

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

NICOLA LAY ON her stomach on Laurie's bed, her new laptop—a gift from Laurie, dainty and too expensive—propped on the embroidered coverlet. Beside her, Laurie sat upright, his legs crossed, his knee touching her elbow. He'd done that a lot since the attack, reflexively seeking near-constant physical contact, small touches to reassure himself. His attention was fixed on the wall-mounted flat-panel television. He watched it intently, barely stirring or blinking.

Nicola glanced up at the screen and grinned. "I haven't seen this since 1986," she said. "It's as monstrously stupid as I remember."

"Yeah, but it's also kind of awesome, right? Post-apocalyptic teen orphans on roller skates. That's storytelling gold." Laurie pointed at the screen. "Look at her outfit. That off-the-shoulder, sun-faded jersey. Is that the sort of thing you wore in the eighties?"

"Eh, sort of. Not too far off, at least. The skates and shorts would have pushed it over the edge." She squinted at the screen, at Jami Gertz looking all frizzy-haired and grim and lovely. "Is any of this useful for your collection?"

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“Probably not. Almost certainly not. But I’m never sure where I’m going to find inspiration, so it’s good to watch and read everything I can.”

He shifted, stretching out his legs and flexing his feet. Copper polish glinted on his bare toenails. He was still in his work clothes, tight bronze leather pants and a fluffy black angora sweater with a huge hood that draped all the way down to his lower back. His hair was tinted the color of the midday sun, and his makeup was flawless. He balanced his broken wrist on one thigh, the plaster cast covered by a wide leather cuff with shiny gold buckles.

She couldn’t look at his wrist without feeling a weird pang in her chest. “When you’re done with *Solarbabies*, maybe we should think about dinner. My treat, provided you pick someplace cheap-ish.”

Laurie shook his head without turning his attention from the screen. “We’ll have something delivered, it’s easier that way. Or you can run out and fetch me something.”

“You know I’m your partner, not your assistant, right?” When Laurie didn’t answer, Nicola shot him a sidelong glance. “You haven’t been getting out much lately.”

“I know. It’s no big deal. I’m not in much danger of becoming a recluse, if that’s what you’re fretting about.” He shrugged. “I’m not going to start storing my urine in jars in the refrigerator or whatever. I just haven’t felt very social, that’s all.”

She wanted to say something more, reassure him he was safe, that no one was going to kidnap him or hurt him again, then thought it was best to stay quiet. She returned her attention to the laptop screen.

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They worked in silence. Laurie watched his crappy movie with keen attention; Nicola sorted her way through Laurie's cluttered inbox.

"This might be something," she said. "Your manager forwarded a letter from some tech guru in Palo Alto. Paul Izumi. Runs a startup called Black Lion. He has a proposition."

"Anything good?"

"I can't tell. His email is pretty comprehensively crazypants, but I think he's just enthusiastic, not insane," Nicola said. "He's applying CGI techniques to the fashion world. 3D virtual runways. He wants to use your designs in his presentation to investors."

"Why me? Tech people usually aren't my demographic."

"His wife's a former Miss Oregon. She's a model in the Bay Area, and she loves your clothes. You interested in what he's doing?"

Laurie was about to answer, probably in the negative, when the chirp of his phone alerted him to an incoming text. After a furious hunt around his bed, he located it under a gold velvet throw pillow. He checked his messages, frowned at the screen for what seemed like a long time, and carefully placed his phone on his bedside table. He stared at the television, his brow creased, his expression distant.

"Was that anything important?" Nicola asked.

A quick headshake. "Nope." A pause, then he cleared his throat. "You know what, you're right. We should go out. Being social might do me some good."

Laurie could change his mood or his mind with baffling speed, but even so, this seemed abrupt. "Ah... sure. What are you up for?"

"I know a place," Laurie said. "This isn't going to be dinner, though. It's a bar. So they only have bar food, not real food."

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“What’s up?” Nicola asked. “Does this have anything to do with the text you just got?”

Laurie shrugged, which was as much of an affirmation as she’d get from him. “We probably won’t stay long. We can go out for dinner afterward.” He crawled off the bed, then glanced at her jeans and ragged sweater. “You might want to change. I still have Joelle’s dress, the one you wore to the Emmy party.”

“I’m fine like this. I’m not wearing a dress. It’s thirty degrees outside, and I haven’t shaved my legs since October.”

Laurie wrinkled his nose. “The first part of your argument is irrelevant, but I’ll accept the second. Can I at least do your makeup?”

“Not unless you let me do yours,” Nicola said. This shut Laurie up, as she knew it would.

A quick call to the ever-efficient concierge desk downstairs, and a town car was waiting out front by the time they reached the lobby. It was a chilly night, with sparkling white whiskers of frost creeping across the sidewalk. Nicola bundled Laurie into the sumptuous leather backseat, then climbed in after him. He’d thrown on a belted coat, something luxurious and ridiculous in soft black fur that made him look like a fluffy kitten. “You’re not wearing mink, are you?” she asked.

“I love fur. I love small, fuzzy animals more,” Laurie said. “It’s synthetic. If I stand too close to a heat source, I’ll go up in flames.”

Nicola fell silent. Laurie smirked. “You were all set to give me a lecture about wearing fur, weren’t you?”

“Nope. I was searching for a punch line about you and ‘flaming’ that wouldn’t seem too egregiously offensive.”

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He grinned and shot a slim middle finger at her, the gesture crude and childish and, because it came from immaculate Laurie, hilarious.

The ride was silent and serene. The car sailed down dark avenues lit by glittering skyscrapers to a two-story brick house in Alphabet City. The windows were shuttered, and there was no sign out front. It didn't look much like a bar, or any kind of business at all. Laurie breezed up the crumbling stairs and yanked open the door.

A small, cramped room, battered wood floors and eggplant-colored walls, bronze chandeliers dangling from the low ceiling. Tiny wood tables and frail chairs, a long bar against the brick wall. It was all decaying elegance, dusty velvet drapes and candlelight and shadows, less aggressively sleek than Laurie's usual haunts. The clientele, at least, consisted of his kind of people, i.e. ethereal young men, all of them nearly as lovely as Laurie himself. The crowd was a sea of high cheekbones and chiseled jaws and great skin.

The bartender was about Nicola's age, though he was beautiful enough to blend in with this crowd, with thick, wavy hair and sculpted forearms. Upon spotting Laurie, he immediately came over to their end of the bar. "He's still here. Upstairs," he said.

Laurie nodded. "Thanks, Mike," he said. "Something red and fancy for Nicola, and... do you know what I had here last time? Champagne and something you said was made from flowers?"

"Elderflower liqueur. Sure."

Standing on his toes, Laurie rested his elbows on the bar and leaned forward to watch Mike fix their drinks. "So... who's he with?" he asked, his voice low.

Mike shrugged. "Some guy. I haven't seen him here before."

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Laurie frowned. "Is it a date? Could you tell? Does the guy look like someone he'd date?"

"Couldn't tell you. The guy doesn't look like you, and that's really all I can say about it." Mike slid their drinks across the bar.

Laurie passed what looked like a healthy wad of cash over to Mike, then picked up his champagne flute. Goblet of red wine in hand, Nicola followed him over to the stairs at the far end of the room. "Pretty big tip for two drinks," she said.

"I can afford it. And Mike's a good guy."

"And he did you a favor tonight, didn't he?" The stairs were made of wide slats of wood, unfinished and uneven. She could see through the gaps to the tables below, which was unnerving. "Care to fill me in? Who are we stalking?"

"Hmm?" Laurie assumed his most angelic expression. It was an expression Nicola saw a lot, and it was an expression she never, ever believed.

"The bartender sent that text to let you know someone was here. So who are we stalking?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Laurie said. He glanced around furtively. "Let's sit, shall we?"

The upstairs area was cramped and dark. A long violet leather banquette bench ran the length of three walls, with small tables and chairs spaced along it. Laurie took Nicola's wrist and pulled her down into a seat at an empty table. He slithered onto the bench across from her and hunched into his fur coat, his head down.

Nicola glanced around. Ah. There. Amazing cheekbones and dark plastic-rimmed glasses. Tall, slender and elegant. She hadn't seen him since that day at the hospital, when she'd hardly been in the best frame of mind, but she recognized him at once.

"We're stalking Jonathan, aren't we?"

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“Hush. Yes.”

Jonathan wasn't alone. Seated across from him was a man with prematurely white hair, a pointy face, and very tan skin. He was impeccably dressed in a gray suit; Jonathan was more casual in a black sweater. They leaned close to each other, though the noise level was such that the intimacy was probably necessary to carry on a conversation. “I don't know who he's with. Does it look like they're on a date?”

“I don't know, Laurie.”

“He's so old.” Laurie's small mouth pulled into a grim line.

“Please. He can't be much older than I am.” Nicola sipped her wine. Rich and complex. Hanging out with Laurie had upgraded her palate.

“And if you were dating Jonathan, I'd have a big problem with it.” Laurie looked gloomy.

“If it's a date, you have no business getting pissy about it. You're no longer a couple. And you dated Galen, remember?”

She was sorry she'd brought that up. Laurie's face darkened. “I slept with Galen,” he said, his tone brittle and bitter. He looked down at the table and swirled his champagne in the glass. “He called me yesterday.”

“Galen?”

Laurie nodded and didn't say anything. Nicola raised her eyebrows. “Ballsy of him. What'd he have to say?”

“Dunno. Don't care. I didn't pick up the phone, he didn't leave a message.” Laurie took a drink. “Maybe he wants to apologize, maybe he accidentally butt-dialed me. Doesn't matter. I don't ever want to talk to him.”

“Can't say I blame you.” Nicola glanced over at Jonathan's table. “Are we going to go over and say howdy?”

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“Hadn’t planned on it.”

“So... we’re just going to sit here and watch them?”

“Yep.”

“This is a little too junior high for me, Laurie,” Nicola said. “If you want to get back with Jonathan, you could just call him, you know. Ask him out for dinner, see what he says.”

“I can’t. He’d say no.” Laurie’s eyes went wide, and he looked frightened and young. “I just wanted to see him again, that’s all.”

His phone chirped. Laurie looked at it, winced, and passed it over. Nicola read the text: YOU ARE NOT AT ALL INCONSPICUOUS, YOU KNOW.

She glanced up and saw Jonathan frowning in their general direction. He said something to his white-haired companion, then gestured for Laurie and Nicola to come over. “I think we’ve been busted,” she said.

If Laurie felt sheepish about this, he didn’t show it. He approached Jonathan’s table, radiating careless nonchalance. “Hey, Jonathan. Fancy meeting you here. I didn’t want to disturb you if you were in the middle of something.”

“Laurie. How are you?” Jonathan asked.

“Fine. Great. Couldn’t be better. You know Nicola.”

“Of course. Good seeing you.” Jonathan rose to kiss Nicola on the cheek. His lips were cold, and he smelled expensive and tasteful.

Laurie turned to the white-haired man and stuck out his hand. “Hi. I’m Laurie.”

The man shook his hand. “Sure. I know who you are. That MTV show that Jonathan was on. *NYC Elite*, was that it?”

“This is Dominick. I’ve been temping at his PR firm,” Jonathan said. His cheeks flushed. “We were just grabbing a drink after work.”

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Nicola thought Dominick looked irked by the faint emphasis that this wasn't a date. The genial expression returned to his face so quickly she might've imagined it. Jonathan continued: "Dom, this is my... well, I suppose you know Laurie. And that's Nicola, his business partner."

"Nice to meet you, Nicola." A firm handshake. "Laurie Sparks. You've been in the news a lot lately. Some kind of trouble, what was it?"

Laurie raised his chin. "I was kidnapped by a murderer. Nicola rescued me."

"Right, that rich lawyer guy, the one who killed those models. I heard about that." Dominick nodded at Nicola. "Nice going."

She hadn't rescued Laurie—Detective Tally had saved them both—but this was the version he preferred, so she wouldn't contradict it. "Thanks."

Dominick examined Laurie. The avid curiosity in his face made Nicola understand why Laurie hadn't felt social lately. "Care to join us?"

"If you don't mind, thanks." Laurie snagged an empty chair from a nearby table and plopped it next to Dominick. Jonathan looked wary, but he shifted over on the leather bench to make room for Nicola.

Despite the potential for awkwardness, conversation flowed easily. That was a relief; when Laurie was in a mood to misbehave, he could be horrid. Tonight, he was bubbly and delightful. From Dominick's charmed, rapt expression, Nicola saw he was smitten. This was a common reaction to meeting Laurie for the first time. Nicola used to find this less unsettling, before Joel Sutton had seen him, become fascinated by him, and tried to destroy him. Dominick seemed okay, though, both charismatic and engaging. A little shady,

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maybe, but he probably wasn't a murderer. He told some juicy tales about the PR industry, about managing publicity for one of the big Vegas casinos before moving to New York.

Jonathan was still a cipher to Nicola, polite and friendly but guarded. He sipped his wine and hid on the fringes of the conversation, observing the interaction between Dominick and Laurie with cautious interest. Nicola was surprised when he suddenly turned to her. "So why are you and Laurie here tonight?" Behind his glasses, his eyes were very blue. "Coincidence?"

A spike of irritation at the question. She was loyal to Laurie, but she had no wish to get caught in a dumb lie. "You'd have to ask him."

"Oh, it's no coincidence," Laurie said archly. Because he was tiny and whippet-slim, he was already a wee bit drunk. "I have a network of spies all over town, monitoring your movements."

A corner of Jonathan's mouth quirked up. "That's creepy."

"It's only fair. You spied on me, after all."

Jonathan's brows drew together below the frames of his glasses. "I most certainly did not," he said.

"You did. You skulked around the hospital after I got attacked, but you didn't let me know you were there. I call that spying."

Jonathan glared at Nicola. It took her a minute to figure out the cause of his pique. "Hey, I didn't tell him."

"It was my mom. She gave you a ride to the hospital, of course she was going to tell me," Laurie said. "Why didn't you see me? It was the worst day of my life, and I thought you didn't care enough to visit."

Jonathan fell silent, regarding Laurie with that same cautious expression. He turned to Nicola again. "Has he eaten lately?"

BIAS CUT

“You don’t need to talk about me like I’m not here, you know.” Laurie sounded sulky and petulant.

“No, but you never remember whether you’ve eaten or not,” Jonathan said. “And too often the answer is Not.”

“He probably hasn’t. He was at his studio all day, and then we were working at his place before coming here,” Nicola said.

“I could eat,” Jonathan said. “Should we find dinner?”

Dominick cleared his throat. “I’ve got plans, so I’ll bow out. It’s been a pleasure.” He shook Nicola’s hand, then clasped Laurie’s hand in both of his. “Nice meeting you, Laurie. Glad Nicola rescued you. You seem like you’re probably worth saving.”

Outside the bar, they parted ways with Dominick. Nicola hailed a taxi. They all piled into the backseat, Laurie wedged in the middle, and headed uptown. Nicola glanced over at Laurie and Jonathan, both so young and so lovely, and felt a fierce, shameful stab of envy. Jonathan was Laurie’s physical equal, his soulmate, his once-and-future lover, and Nicola was an interloper at this party.

Laurie yawned elaborately and snuggled against her, leaning his head on her shoulder. She slipped an arm around him, feeling the softness of his fluffy, ridiculous coat under her fingers. “Tired, kiddo?”

“Mmph. Famished, too,” he said, the words mangled by another yawn. His eyes closed.

Jonathan’s gaze was fixed on the leather cuff covering Laurie’s cast. He looked up, and over Laurie’s head, his eyes locked with Nicola’s. His expression mirrored her own. For the first time, she felt a visceral, near-tangible moment of connection with him.

They ate at a crowded diner on Broadway, not far from Laurie’s building. They sat in a doll-sized booth, with Nicola squeezed up against Laurie, separated from Jonathan by a table barely larger

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than her laptop. Because the boys were young and had strong stomachs, Laurie ordered waffles and ice cream while Jonathan ate fries topped with gravy. Because Nicola was old, she had soup.

“So.” Jonathan cleared his throat. “How’s the collection going?”

“Fine. It’s great. It’s fabulous.” Laurie sounded defensive.

“You’re still doing that whole post-apocalyptic theme?”

“Post-nuclear. But it’s set thirty years after the bombs, so it’s not like everything’s still ruined. I bet the world would be mostly okay.”

Nicola smiled. “Your apocalyptic fetish always surprises me,” she said. “It tickles me to no end to think of you trudging across a post-apocalyptic wasteland, desperately trying to find champagne.”

Laurie looked disgruntled. “I’d probably do just fine in a nuclear wasteland. I’m tougher than I look.”

Nicola raised her water glass in a toast. “That you are, kiddo.”

Laurie leaned across the table and addressed Jonathan. “Here’s my thought,” he said. “It might be a really good thing that I ran into you.”

“Or that you were stalking me, whichever,” Jonathan said.

Laurie ignored him. “Because I still don’t have an assistant. If you’re just temping now... You could always take your old job back.” He looked uncertain, almost shy. “I could pay you more, if you wanted. I could pay you whatever you want.”

Jonathan stared at him. He was suddenly very still and distant, a statue carved in ice. “Is that what you really want?”

“No. I mean...” Laurie’s voice broke. He cleared his throat, and his usual confidence returned. “I want you to move back in with me. I want us to go back to the way we were, before I screwed things up by being awful to you.”

BIAS CUT

Jonathan was silent. Sitting beside Laurie, Nicola wanted to be anywhere else in the world. Rome. Madagascar. Madagascar might be nice.

“I quit the show, did you know that? I know that caused so many problems between us,” Laurie said. “And I’ve grown up a lot over the past few months, I really have. Nicola can tell you that. It’d work out better this time, I promise.”

There was a pleading note to his tone that Nicola hated to hear. Jonathan shifted in the booth, then shook his head.

“I love you more than I will ever love anyone. I’m sure you know that,” Jonathan said. “But you’re a force of nature. It’s like being in love with a hurricane. It’s wonderful, but it makes me feel... insignificant.”

“I’m sorry,” Laurie said. “I don’t mean to.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s not anything to feel sorry about. It’s just who you are, and right now, I need more time away from it.”

Laurie wanted to argue, Nicola could see that in his face, and she braced for tears or tantrums or some combination of the two. Instead, he exhaled and nodded once.

“What can I do?” he asked. His voice was small and miserable.

“Give me some space,” Jonathan said. “This temp gig lasts through the end of the year. If you haven’t hired anyone by January, we’ll talk.”

“I won’t have hired anyone,” Laurie said.

Jonathan smiled, dazzling but fleeting. “Yeah. I know,” he said.

They finished their meal in silence. Jonathan walked with them back to Laurie’s building. “I’ll leave you here,” he said to Laurie. “Nicola, which train are you catching?”

“Nicola’s sleeping over,” Laurie said. “We still have a lot of work to do for my collection.”

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Both statements were accurate, if wholly unrelated. They wouldn't do any more work tonight. They'd camp out in his luxurious living room drink too much champagne. Laurie would mope about Jonathan, and she'd distract him with eighties movies and Duran Duran videos, and they'd have a nice time.

It seemed like Jonathan could probably guess all this, because the look that crossed over his beautiful face was, Nicola could swear, envy. It passed in a moment, and then he smiled.

"Okay, then," he said. He gave Nicola a hug, which was bony and awkward but very nice, before turning his attention to Laurie. Laurie clutched his shoulders; Jonathan buried his nose in his hair. They rocked in place for a moment, then Jonathan released him.

"Okay," Jonathan said again, and with a small wave, he walked off.

Laurie looked forlorn. Nicola draped an arm around him and squeezed his shoulders. "Someday, kiddo," she said. "You'll be back with him someday."

"Not tonight," Laurie said.

"Not tonight, no."

They stood like that for a moment, bathed in the streetlights and listening to the traffic noises from nearby Central Park West. Nicola drew away first. "It's freezing out here," she said. "Let's go back inside and finish *Solarbabies*."

"Excellent plan," Laurie said.

They entered the warm lobby, the uniformed night doorman touching his cap and greeting them by name, and left the cold night behind them.