

### Chapter Three, Part Three “Bags and Tricks”

Lenny...Da...left the reception with speed, forcing Vinya to a near-run to keep up.

Once they were well down a long, red-carpeted corridor, Da finally shouted back at Vinya. “Our suite is on the opposite side of the club level. You know, in case any of the *real* stans get backstage passes. I kid you not, one time someone chased us down the hallway yelling ‘marry me Penny!’”

“That sound intense.” Vinya responded, trying to keep pace.

“She was,” Da shouted back, “but you get used to it.”

After what seemed like forever, they finally came to a door festooned with an almost comically large pink-glitter star – adorned with “LENNY” in huge block print.

“This would be me,” Da said, pushing open the door.

Inside was a full luxury suite, although Vinya thought it was quite spartanly furnished. There was a coffee table with a vase of white lilies and five bottles of high-end mineral water – not exactly what one would expect on a Brilltone’s rider. However, the first thing Vinya noticed was the strains girl group songs wafting from a Bose radio in the back. Not modern Brill, but girl groups from early-1960s “Brill Building sound.” The music that had given a name to the “Tones (and the movement they spawned.)

Da briefly disappeared into the next room, returning with a steaming mug of something citrusy and a soda bottle. *Thums Up* cola – Vinya’s favorite Indian import, and not an easy thing to find unless you knew where to look.

Da set the bottle on the table with a thud, gestured for Vinya to take it, then plopped herself on the white leather couch in the center of the room.

“So,” she checked her watch, “You’re Vinya Jain – WWN Lifestyle. Can’t say I knew they were industry leaders in music journalism.”

Vinya shifted on her heels, “We’re...ramping up.”

“Clearly.” Da said between sips of her hot citrus concoction. “And do they always have an eye for sneaky talent. Or did they just get lucky with you?” She motioned to a plush recliner. “You can sit, you know.”

Vinya walked across the room and planted herself gingerly on the edge of the very plush chair, turning on the voice recorder on her phone as she did so. “I’m just covering the tour.”

“Really?” Da fired back. “Because, last I checked, you’re the first person I’ve ever heard of who asked to interview with me without bothering to even request Jen or Erin – outside of the Asian-interest mags. Nobody asks for the just the third Brilltone, and you know it.”

Vinya straightened her back and opened the soda, trying to wrangle her nerves. “I think you’re a wonderful interview subject, and as you said, we’re a newer outlet. I aimed for the interview I thought I was most likely to get.”

“And you filed interview requests for our manager, the drummer, and our freaking make-up girl. They’re all flattered, by the way.”

“My angle is the gritty details of the tour.” Vinya lied.

“Right,” Da took another long drink, “and you hate everything Brill.”

Vinya froze, soda bottle halfway to her lips. “I – I don’t – I love your music. You can look at my reviews.”

“I didn’t say you hate *us*.” Da said. “I said you hate the Brill scene. I mean, you’re clearly plugged in to modern trends, but your entire personal aesthetic is a holdover from pre-Brill style. Your reviews of every Brill group other than us and Deranged Poodle have been skeptical at best, and the few bands you drool over are underground Glow Scene. This,” Da gestured around her, “is not your turf.”

Vinya forced herself to pick up the soda bottle and take a sip. The bubbles running over her tongue calmed her just enough to muster something coherent.

“*Music* is my turf,” Vinya said, realizing that this interview had quickly become a sparring match. “I do cover the Glow Scene, but I also go to a Brill bar every Saturday, own five poodle skirts, and spent last summer using antique hair rollers to perfect my victory roll.”

Da gave her a dismissive wave. “None of that means you like the scene, and you have history. So, tell me - Cadigan V -why are you here?”

Vinya stopped cold. Nobody knew her old stage name, not unless they’d been in L.A.’s underground scene a *long* time.

“Let me help you,” Da interjected. “You’re here because you’re a solid enough reporter to have gotten wind that the band isn’t getting along, and that the higher-ups at our label are starting to talk to us about the Brill scene’s inevitable collapse.” Another sip of tea. “My sister doesn’t even know half of that, so you have some *great* sources.”

Vinya took a deep breath, “Ms. Len, I think you might have—”

“Ms. Jain,” Da cut her off again, “I don’t accept interviews. You’re in here right now because you have an amazingly strong nose for a story. So, there are two ways this can go. You can keep saying you’re just here for the tour, and I’ll give you the same useless soundbites I give everyone. Or, you can admit that you’re writing an investigative piece about the end of Brill, go off the record, and I start *dishing*.”

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Scrambling back to her feet, Nina looked up at a towering, silver-haired man wearing in a pale blue short-sleeve shirt and a priest's collar. He looked concerned and extended his hand down to help her up.

"I am so sorry. Are you all right? I was in such a hurry."

English, Nina noted, with what sounded like an Australian accent, but not quite.

"No worries, I'm fine." Nina took his hand and got to her feet. "I've taken harder knocks."

Once standing, she realized why he hadn't seen her. He was at least two feet taller than her, and her head didn't even reach his shoulder. He bent down to retrieve her guidebook, which had fallen open and sat face-down on the pavement.

"Here, let me get that for you."

Nina realized too late and lunged for the book. "I got it."

But the priest already retrieved it with his long, spindly arm.

"Oh no, I insist, after all I was the one who—"

He stopped as he saw the pages inside the guide, and his face turned pale, "Wait, what's this?"

"It's nothing." Nina reached to grab the book from him. "Give it back!"

The priest held the book above his head to prevent her from reaching. "What are you doing here? Are you a reporter? Who told you?"

"I...um..."

Nina searched for an answer, realizing that she'd started shaking. "Just...just a tipoff."

The man's face seemed to lighten a bit, and he flashed a defeated smile.

"I'm not going to hurt you. We closed down the Inquisition years ago." He handed the book back. "I'd probably be doing the same thing if I were you."

"Thanks, Father." Nina allowed herself to calm down a little.

"You know," he said. "If you knew what goes on in those meetings, you'd be far less interested. I don't enjoy them at all, really. Lots of prattle about stability and deferring to the wisdom of the Vatican Curia – don't print that."

"No worries, Father," Nina responded. "I didn't ask for an interview. Off the record."

The priest sighed with relief. "Thanks. It means a lot coming from media. And don't call me Father. Name's Fletcher. Fletcher Adams." He extended his hand.

Nina returned the handshake. "Nina Constantinos, WWN News."

"Well, Nina Constantinos, WWN News, it's nice to know that we have some honest people on the telly." He pointed at the guidebook. "Most of your mob would have been badgering me about how I'm going to vote by now."

The flash bulb went off in Nina's head. "Vote? What do you mean vote?"

The priest chuckled and pulled pen out of his shirt pocket, "Hand me that book for a second." Wide-eyed, Nina held out the book. He opened it, flipped few pages, and drew several swooping circles. Then he turned it back toward her. "I'm that one, and I've circled the ringleaders of the dinner for you."

Nina squinted her eyes. Sure enough, there was a picture labeled, "Cardinal Fletcher Adams. Archbishop of Wellington, New Zealand."

She gasped. "Your Eminence! I'm so sorry, I didn't know."

Adams rolled his eyes. "If I won't let you call me Father, I'm sure as hell not letting you call me Eminence. I've had about enough of Eminences this week. I honestly wish I could tell you some of the bilge I've heard from these Vatican types."

"Me too," Nina deadpanned.

Adams exhaled loudly. "Look, I don't need my name on telly, especially not with the lot at this dinner. I'm here as a courtesy to people I don't particularly like, which I think I can say without breaking any oaths."

Nina should have thought before responding, but he seemed so vulnerable. Not the type of guy she was interested in outing – and he had flat-out given up several people inside.

She paused for a second, trying to work out the right thing to do. It seemed obvious, if not particularly journalistic.

“It was really clumsy of me to slip on those cobblestones,” she said with a wink. “That’s what I get for being alone in dark alleys.”

"Thanks," Adams wiped a gathering pool of sweat from his forehead. "I...you really aren't reporting me?"

He thought for a second, then said something odd.

"Have you been at WWN long? I don't recall seeing you."

"A month ago, I was on local TV in Wisconsin."

"That explains the altruism," he said, staring off into the night. "Do you think it would help you get a leg up if you got an exclusive interview with a low-ranking cardinal, maybe after the conclave? I can wear a silly red hat and gush about how I love the new pope."

Nina's eyes almost bugged out of her head. "Seriously? That would be awesome."

Fletcher nodded and pulled a pen from his shirt pocket, "Well then, where can I write down my cell number?"

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## **12:00 AM**

By the time Vinya arrived back at Room 504, she wasn't sure whether her head was spinning from the interview or the three hours of vintage technicolor madness that followed at the concert.

Or both.

There was such jarring disconnect between “Da” and “Lenny” – the jaded girl in the rock t-shirt dishing dirt vs. the beaming star in her polka dot dress, soaking in the roar of the crowd. That by itself would have been enough to blow out Vinya’s synapses, but then there were all the stories.

The entire cultural landscape was re-arranging itself inside her head, nagging questions about the Brilltones and Brill-world suddenly answering themselves. So many pieces were snapping violently into place that it was literally making her head hurt.

If this was how sudden enlightenment felt, Vinya wanted a refund.

It was already the time of night where the music of Vinya's thoughts shattered into a hundred dissonant samples, and now all of the revelations were being looped and overdriven through the pegboard of her ADHD.

She inserted her card key into the reader so hard it almost cracked, then flung the door open. Hurling her purse across the room onto her bed, Vinya made a beeline for the bathroom - and her meds.

Then she realized that she wasn't alone.

Nina Constantinos was sitting silently on the bed in her *Star Trek* pajamas, bolt upright, hugging her legs close to her chest and casting an unblinking stare at the wall

"Oh, hey." Vinya blurted.

"Hey," Nina responded in a blank monotone, not taking her eyes off the wall.

Vinya took another step into the room. "Everything okay? You look like you just saw a ghost."

Nina blinked her eyes, snapping out of whatever trance she was in. "Something like that. Weird night."

"Weird as in your dinner tasted funny?" Vinya probed, smelling a story, "Or weird as in your dinner was interrupted by a rampaging T. Rex?"

Nina stared at her sheets before answering. "Closer to the second."

"Seriously?" The hairs on Vinya's neck stood on end as she flung herself onto Nina bed. "Girl, I need details!"

Nina curled back into a ball and shifted away from Vinya. "Let's just say I got some inside info, don't know what to do with it, and don't want to blab about it either."

"Wait," Vinya said, stiffening, "Inside info? Like, on the conclave?"

Nina didn't budge, "Yep."

“Seriously?” Vinya bounded up onto her knees, “Seriously? What happened? Have you told Priscilla?”

Nina shook her head without making eye contact. “I was out chasing a story with Dan Dragovich, which I don't think she'd approve.”

Vinya saw Nina was starting to shiver nervously. There was more here. “And?”

“No. Not going there.”

Vinya took a deep breath, got off the bed, and fished a water bottle out of the room's mini-fridge. “You need that,” she said while handing it to Nina, “Now *please* tell me what's going on.”

Nina just shook her head.

Vinya sat back down on the bed. “Look, I'm not in the news division, but I know a big scoop when I see one. You have one and don't know what to do with it.” She pointed back at herself. “I'm the ditzzy music blogger. I'm nowhere close to this story and I don't give a flying rip about the pope. Tell me.”

Nina's eyes darted back and forth, but she didn't say anything for a solid thirty seconds. “You know,” she finally said, “if you want to convince people you're a ditz, don't use the term. It breaks the illusion,” then she went back to staring.

“And if you had enough confidence in your skills,” Vinya snipped back, “you wouldn't be staring at a wall. You need help and I'm safe. Tell me.”

Nina looked up. “Nobody's safe here. I've learned that in two days. How are you any different?”

“Because...” Vinya searched for the answer. Why did she care, other than morbid curiosity? She closed her eyes. “Because I'm your friend.”

Nina tilted her head and blinked. “We're friends?” It wasn't like she was hostile, just like she genuinely hadn't considered the idea.

Now it was Vinya who found herself staring at her feet. “I don't know. Sorry.”

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Nina stared at the top of Vinya's bowed head. This was easily the most awkward conversation she'd had in months.

She still wasn't quite sure what to make of the definitely-not-ditzzy-but-still-very-odd music blogger. Something about Vinya didn't add up, but she seemed honest. Maybe a little *too* honest.



Nina bit her lip for a second considering how to respond. What came out was, “Okay.”

Vinya looked up and raised an eyebrow. “Okay what?”

Nina shrugged her shoulders. “I could use D.C. friends. Just don’t expect that we’ll be painting each other’s nails.”

“Oh these,” Vinya chuckled, and waving her black and red swirl-pattern nails. “Hell no. Authorized professionals *only*.”

“Well then, friend, we have a deal.”

“Deal,” Vinya replied, jumping back onto the bed. “Now, friend, will you *pleeeeeease* tell me what’s up?”

Nina took a deep breath, then spilled the whole story in a flood of verbal brain-vomit - although being careful not to mention Cardinal Adams’ name.

Vinya’s eyes got wider and wider, and when Nina finished, she practically exploded. “That’s freaking awesome! Why haven’t you told anyone?”

“Think about it,” Nina said, “I told a public figure that I wouldn’t report his presence at a meeting that could potentially embarrass him. Sure, it got me an interview, but my job is to report. If I tell anyone, I’m admitting a breach of journalistic ethics – and Priscilla is already trying to pin me down for pro-Catholic bias.”

Vinya blew a lock of hair off her face. “Good point. So, we’re definitely not telling crazy boss lady.” She stopped to think for a minute. “What about Dan?”

Nina shook her head. “He might insist I report it.”

Vinya’s eyes glazed over as Nina watched her sink into deep thought. “So, you don’t give him the name.” She sprung off the bed and practically dove into her suitcase across the room.

“He won’t go for it,” Nina shouted after her. “I’ve done anonymous-source stories before, the editor always has to know the identity of the source. Three people on Earth knew who Deep Throat was - Woodward, Bernstein, and their editor.”

“I’m going to assume that’s some big news-history reference.” Vinya kept rooting in the suitcase, hurling out an assortment of electronics, jewelry, and neon-hued undergarments.

She came up with a handful of paper products and hurled them onto the bed. Red envelopes, black note cards, and a sheet of stick-on-seals. “Problem solved.”

Nina examined a card and an envelope, noting that both were monogrammed with a giant *VJ* in graffiti-looking font.

“Here’s what happens,” Vinya said, “You write the name in a sealed envelope, show it to Dan, then take it downstairs and have the concierge lock it in the safe at the front desk. Tell them to only open the safe if both of you are present, and not until after the conclave. You’ve been fully transparent, just on time-delay – and in the meantime he can advise you on the general situation.”

Nina fingered an envelope and bit her lip. “It might work,” she said, “Dan might think I’ve lost my marbles, but it could work. Only one problem,” she held up a card, “How am I supposed to write on black stationery?”

“Right!” Vinya ran back to the suitcase, tossing out some fishnet stockings. “I know I have white-ink pens somewhere!”