

Chapter Seventeen, Part Two
“True Colors”

Saturday, April 10, 2038
Eleven Days Since Interview
7:04 P.M.

Vinya gulped the last sip from a glass bottle of *Thums Up Cola* and sent it rolling down the edge of the roof of the house – which she and Nina had now officially christened “The Fairlington Bureau.” She waited a second and then heard it thump into the garbage can carefully positioned below.

“Got one!” She threw up her hands in triumph as Nina and Aiden saluted her by raising their beers. They’d all been carefully perfecting the move by trial and error over the last hour, with Nina and Aiden becoming slightly inebriated while Vinya became progressively more caffeinated.

“Yeah,” Aiden scoffed, “one hit in three attempts.”

“Nina, would you punch him for me?”

“Sure.” Nina jabbed Aiden in the shoulder.

“Ow!”

Vinya said. “Serves you right.”

For once it didn’t suck being the token non-drinker, at least not since Nina had gone out of her way to get a twelve pack of Vinya’s favorite Indian import. D.C. people seemed to put obsessive effort into everything – including their friendships.

That was the surprising thing about this town. When Vinya had taken the job at WWN, it was mostly to prove she could hack it outside L.A. – though she’d dreaded leaving a town that let her wear her vintage Lady Gaga t-shirts to the office. She’d come here expecting DC to be a suffocating, all-business, black hole full of suits – and that’s exactly what it was. There was no laid-back anything here. Everyone here was go-go-go, twenty-four-seven.

And she loved it.

Vinya Jain – wild child music blogger – had finally discovered her own secret.

Deep down, she wasn't a vintage Lady Gaga t-shirt. She was a suit.

A glow-in-the-dark, bedazzled suit, maybe, but a suit. In L.A., nobody understood the rush that came from typing until her fingers hurt or working the phones until one in the morning just to find out when the next Brilltones album was coming out. Here, everyone worked like that.

An alarm went off on her watch – a 2010s EDM song called “Dancing on Glass.” Two hours to her debut as DC’s newest glow-scene DJ, with a bi-weekly gig on the table if it went well.

“That’s my cue.” She said. “I’ve gotta head over to the club - see you guys at ten?”

8:55 P.M.

The inside walls of *Club Phosphorus* were painted black with glowing splashes of fluorescent paint. Green neon tubes were arranged haphazardly across the ceiling, and the entire room was flooded with the glow of black lights. It was about as far away from mainstream Brill-world as one could humanly get. It had echoes of the 2020s CyberPunk world, but it was more psychedelic, more abstract, more weird. Nina had remembered that things glowed more in the CyberPunk years, but not like this. This place was a monument to unearthly lights and sounds.

No wonder Vinya loved it here.

Nina followed as Aiden pushed his way to the crowded bar. Waiting for them was a man with a stocking cap on his head and his face painted with intricate geometrics in fluorescent orange. Vinya had said to look for him.

He spread his arms wide. “Well, well, well!” he said, “Do my eyes deceive me or has Vinny’s real life trickled into our little fantasy?”

“Excuse me?” Aiden asked.

The man stuck out his finger-gloved hand, “Rat Conlin, pseudo-official welcoming committee.” He cocked his head at a still somewhat shocked Aiden. “Dude, I had my rabies shots last week, you’re good.”

Nina almost broke down laughing at the spectacle, and even Aiden cracked a smile as he took Rat’s hand. “Aiden Healy.”

Nina cut in, “So you’re the infamous Rat. I’ve heard stories.”

“You’ve heard the *tame* ones,” Rat turned back to the bar, where two glasses had already been poured. “So, I asked Vinny about your drink preferences.” He slid a tumbler to Aiden, “I have a Balcones twenty-year old blue corn Bourbon for you sir, on the house. Drink it slowly and do *not* ask what it costs.”

Aiden took a sip and looked for a moment as if he were having an out-of-body experience.

Rat snickered, “I told Vinny I knew how to win over a country boy. She didn’t believe me.”

Then there was a green martini glass containing fizzy liquid and a yellow strobe light encased in an ice cube. “And for the lady, we call this an Atomic Lemon.”

Nina picked up the drink and caught a strong whiff of what smelled like lemon zest. “Well,” she said skeptically, “it smells like my hard lemonades.”

Rat almost snorted. “Honey, that’s like comparing goldfish to a Great White.”

Nina took a sip and puckered at the extreme sourness, but then felt a wave of vanilla wash over her tongue. “Wow,” she said, “You *do* know your drinks.”

“I mean, they do pay me.” Rat pointed toward the stage, “which is why I also know we need to get a good spot while we can. It’s not a big club.” He led them through the crowd, monologuing the whole time about how weird it was having to work both the Brill and Glow scenes - seeing as how they hated each other.

By the time they made it to the front, Vinya had already hit the stage and was busy filling the room with beats that sounded like an old Nintendo. The black lights brought out the blue glow in her hair, which was matched by the blue glow stripe that ran down the side of her black t-shirt and pants. She’d painted a glowing red star around her right eye, and

the soles of her sneakers blinked along with the beat of the music. If Nina hadn't known better, she wouldn't have even recognized the woman behind the SlamBoard.

The music seemed to be a positive surprise for the crowd – and a lot catchier than the random space noises Nina had been hearing. A few people started hitting the floor and grooving. Nina tried to dance along but both she and Aiden quickly retreated to the side of the stage, where they could nurse their drinks and leave the dancing to the pros.

At the end of the song, Vinya leaned into the microphone and shouted. “How’s it going tonight, Washington? You like that?”

The crowd hollered back in approval.

“Good!” Vinya said, “‘cause it’s thirty years old.”

There were one or two surprised gasps, followed by a few whoops of approval and a lot of clapping.

“My name’s Vinya Jain,” she said, pulling on a pair of kinesthetic DJ gloves, “I’m bit old to call myself glow scene, but I used to be a retro DJ specialist out in L.A. Then a funny thing happened, Brill came in and suddenly 2010 wasn’t retro enough for them!”

Booing, lots of booing.

“Well, you know what? Screw ‘em, I’m back!”

Applause. Lots of hollering.

“You ready to break out some old stuff tonight?”

More applause, and Vinya started playing the piano keys on her board. Nina thought she recognized the melody but couldn't place it – it belonged on a saxophone, not an electric piano.

Vinya continued her speech. “Now, I don’t usually go back quite this far – but my roommate’s kind of a square. Her dad has this diner, and my girl has his entire classic rock jukebox on her phone, you hear me? So, since I’ve had to listen to a lot lately, it got me thinking.”

Nina felt her mouth fall open, and she wasn't sure whether to laugh at being called a square or tear up that Vinya was mentioning her on stage.

Vinya laughed to herself. "You know, when I moved out to DC, I thought I was going to hate it. There's a lot of nerds here, but there's a lot of passion here too. People take work home with them and bust their butts, usually because there's some dream they're here to chase. And then I realized that was me, too – and this was home."

The crowd had gone silent, but Vinya started playing louder.

"So, this is for you, Nina – for showing me I'm more than just a silly music blogger. And this is for you, DC!" She turned around to reveal a fresh tattoo glowing neon red on her right shoulder. Two stripes and three stars – the flag of District of Columbia.

How on Earth had she snuck *that* past Nina?

Vinya played a few more notes, then brought her lips back to the mic and let out a silky, alto voice that Nina had never heard before. Vinya's tone was crisp and clean and sounded so perfect that Nina would have thought it was a record – and she was singing the opening bars of Springsteen's "Born to Run."

1:37 A.M.

By the time Nina got home from *Phosphorus*, the afternoon warmth had given way to a steady, drenching rain. The evening had been a smashing success. The crowd loved it, Vinya was over the moon, and even Aiden had been jumping up and down at the edge of the stage.

The only thing Nina would have changed was staying later than Aiden and having to come home in Vinya's car. It had seemed like the sensible idea at the time, but it had resulted in Vinya driving hyper – in a deluge.

The pink Mini screeched to a stop in the street in front of the Fairlington Bureau, and Vinya triumphantly threw it into "park." Nina extracted her fingernails from the armrest, letting out a sigh and promising herself (for the three millionth time) that she was never getting in this car ever again. She also realized, with sudden clarity, that nobody had packed an umbrella.

Vinya leaned back and raised her hands above her head. "Night on the town complete! Vinya Jain is officially back in action!"

She'd been talking like that the whole way home, barely stopping to breathe, and Nina had a feeling that DC's Glow-Scene was about to become an integral part of her life – whether she like it or not.

“Meanwhile,” Nina said, “Nina Constantinos is going to *bed*. Ready to run for it?” She grabbed the doorhandle and charged out into the rain.

“Bed is for losers!” Vinya called after her. “Af-ter-par-ty! Af-ter-par-ty! Af-ter – what the heck?!”

As they neared the house front steps, Nina saw what had stopped Vinya. A soaked figure in a black hoodie and a backpack was sitting on their front steps, staring at the sidewalk to keep their face out of the rain.

Dealing with a random, potentially dangerous intruder was not something Nina wanted in her life right now, but she was also cold and needed access to her house.

“Excuse me!” she yelled at the figure, “Can we help you?”

The stranger lifted their head, and Vinya shouted, “Oh, hell no!”

“It's about time you showed up!” yelled a waterlogged, shriveled, miserable-looking Sinéad Szerbiak.

Nina's eye's widened as she felt cold water seeping through her coat. She wanted to echo Vinya, but she also wanted a hot shower, which required removing Priscilla's minion from the porch.

“What are you doing?” Nina raised her voice above the rain.

“Freezing!” Sinéad said back through chattering teeth. “Can we talk about this inside?”

TO BE CONTINUED IN SEASON TWO.