

Chapter Thirteen, Part Two “Seeing Red”

Thursday, March 18, 2038
Thirteen Days Until Interview
10:28 P.M.

Nina took Aiden’s hand and climbed down out of his truck, clicking her new white stilettos on the pavement and slipping a hand around his waist. He felt warm and strong and definitively not like Isaiah.

“You know,” she said. “I would not have taken you for that good of a swing dancer.”

“You weren’t bad yourself.” He laughed and pulled her closer, and she felt even warmer.

She’d worn a black skirt and paired it with a V-neck Star Trek T-shirt that Vinya had repeatedly assured her wasn’t too small.

I can totally do this right now, she thought, shushing the part of her brain telling her otherwise.

Besides, it wasn’t like she was under any pressure. She’d expected Aiden to wait until at least the third date to try anything stupid – and he was trying so hard to play the good guy. Any hijinks tonight were all on her.

Besides, it wasn’t like she was a virgin or anything.

But still...the second date?

Yes. Definitely.

“So,” Aiden said, as they reached the front door of the darkened house, “I guess this is where I kiss you good night?”

He leaned down and gave her a slow kiss, which she made a point of lengthening while she fished her keychip out of her purse. Then she grabbed his hair and kissed him harder. “Oh,” she said, “you’re not going anywhere.”

She shoved the chip in the lock, and the door unlatched. She shoved the door open with her free hand, and they stumbled into the living room.

Then a voice came from somewhere outside her head.

“The hell?”

She let go of Aiden and saw Vinya sprawled on the living room couch, staring wide-eyed as an episode of *StormLight* played on her tablet.

“Gosh, V,” Nina said, unable to stop breathing heavily, “I’m so sorry!”.

“No, my bad!” Vinya shot off the couch and darted toward the basement stairs. “Carry on, I own the best noise-canceling headphones known to man.”

Nina turned back to Aiden. “Sorry, where were we?”

She pulled him back into her and started inching backward toward the stairs.

Aiden kissed her again, then stopped. “You sure?”

She nodded her head vigorously. Of course she was sure - and the part of her that still wasn’t sure after three hard lemonades didn’t need his help.

She shut him up by nibbling at his lower lip, then pulled herself tight against him. He tasted like sweat and cheap cologne, a marked improvement on Isaiah – who’d usually tasted like hair gel. She ran both hands through his hair before leading him up the stairs.

If this was what being bad felt like, Nina could definitely get used to it.

They knocked over Nina’s Spock cutout on the way into the bedroom, and she practically hurled Aiden down on the new double bed. That was when she realized that her iWindow was still on, scent features and all.

“Do I smell pancakes?” Aiden asked.

“Trill Honeygrass,” she said, climbing into the bed on top of him, “Star Trek stuff.” The last thing she wanted him focused on was her nerdery.

People did this, right?

She started kissing him again, but then he grabbed her by the biceps and moved her off him.

“Something about this isn’t right.” He took a sharp breath to calm himself. “You’re hesitating. Why are you doing this?”

The room around Nina snapped into view, and thanks to the alcohol, it was spinning. This was a horrible time to stop and think. She blinked and tried to re-engage.

“I’m doing it because I want to.”

She reached to kiss him again, but he softly grabbed her hand and moved it away from his face. For a second, they just sat there.

Aiden shook his head and guided her back down onto the bed. “This isn’t you.”

“Maybe you just don’t know me that well,” she protested, trying to sound playful.

“I know enough to know you’re not that kind of girl.”

Nina took a deep breath. Why did he have to be right?

“Maybe I want to be that kind of girl for once. I’m tired of just being...” She gestured to the assorted Trek memorabilia scattered around the room, “just being this.”

Aiden got to his feet and stood the Spock cutout back up.

“Did it ever occur to you that I like you *because* of all this?”

Nina struggled for a response, then took another breath as the alcohol swirled in her brain. “I know. I just...Can I not be the good girl for once? My last boyfriend was a realtor with a Golden Retriever whose business cards said, ‘Bringing Appleton Home.’ He thought innocent-Appleton-me was too edgy. I...I don’t know...I want to be the type of girl who gets mixed up with the dangerous, hot camera guy.”

“Then you don’t know *me* that well,” Aiden’s jaw tightened. “If I wanted cheap sex, I know where to get it without paying for dinner.”

Nina laid down on the bed, her stomach starting to gurgle. Was this really happening? Aiden Healy was calling *her* out for going too fast?

“Sorry,” she muttered, “I just...I thought you’d...”

She failed to finish the sentence, mostly because the feeling in her stomach was getting far more visceral.

“Aiden,” she picked up her train of thought, “Do you still want to go out on a third date?”

He cracked his knuckles and walked back her direction. “Yes, just not like this.”

Nina nodded and pulled herself into a sitting position. “Good, because I think I’m about to throw up.”

Sinéad was still staring at the phone in the dark. It was too late to call, way too late, but she couldn’t stop. There was nothing else to think about. Emma had gone to bed hours ago, and Sinéad’s attempt to put herself to sleep reading *A Game of Thrones* had come to a screeching halt when the book’s hero was beheaded.

So, now she was back to staring at the stupid phone.

She threw the phone down on her bed and rolled over. Maybe she should just try going to sleep for real.

Then she heard a soft beeping noise. No, wait...it wasn’t beeping, that was a ringing.

Eff.

Sinéad rolled over and grabbed the phone. Sure enough, she'd accidentally pressed "Send."

It rang again.

"Go to voicemail!" she whispered, "go to voicemail!"

The last thing she needed was to introduce herself to her birth mother by ringing the poor woman out of bed and scaring her half to death.

Another ring.

Maybe Skyler was up late writing a research paper and this was going to break her train of thought and frustrate her and she wouldn't be able to submit her findings.

No, wait, who did that?

Nobody...well, Sinéad did that in college so maybe it was in the genes...although mostly that was the study drugs.

Fourth ring.

"Calm down," she whispered to herself, "Calm down, calm down, calm down."

The phone mercifully beeped over to voicemail.

"This is Skyler. I'm away from the phone right now but there are like three of you who have this number for emergencies, so rest assured that I will get back to you promptly unless – Dad – you're calling my emergency line *yet again* just to lecture me about how much I suck. In that case, take a long walk off a short pier. Bye!"

The phone beeped again and Sinéad raised her eyebrows. That wasn't what she'd expected. Then again, what exactly does one expect from a woman who has their professor's baby and then leaves it with their thesis supervisor.

Sinéad realized that she'd left three seconds of dead-air on the voicemail. Should she say something or just hang up? Definitely hang up – call back at a normal hour. That's what a civilized person would do. But would she actually have the guts to call back? Probably not. She'd already launched this screw-up – so she might as well finish.

Deep breath.

“Hi Skyler. This is....this is Sinéad...your daughter. We need to talk.”

Aiden slammed his truck door and exhaled. So *that* was what happened when the innocent ones lost control.

Holy crap.

Nina was going through a major life change, and he was caught in the middle of it. How could he not have thought about it? She probably wouldn't even like him once she stabilized and didn't need someone to hold her hair while she vomited. Nice girls always went looking for another Golden Retriever in the end.

He turned the ignition.

“Enjoying your spiral of self-pity,” a voice interrupted his thoughts.

“What the hell?” he spat, almost jumping out of the car.

Vinya Jain was in the passenger seat, her bioluminescent highlights bathing the cab in soft blue light.

“Really?” Vinya said, “You leave your truck unlocked with all the weirdos in this neighborhood? It's not my fault you can't see past your nose.”

Aiden let out an exasperated sigh. “I'm distracted, and it's not like you made yourself obvious.”

She responded with a death-stare. “I have glow-in-the-dark hair, moron.”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “If memory serves, you also own the best noise-canceling headphones known to man.”

“I said I own them, not that I’d use them.”

“What do you want?” Aiden shot back, taking a jab at the steering wheel. Nina had put him through enough tonight, and he really did *not* want to deal with her crazy-chick roommate.

Vinya seemed taken aback by the outburst. Was this not how normal people responded to radical invasions of privacy?

“I want to know if you’re gonna stick around,” she said. “Nina’s not exactly in her happy place at the moment.”

“No s***.” Aiden retorted, “I’m the one dating her.”

“And I live with her.” Vinya exhaled. “Nina’s my best friend in this city. Holding her together right now is hard enough. So, if you’re gonna flake off, do it now.”

“Holding her together?” Aiden spat. “That’s not how D.C. works. You either learn to hack it or you leave.”

That finally seemed to pierce Vinya’s façade, and she looked down at the glowing red laces on her sneakers.

“Yeah, maybe,” she said, “but she’s used to having a town and a tribe to help her along. I know what it’s like to have that and then not have it anymore.”

“Right.” Aiden gripped the wheel harder. “You look like you know small town America real well.”

“I get more than you think,” Vinya said, venom in her voice. “I’ve lived in this town like three months, and I get that D.C. is just a bunch of people running from something. People come here to chase dreams, and you don’t drop your life and move to dream-town unless someone put a big enough hole in you that you can’t stay wherever you came from.”

Aiden glared at her, but Vinya wasn't wrong.

"My family thinks I'm an embarrassment," she continued, as if she was trying to prove her own point. "They don't get my music, they're scared of my psych meds, and they keep telling me I need to get a 'real job' no matter how much money I make. In high school, my big sister Yasha tried to slit her wrists to get away from all the drama – and she was the only one that stuck up for me, so apparently I wasn't worth sticking around for. I didn't see how much I'd let it all shake me up until one day, in college, I woke up half-naked on a couch I didn't recognize – and then I realized that I didn't remember how I got covered in glitter and Froot Loops. I keep a photo of Amy Winehouse on my wall to remind myself that it's worth living past 27."

Aiden took a deep breath. "Okay, you win. I get it. Now will you please get out of my truck?"

"That depends," Vinya said, "on what exactly you plan on doing with my friend's heart."

Aiden fixed her gaze. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Then we understand each other," Vinya said. There was a tense silence for a few seconds before Vinya spoke again. "It was a girl that messed you up, wasn't it?"

"What?" Aiden raised an eyebrow.

Vinya opened the door and climbed out of the cab. "Like I said, everyone here is running from something. You'll have to tell me about her some time."

Madison felt glass crunch under her heels as she opened the refrigerator and stuffed it full of Diet Cokes from a Walgreens bag. After all, she was going to have to drink *something*. Also, she was probably going to have to address all the shattered bottles and whiskey on the floor – which was starting to stink – but she'd call someone for that later. Right now, she had bigger fish to fry, and she *really* wanted a smoke.

She fished into the bag holding the rest of her drugstore run and ripped open the pack of Nicorette gum. This crap had better work.

Chomping down on the first piece of it, she could feel the edge coming off. It wasn't the same, but it would do in a pinch.

Steam was starting to billow out of the bathroom, and Madison grabbed the two plastic boxes out of a fancier paper bag. Her colorist was going to kill her, but supposedly this semi-permanent stuff had gotten really good in the last few years. It only needed to hold a week until she could get a proper appointment.

Besides, the brilled-up college kid working at Sephora has *assured* Madison that her friend Babs had gotten *ah-mazing* results by layering two treatments over one another.

If only that pimple-faced innocent had known her advice was about to get field-tested on national TV.

Madison stripped, entered the shower, and spent the next half-hour slowly working both tubes of glop into her hair. The colors circling the drain made it look like someone was murdering a muppet, but in desperate times, one had to put their faith in the advice of people like Babs.

Eventually, the last bits of Elmo puree spiraled down the drain, and the water was clear and warm and crisp. Whatever had just happened, it was done.

Madison turned off the faucet, stepped out onto the tile, and stared at her fogged-up mirror. She was not at all sure she wanted to see the results, and the adrenaline she'd been running on for the last few hours was starting to wear off.

Every drop of alcohol in the apartment had been shattered or flushed down the toilet. Five packs of cigarettes had been run down the kitchen garbage disposal in a cathartic rage, and now Madison had probably done something horrifying to her hair.

Maybe this was all a bad idea. Most decisions made while enraged and throwing things were bad.

Madison reached a tentative hand toward the mirror and wiped away the fog. The ghost staring back at her almost made her skin crawl. Getting used to that was going to take time.

The temporary color had worked. Maybe a little too well.

The woman in the mirror was a mirage, and Madison knew that the color would fade without professional help – just like she knew that in the morning she would be aching and twitching from withdrawals. Tonight, however, the deep auburn looked almost like it had never been touched by bleach.

“Well, hello, Maddy,” Madison said to the mirror, “It’s been a while.”