

**Chapter Seven, Part Three**  
**“Home Is Where You Hang Your Soundproofing”**

**Arlington, Virginia**

**7:31 P.M.**

“Take the exit on the left,” the GPS system deadpanned

Nina felt like she needed to vomit.

“Left?” Vinya shouted. “Hold on.” She shot a quick glance over her shoulder and cranked the steering wheel hard. The pink Mini Cooper careened across three lanes of traffic, reaching the left lane just before the off-ramp marked *Shirlington/Fairlington/King Street*.

Nina dug her fingernails into the door handle and tried to breathe. She wondered how *anyone* survived on DC roads, let alone the human wrecking ball that was Vinya Jain.

“Do we really need two different devices for this?” she asked.

Vinya didn’t seem to hear, she was too busy yelling at her smartglasses.

“It’s stuck! Glass, reboot...reboot dammit!”

Several drivers honked as they rushed to get out of her way.

Vinya ripped off the glasses. “Guess I have to fly blind. You have your phone, right?”

“You have GPS on the dashboard.”

“Yeah, but that’s audio, I need graphics!”

Another horn honked.

“Turn right on South Taylor Street,” the GPS interrupted.

Instead of going right, Vinya jerked hard left into the parking lot of a shopping center. “I’m just going to park here and reboot,” she said.

Nina finally pried her nails out of the armrest.

They’d stopped in front of a decaying storefront decorated with blue Christmas lights. The green awnings betrayed the building’s past life as a Starbucks, but the smell coming out of it now was carne asada.

“Nina, are you sure about this neighborhood?” Vinya asked. “All the signs are in Spanish.”

“That’s probably why the food smells so great.” Nina looked around and pointed at a sign, “And they aren’t all Spanish, that one’s Amharic.”

“We’re in the *hood!*” Vinya spat. “I know you probably don’t have those in Wisconsin, but this is like car-jack city, dollar-store-hair-product *hood.*”

Nina shrugged. “It doesn’t look *that* bad, and I’ve been to worse neighborhoods.”

“So have I,” Vinya retorted, “but then I stopped buying drugs!”

Just then, a group of teenagers walked by, talking loudly and dressed in military-looking fatigues. One of them smacked the hood of the car for no apparent reason, then pointed and laughed as Vinya and Nina jumped. An old man came running out of the restaurant and shooed the group away.

Vinya put her smartglasses back on. “Not that bad, huh? What’s the address again?”

“4316 35th Street South”

“Glass,” Vinya said to the air, “directions to 4316 35th Street South.” She paused for effect. “Wow, Nina, just two blocks from all these lovely amenities.”

A few minutes later, they pulled up in front of a row of red-brick townhouses. All had white Greek columns framing the front doors, but most were stained with

grime and some had boarded-up windows. In the distance, Nina could hear blasting hip-hop that mixed with the blare of sirens.

“Oh, *hell* no!” Vinya exclaimed.

“Come on,” Nina said. “We don’t have to move in, but let’s at least look.”

“I’m looking now.” Vinya said, “No bueno!” She crossed her arms and sank deeper into her seat.

Nina threw open the car door and stepped out. “This place has more than twice the square footage of anything else in our price range. I’m going in.” She started walking.

“Wait!” came Vinya’s voice behind her. “You can’t leave me alone here.”

Nina kept walking.

“Okay, I’ll come!” Vinya stumbled out of the car, struggling to hide her phone, smartglasses, and smartwatch in her purse. “Just let me put away my tech.”

Nina found the house labeled 4316. The windows were treated with blinds that might have been white twenty years ago, and one of the columns had been tagged with the initials “SP” in black graffiti. She knocked.

The door was thrown open by a pudgy, balding man with a five o’clock shadow. He looked every bit as unkempt as the photo-verification attached to his RoomList account.

“You Nina?” he said gruffly.

Nina attempted a smile. “Yes, and you must be Vladimiro.”

“Yes, yes. Pleased to meet you.” He put out his hand, which Nina shook.

“And this is Vinya Jain,” she noted as Vinya finally arrived at the door. “We’re moving in together.”

“Great.” He offered a meaty handshake to Vinya, who seemed unsure how to respond. “Come on in.”

The living room was unfurnished and dusty, and Nina saw that Vinya had snuck a bottle of hand sanitizer out of her purse and was rubbing it vigorously into her palms.

A bare light bulb in the ceiling flickered to warn of its own imminent demise, and the hardwood felt rough under Nina’s shoes. It was probably original, but not in a good way.

Still, Vladimiro was keen to pitch the place. “I know she’s not the prettiest, but she’s solid. New washer, new dryer, new sinks. Even had the exterminator in to take care of the ants. She needs some paint, and the basement toilet backs up, but other than that she’s in great shape.”

“So,” Nina pressed on, “can we see at the bedrooms?”

“Sure, sure, come with me.” Vladimiro showed her up a flight of stairs.

“I’m going to look at the back yard,” Vinya hollered after them.

The two upstairs bedrooms were tiny and floored with gray carpet that faded to black near the edges. The larger of the two had a large burn-mark in the middle of the carpet, exposing the subflooring.

“What happened there?” Nina asked.

“Not sure.” Vladimiro said, “I got her when the police auctioned her off. Thought I was getting a steal, but getting this baby up to code was something else.”

Vinya’s voice wafted in through the back window. “Hey Google...Search: ‘How sketchy is Fairlington?’...No results?...search: Fairlington sketchy...”

Vladimiro chuckled to himself as he showed her back downstairs. “Your girlfriend don’t seem too excited.”

“Search: Fairlington murder.”

“Sorry,” Nina said as they reached the kitchen, next to the back door. “Looking at this place was really my idea.”

“No problem, man,” he said. “Trust me, it was the same way when I moved in with my old lady – but trust me, when you’re in love, it’s worth it. Anyway, all the appliances are stainless, brand new - but what I really think you’ll like is the basement.”

“Search: Will I get shot in Fairlington?”

Nina had heard enough. She leaned out the back door and decided to make Vladimiro’s mistaken assumption funnier than it already was. “Vinya, babe, at least look at the place – for me?”

Vinya flipped her off, but came inside.

Vladimiro led them down a long staircase, flipping a light switch at the bottom. This revealed a sprawling, partially finished basement with concrete floors.

“I know it don’t look like much,” he said, “but this is a great TV room, office, workout room, whatever - stays cool in the summer too. And the third bedroom is down here. Tons of privacy.”

Nina saw Vinya’s eyebrows perk up. “There’s a bedroom down here?”

“Yeah,” Vladimiro crossed the basement to a tiny hallway in the back, “right over here past the washing machine.”

Vinya rushed to follow him as Nina trailed along behind. Once she made it to the tiny room, she found Vinya standing transfixed.

“No one would hear me down here,” Vinya said to the air. “I could unpack the whole setup, no sweat. Just a little soundproofing on those walls and...” her voice trailed off.

“Everything all right?” Nina asked.

Vinya snapped back to reality but didn’t respond to Nina’s question.

Instead she looked straight at Vladimiro. “How soon can we move in?”

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**9:32 P.M.**

**The Hiram Fong**

Emma was roused awake by the slamming of the apartment’s front door. The smartwatch on the nightstand said it was half past nine. So much for only sleeping four hours. The sucky part of being the morning-show girl was getting up at three AM and then crashing all afternoon.

“Emma?” Sinéad’s voice rang through the wall. “You up? I told you we were going to celebrate. I got *Chengdu Dragon*.”

Those were the magic words. Given the lack of decent Cajun food in this town, Emma has taken quite a shine to Sichuan Chinese – the spicier the better. The *Dragon* was both D.C.’s most authentic purveyor of the cuisine, and by far the hottest. Just the smell of it was enough to wake her up.

“Be right out,” she yelled, grabbing the pair of jeans she’d left hanging from the bedpost.

“There you are,” Sinéad said, leaning her bassoon case against the wall and plunking a large white to-go bag on the table. “For a second, I thought you were going to sleep through your promotion dinner.”

“I was,” Emma yawned. “How was rehearsal?”

Sinéad made her way to the kitchen and started rustling around in the fridge. “Not bad, but I can play the Lord Nelson Mass in my sleep. You’d think they’d show a bit more audacity for the tenth anniversary concert. Now, where the hell did I shove that champagne?”

Emma never ceased to be amused by Sinéad's motormouth. The girl's brain was always ten steps ahead of her vocal chords, and she almost never shut up. The only thing that ever calmed her down was the damn bassoon – hence the side-hustle as second bassoonist for the National Cathedral Orchestra.

“All righty,” Sinéad returned with two plastic goblets, handing one to Emma. “A toast, to WWN's newest weekend anchor. Long may she reign.”

Emma took a swig and set the glass down. “Now can we please eat? The smell is killing me.”

A few minutes later, both were happily munching on tongue-singing fish soup and *real* Kung Pao Chicken. That was when Sinéad asked something strange.

“What do you think of Constantinos? You work next to her right?”

“Nina?” Emma said through a mouthful of rice. “Like, Wis-CON-sin Nina?” Why was everyone suddenly so curious about that girl?

“I mean, she was in my earpiece with the whole pope thing, and her station is at my table, but we don't really talk. Reckon she's pretty normal. Needs some *serious* work on that accent if she wants to stay on air.” Emma poked at a chili pepper with her fork, “What's it to you? You're third-floor.”

Sinéad stared at the table for a few seconds, then started unwrapping a fortune cookie. “Priscilla really seems really interested in her - and not in a good way.” She didn't look up, instead slowly crumbling the cookie to pieces without eating it. “Something about her is making Priscilla jumpy. She's hanging around Dragovich, getting off message. Plus she's rebelling against the treatment.”

Emma nodded with an eye roll. “Right, the psycho-secretary strikes again.”

Sinéad chortled and gave Emma a fake glare. “And don't you ever forget it, Poissonier. We're watching you.” Then she crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

Emma pitched forward laughing. “Don't worry, I won't tell anyone you're normal.”

Sinéad rolled her eyes. “It’s WWN, we don’t let normal people in the front door.” She refocused. “But yeah, this one seems weird. Prissy’s obsessed with her, which never happens with washouts.”

“Okay,” Emma said, “Turn the question around. Why do you care?”

Sinéad shrugged. “She rebels hard against my character, and she’s doing good stories. I want her to stick around, and I can’t figure out why Prissy hates her so much. It’s more than just the fact that she’s not falling in line.”

“Hell if I know.” Emma took another sip of champagne, rolling it around on her tongue. “But we both know how much the boss *loves* pushback. My turn. What’s Priscilla’s thing with paper folders? Hasn’t she heard of computers?”

Sinéad snorted, but in more of a sarcastic way, still staring down at her tattered fortune cookie. She read the fortune silently, then dropped it to the table and sprang to her feet. “I knew I forgot something. The ice cream! I got that habanero chocolate sauce you like.” Sinéad snapped her fingers and bounded out the room.

Dishes started clanking in the other room, and Emma saw sandy remains of Sinéad’s cookie. She slid the fortune out of the pile of crumbs and turned it over.

*When fate throws a dagger, there are only two ways to catch it: by the handle or by the blade.*

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Nina climbed back into the Mini and exhaled. “What just happened in there?”

Vinya smirked and leaned back in the driver seat. “We just rented a massive house in the ghetto.”

“Yeah, I know,” Nina sputtered in disbelief. “What switch flipped in your head?”



Vinya shoved her keychip in the ignition and started the car. “The switch that said I haven’t had a dedicated room for my equipment since high school.”

“Your equipment?” Nina asked. “What equipment?”

“Full music studio.” Vinya replied matter-of-factly. “I told you I’m a DJ.”

“No.” Nina said, “You said that you used to DJ *in college*.”

Vinya laughed and hit the gas hard. “I said I got out of it *professionally*, but I still like to mix music for fun. Even post some of it on *JollyRoger*.”

“You pirate music? Are there any other illegal activities I need to know about?”

“Hey, hey,” Vinya corrected. “JollyRoger went legit three years ago, they pay royalties on their whole library, users just mix it. Granted I’ve been doing it for five years, so...”

“Whatever,” Nina threw up her hands, “I’ve known you long enough to know that I don’t want to know.”

“You’ve known me three weeks.” Vinya turned out of the neighborhood and sped up yet again. “Two more and you’ll realize you’re gonna learn it all anyway. Do you want sorbet? I’m craving sorbet.”

“Sure, why not.” Nina said, feeling a slight buzz from her watch.

“Sorry,” she cut Vinya off as she fished for her phone, “I think I got a call.”

Then she looked at the notification and stopped cold.

*New Voicemail From: Fletcher Adams*