin, slowly twisted his head to face her, and looked dead into his eyes.

Gray, with little flecks of green, she noticed. Too easy to get lost in.

"I'm over here, silly," she said in the most enticing tone she could muster. "Eye contact is a good thing."

Aiden finally turned toward her and took both of her hands. "Sorry. It's been a long time since I've done ... anything romantic like this."

"Me too," Nina said, placing a hand gently on his cheek, "but I hear it's kind of like riding a bike." She didn't wait for a response, taking his head in both hands and going in for a kiss.