

Chapter Six, Part Two “California Nightmares”

Three Months Before Present
Sunday, November 1, 2037
Buena Park, California

Vinya always thought it was a weird feeling crossing from the “real world” into the gated community where she grew up. It wasn’t like the rest of Buena Park sucked *that* hard, but it was still a jolt entering this wall-encased pocket of affluence. The whole place felt painfully artificial. A tiny bubble of knock-off Malibu, complete with a sad-looking “lake” that existed mostly to justify the nautical décor in the clubhouse. It was the type of place where everyone outside wanted to be – and half the people inside wanted to get the hell out.

The iron gate slid closed behind Vinya’s pink Mini, and two blocks later she pulled up in front good old 4 Sunfish Cove - or “Little India” as the neighborhood kids used to call it. At least that’s what they called it before Vinya, age ten, gave Ethan Kim a bloody nose over the subject.

The driveway was already occupied by her brother Digant's red Corvette and her sister Yasha’s champagne BMW - the only two of her six siblings who still lived in the area.

“Gang's all here,” Vinya muttered as she slammed the car into “park.”

She retrieved the two bottles of high-end, fresh-pressed juice from the hatchback, ducked out of the way of the YardRoomba trimming the hedges, and found the front door unlocked.

“I’m here!” she yelled, catching the sound of argument and the smells of Jain-inflected Assamese food wafting out of the dining room.

The conversation was already in full swing as Vinya washed her hands and grabbed a seat around the table – as per usual. She was always the last to arrive, driving out to Orange County from Los Angeles-proper. Her older brother Digant, a defense attorney, still lived in Buena, while her older sister Yasha had a dental

practice down the road in Anaheim.

Vinya's mother offered a kiss on the cheek and almost simultaneously spooned a bed of rice onto the waiting plate, followed by a spoonful of dark papaya khar on the side.

"Could you pass the kordoi," asked Digant, apparently midway through his normal monologue about corporate clients.

Yasha slid the bowl of Assamese wheat fritters silently across the table, where Digant grabbed one and took a huge bite before launching back into his speech. This was how these things always went. Digant never shut up, Yasha said next to nothing. Both got lavish praise from their mother, along with the other four successful siblings, while occasionally needling Vinya about when she was settling down or "getting a job."

It was the one time of the week that Vinya never wanted to talk or be the center of attention. She was more than happy to grab a solid pinch of rice and khar and stuff her face before anyone asked any prying questions.

"So, Yashashvi," their mother cut in, "How is the dentistry this week?"

"Oh, you know," Yasha said, picking at her plate with dainty fingers, "The usual. Mostly good patients, although we did get one guy with some pretty advanced gum disease." She gave a small smirk, "Not sure that's table appropriate."

Their mother gave a light laugh. "Maybe not, but see, that's a real accomplishment, and quite a skill."

The only thing stronger than the smell of asafetida powder at "family dinners" was the stench of judgment, especially with her dad on another one of his business trips.

Honestly, there was no good reason to be mad at Yasha. She was probably Vinya's best friend in the world – but for family purposes, Yasha was the good girl, the stick Vinya was poked with. And as much as Yasha said she hated it in private, she never said a word to stop it.

Never mind that it had been Yasha who introduced Vinya to EDM music, Yasha who procured Vinya's first fake ID, Yasha who'd once had a sex-drenched alter ego named "Aarti Fish." And it was Yasha who'd almost...well, Vinya didn't want to think about that.

Either way, Yasha had gone to dental school. Yasha was an excellent cook. Yasha knew how to demure when the family bullcrap surfaced.

Yashashvi Jain, DDS., was exactly what Zarna Jain's daughter was supposed to look like – almost. She didn't have a husband.

Still, compared to Vinya, Yasha was practically the good-Jain-girl messiah.

"So," Digant announced, finally saying something that got Vinya's attention. "I got some people asking me to think about State Assembly."

"Politics?" Their mother said in near shock.

"What a surprise." Yasha deadpanned, making eye contact with Vinya for the first time.

Vinya wanted to laugh but was distracted by a soft bloop emanating from her vintage Katy Perry handbag, and her hand instinctively shot for it. She pulled out her wafer-phone and saw there was another email. These people were certainly persistent.

She looked up to see Digant staring at her – the trial attorney staring down an inattentive juror. Heaven forbid she not hang on his every word. "Apparently," he continued, "they're not sure that Assemblyman Chu is going to run for another term."

"Really?" their mother said, "That would be something. A Jain in the State Assembly. Even if you are a Democrat. What does Bhakti think?"

Digant scrunched his features. "She likes the idea of being an assemblyman's wife, but she'd be hotter on it if it weren't in Sacramento."

The table settled into an awkward silence. Vinya and Yasha caught each other in a knowing stare. Vinya raised an eyebrow, and Yasha poked at her khar.

Vinya tried to re-start things. “I got an interesting offer this week too,” she said tentatively, “I got an email from WWN. They're trying to rebuild the lifestyle section on their website, and they really like my work with the Times. Asked if I'd ever think about jumping.”

“That could be really cool,” Yasha jumped in, clearly catching the chance to redirect the conversation. “What did you say?”

“Does it pay?” their mother interjected.

“It would pay about what I'm making now, Mom.” Vinya said. “I told them I'd take a phone call, but it doesn't get better than the *Times*, right? And they said they'd want me based out of their D.C. headquarters. Not exactly a hip and happening town.”

Her mother clicked her tongue, “You know what I think about newspapermen. Dirty scoundrels the of them. Back in Kohima I-”

“I know, Mom,” Vinya tried to laugh, “I know all of your Kohima stories.”

Her mother shook her head, “Dirty, corrupt backwater town. Never knew what your father saw in the place.”

Vinya tried to avoid the eyeroll. Yes, she knew. If her father hadn't loved his hometown so much, she would have talked him into going to Mumbai like she wanted after he became an engineer. They wouldn't have moved to America where there were mountains like Kohima - and then her poor, long-suffering mother would have a good little Jain daughter who went to went to derasar and married a nice Indian boy. Instead, they'd come here, and her children were Westernized horror shows – especially the one with adult-ADHD and glow-in-the-dark hair.

Vinya was pretty sure there were crazy kids in Mumbai, and her mother still hadn't picked up that she and her glow-hair were at derasar every week for prayers while Digant was who-knows-where.

Digant shoved handful of khar in his mouth, speaking as he chewed. “Yeah, V, L.A.’s definitely a better fit for you. DC takes itself serious, man.”

Really, Vinya thought, letting the words hang in the air.

She poured herself a glass of the mango juice she’d brought and took a slow sip. “And you’re saying I don’t? Take myself seriously, I mean.”

Yasha’s glass clanked down on the table.

“No, I’m not,” Digant said curtly, “just that there are things you can get away with in L.A. that don’t fly out East.”

“Like what, exactly?”

“I don’t know, this,” He swept his hand up and down far enough to take in the vintage Lady Gaga T-Shirt, the custom-painted neon sneakers, and of course the bioluminescent blue highlights in Vinya’s hair. “I mean, you spend all day listening to music and fangirling out on red carp-”

“I get paid \$65,000 a year to 'fangirl out on red carpets,’” Vinya shot back.

“I just meant-”

“I have a half-million subscribers on YouTube.”

Digant finally lost his composure and shouted back. “Getting people to watch trash is not an accomplishment!”

“Guys...” Yasha tried cut in, but their mother took control before she got another word out.

“Vinya, all your brother is trying to say is that a lot of people in Washington are focused, driven people who really invest in their careers.”

“Focused?” Vinya fumed, “I work 60 hours a week, Mom. I write for the *Times*.”

Digant butted in. “You run a trashy fangirl YouTube channel.”

“Guys....” Yasha tried again, firmer but with no reaction.

“Have you even watched my channel?” Vinya fired back. “How does being a journalist make me such a screw-up in this family?”

Digant threw up his hands. “That's the point, V! You keep lying to yourself that you're a journalist and you're not. You've never worn a business suit in your life, and you think you can hack it in Washington freaking D.C.?”

“Guys!”

Digant finally acknowledged his other sister and wheeled to glare at her, “and maybe if her big sister hadn't coddled her all these years, she wouldn't be like-”

“OK, that's it!” Vinya got up from the table, “What the literal f***, Digant?”

“Vinya!” her mother yelled, “Language!”

Digant stood up from the table. “What, you think you're defending Yasha? She's exhausted from trying to humor your delusions, V!”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Vinya!” her mother cut in. “We love you. Digant loves you. Yashashvi loves you. It's just - you're 27, and we all want to know that you can be happy in an adult life.”

“I *have* an adult life, Mom! I write for the biggest newspaper on the West Coast!”

“On pop music,” Digant insisted.

“Really, Digant? Nobody other than you doubts my credentials. The *Times* says I'm a serious journalist.”

“Your byline says Lifestyle Correspondent,” Digant corrected.

Vinya sighed, “Yasha thinks I'm a journalist.”

Everyone simultaneously turned to Yasha, who had clearly given up and was staring down at her plate. Retreating into her shell.

“Fine,” Vinya grabbed her keys out of her pants pocket.

Finally, Yasha got something out. “Wait, V, come back!”

“Let her go,” Digant podded, “Probably off her meds again anyway.”

Vinya slammed the door behind her without looking back.

Fifteen minutes later, she found herself sitting on the asphalt in the parking lot of the old 7-Eleven on Oglethorpe Road, leaning against the wheel-well of her pink Mini and sucking on an extra-large pink Slurpee. Somehow, she always ended up here.

She heard a car pull up a few spaces away, then a door open.

“Mind if I join?” came Yasha’s voice.

Vinya puffed a stray lock of hair out of her eyes, “Depends on whether you want to be seen with the family embarrassment.”

Yasha sat down next to her on the asphalt, but Vinya scooted away. A few seconds passed in silence until Yasha spoke again.

“I’m sorry for not sticking up for you, okay?”

Vinya didn’t respond.

“Look, for what it's worth I just literally told Digant to go f*** himself – in those words, in front of mom. Now, will you *please* give some of that Slurpee?”

Vinya didn't say anything but held out the drink with one hand. Yasha took it tentatively and sucked out enough ice that her cheeks puffed. She swallowed, looked at the drink again, and then started giggling.

“What's so funny?” Vinya asked.

Yasha regained control. “I'm a dentist. Do you have any clue what these things do to your teeth?” She took another slurp. “I can literally *feel* my enamel eroding.”

That got a small laugh from Vinya. “Hey, at least this one isn't laced with vodka.”

“I remember that! The two good Jain girls throwing religion to the wind and getting plastered on spiked Slurpees.”

Vinya finally cracked a smile, “If memory serves, that was your idea.”

There was another long, awkward pause.

“Can I say something weird?” Yasha said, breaking the silence. “I think you should look at that job in D.C. – hard. They seem to want you *bad*. You can prove yourself on your own terms, and you wouldn't have to deal with our crap every week.”

“What?” Vinya practically choked on her Slurpee. “I wasn't even seriously thinking about it. I mean, I hate saying it but Digant's right.”

“Digant's a manipulative ass.”

“I know, but really, *me* in Washington?”

“Why not?” Yasha said, giving Vinya a mischievously innocent stare while sucking her the pink slush.

“I mean,” Vinya stuttered, “I'm – look, I'm not sure DC does Katy Perry handbags and tight t-shirts. Even the people I did a Zoom call with seem pretty suit-and-tie.”

Yasha shrugged her shoulders. “So? We find a few bedazzled suits, problem solved.”

“It’s not that,” Vinya said, “I just – I just can’t picture it. That world has a certain type of people and I’m not it.”

Yasha took a deep breath. “Look, I *hate* Digant’s view of you as some vapid fangirl – to my core – but what I hate even more is that you believe it.”

Vinya crossed her arms. “Well, it would help if someone other than me shut him up.”

Yasha took a deep breath and stared down again. “Maybe, but fighting is exhausting, and you always take the bait.” She got to her feet and dusted herself off. “Look, I’m not saying you have to take this job, or that I want you to go away – because I don’t. But I do think you can hack DC, and I want to watch you shove your big, shiny, suit-and-tie, East Coast job in Digant’s face.” She took a last gulp of Slurpee and handed it back to Vinya. “Rest is yours. Just think about it, okay.”