

Chapter Nine, Part Two
“New”

Thursday, February 25, 2038
Thirty-Two Days Until Interview
7:05 P.M.

Nina stared at herself in her new mirror in her new house in her new city – wondering how the heck she was supposed to look for her new date. She didn’t know where she was going and didn’t really know Aiden. All he’d said was not to wear anything she was afraid of getting dirty – which could mean any number of things.

Also, most of her stuff was still in moving boxes.

This was stupid.

Focus, Nina, she told herself as she applied mascara.

She looked at herself again. Pretty. Classy. That’s what Isaiah always said about the tightish red long-sleeve t-shirt. It had always worked for him - attractive without being loud.

But something about it didn’t look right. Aiden wasn’t even close to Isaiah. She had no clue what he liked - but it probably wasn’t “attractive without being loud.”

She ran down to the basement.

“Vinya!” She yelled down the stairs.

“Is there blood?” came Vinya’s voice, “I’m doing battle with the hot rollers!”

“No,” Nina said, reaching the bottom of the long staircase and poking her head into Vinya’s bathroom. “I just don’t think I’m dressed right.”

Vinya looked away from the mirror, her head half full of antique-looking curlers, “Not in that you’re not. It’s a date, not a Young Republicans picnic.”

“Thanks,” Nina said sarcastically. “It always turned Isaiah on, so I figured I’d give it a try.”

“That means you need to burn it, not try it out on the new guy,” Vinya extracted a roller from her hair, “You don’t even look like yourself.”

“Look who’s talking,” Nina retorted. “Miss ‘I hate Brills’ has a full set of antique hair rollers?”

“Much to learn have you, young padawan.” Vinya croaked in her best Yoda voice before flipping back to her normal SoCal accent. “I’m going to a brill bar to meet some connections, and if I need to look analog, I’m doing it *right*. Besides, I look *divine* in bobbysoxer ringlets.” Vinya struck a pose, “Oh - and could you be a doll and grab my poodle skirt. It’s hanging on my door.”

Nina retreated to Vinya’s room and then stopped and stared. Vinya had indeed plastered the place with soundproofing. Multiple microphones lay on the bed, along with a large rectangular case with an Apple logo. What really caught Nina’s eye, however, was the four posters on the wall – all old music artists.

Janis Joplin, Jimmi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, Amy Winehouse.

Nina didn’t know them well, and none of them looked particularly like Vinya’s type of music. None of them looked particularly happy, either. They just stared out at her with empty, hungry eyes.

“It’s on the knob,” Vinya shouted, bringing Nina back to reality. She found the chartreuse poodle skirt hanging on the doorknob. It was in the classic style, but instead of being on a leash, the poodle was chomping on an electric cord and its skeleton was shown in x-ray.

Nina gave it to Vinya, holding it by two fingers as if it might bite. “Funny...Sick, but funny.”

“Hey, I think Skeletor’s cute.” Vinya slipped out of her jeans and into the skirt, “And it gets me in and out of Brill-world alive. Now, let’s talk about...whatever that is you’re wearing. Don’t you have anything more, I don’t know, you?”

“What do you mean by that?” Nina protested, “I mean, this is kinda me.”

“No,” Vinya scolded. “It’s you hiding behind some preppy nonsense. Whenever I see you bumming around, you’re wearing something Star Trek or Spider-Man or whatever.”

“Yeah, but it’s a *date*.” Nina said, “I don’t want to blow the whole nerd thing all at once and Isaiah always said they made me look childish.”

Vinya responded with a melodramatic feigned dry heave. “Sorry, it’s just a reflex action when you mention your ex.” She looked up and down, then sighed. “Okay, I have like five minutes to get out of here, but you totally need to ‘blow the whole nerd thing all at once.’ Hold on.”

Vinya took off running up the stairs, leaving Nina in the basement.

“Where are you going?”

“Your closet,” Vinya yelled from somewhere up above, “Beam me up, Scotty, and set phasers to *stun*.”

Nina shook her head. Living with Vinya was going to be even more of a trip than she thought. While she waited, something about Vinya’s bedroom drew her back. All the posters and their big hollow eyes.

Then the sound of stilettos came clicking down the stairs with more speed than Nina thought possible, and Vinya was suddenly outside the bedroom door, staring at her and holding a stack of t-shirts. Somehow, she’d found all of the stuff that Nina only wore to conventions and fandom events.

“Girl,” Vinya said, gawking, “How did you not tell me that you own the sickest collection of graphic tees known to humanity? I am going to borrow *all* of this stuff. Now let’s get to work.”

7:29 P.M.

“Turn left,” the old GPS unit groaned.

Aiden cranked the wheel of his old Ford pickup, and the rig rumbled off the main road into Nina’s neighborhood. Even as nervous as he was about the date, he couldn’t help but look at the graffiti-stained houses.

What a dump.

He knew Fairlington was a rough part of town, but he hadn’t ever been down here. The idea of two single women living in this place made him think Nina must was either totally fearless or dangerously reckless.

Or both.

Those two traits had a way of going together, especially among newsies. Himself included.

That was another reason he normally never mixed work and pleasure. No relationship needed two people who were both that nuts.

Yet, here he was, picking up a newsie for his first proper date in at least five years – which was either crazy brave or stupid reckless.

Or both.

He pulled up to what the GPS told him was Nina’s house and thought he must have come to the wrong place. No way in hell Nina would live in that kind of hole. He’d pictured her more in a nice suburban apartment complex - something a little more suited to her Appleton sensibilities. Honestly, that would have made him feel a little more comfortable about her safety - which he was scolding himself for worrying about at all.

He threw the car into park and reached for his phone, but then he looked up and saw Nina waiting on her front steps. At least, he thought it was Nina. The woman sitting here didn’t look a thing like the cub reporter in the perfect blouse-and-slacks ensemble. This was something completely different.

He couldn't help but trace her up from her red Converse sneakers to the tight blue jeans, then the faded denim jacket, and finally to the black t-shirt with a huge picture of Kitty Pryde from the X-Men - labeled in huge yellow letters.

It took everything Aiden had not to sit and stare. Somehow, he found the mental capacity to open his door and get out of the truck.

Nina got up to greet him. "Well, look who decided to show up."

Aiden chuckled. "I am not a smart man, Miss Constantinos, but I ain't never backed down on a dare." He opened the truck door and helped Nina into the passenger seat.

"Nice truck," she said, looking around the cab, "I'm guessing it's what, a ninety-five?"

Aiden's heart almost stopped. "Ninety-four."

"Close enough," Nina yanked the door shut herself. "So, cowboy, are you going to tell me where we're going, or do I have to play twenty questions? You should know better than to set yourself up for an interrogation with a reporter."