Titles by Laurel Osterkamp

Following My Toes
Starring in the Movie of My Life
The Holdout
The Next Breath
The Standout
Just Like the Bronte Sisters
Favorite Daughters
Beautiful Little Furies

The Next Breath

LAUREL OSTERKAMP



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Prologue

My running shoes are soaked. And mud splatters my calves.

The morning was too dark to jog safely. But not too cold. Thirty degrees is my threshold, so I packed my sweats and my sneakers into an old Hoyt College gym bag and drove to my studio. After spending several hours turning an embroidered mother-of-the-bride dress into a sleek, belted cocktail jacket, it was time for a break.

Now, as my rubber soles slap damp pavement, I have a premonition. Things have been too calm, too stable. Dark clouds roll over Des Moines, and I can't shake off this growing unease. It's like that moment right before thunder growls, when the air turns heavy, pregnant with the promise of a storm. The faint yet distinct smell of wet earth snakes up my nostrils, fueling my apprehension, and humid March winds gust against my face. It's a harsh caress, yet not unpleasant. The sun breaks through a cloud, and I'm chased by shadows.

I pick up my pace.

When I arrive back at my studio, Nick waits, holding a takeout bag from Simmer & Slurp. "You went for a run?"

Joy pulses through me—my standard response upon seeing Nick. He's so cute, with his wavy dark hair falling over his mocha eyes. And that roguish grin that weakens my knees.

"My third one this week." I give him a quick peck on the cheek, aware of my salty, sweaty scent.

He wrinkles his nose, amused. "You stink."

I swat his shoulder. "And you're mean. But you brought me soup, so you're also forgiven."

He smiles and takes in my disheveled state as I unlock my door and let us in.

"You're lucky you didn't slip on a patch of ice." Walking into my studio like he owns the place, he unpacks our food from the large brown paper bag. As I clear my worktable, he pulls out a container of soup for us each, plus two freshly baked sourdough rolls.

"There was no ice, only puddles of slush."

"Mmm." Nick gives me a crooked grin. "I can't decide if you're crazy, running in this weather, or if you're a badass."

"Uh huh. Keep wrestling with that while I change out of my sweaty clothes."

Nick shakes his head. "Don't change. I like the sweatsuit. I bet you looked like Rocky Balboa, running through downtown Des Moines. Did you go up any steps?"

I screw up my face. "Huh?"

His mouth drops open. "Rocky Balboa? The famous sports montage from *Rocky*?"

"Starring Sylvester Stallone?"

"That's the one."

I cross my arms over my chest. "You're saying I look like him?"

"Yeah."

When my mouth drops open in horrified shock, he chuckles. "Oh, come on. It's clear that you, in all your leggy-blonde glory, don't actually resemble the Italian Stallion. You're just both determined and scrappy."

"Right." I have no other answer, so I walk off to my bathroom. After closing the door behind me, I peel off my workout gear, splash lukewarm soapy water under my pits, reapply deodorant, and change back into today's outfit: a wide-necked gray sweater that slides off my shoulders, black stretch pants, and pink knee socks.

Then I rejoin Nick in my studio's workspace. "Thanks for bringing me lunch."

Since I no longer smell like car exhaust and perspiration, I give him a proper kiss.

His lips are warm and inviting, tasting faintly of the soup he just sampled. I pull back and smile. "Vegetable minestrone?"

He grins, surprised. "How did you know?"

"I'm a woman of many talents." I grab the container that smells like chicken and roasted tomatoes.

Nick looks me up and down. "Okay. Now that you changed clothes, you're more *Flashdance* than *Rocky."*

"Oh yeah?" I taste my soup, which makes my mouth water.

"Hey. How come no one talks about the Rocky/Flashdance rivalry?" Nick asks. "It's epic… Philadelphia versus Pittsburgh, boxing versus dancing, men versus women."

"I haven't seen either film, so I can't say."

"What?" His mouth drops open. "That's not right. They're both classics."

"I always meant to watch them. Just never got around to it."

"Well, tonight we'll remedy that." Nick looks at his watch. "I have a showing in twenty minutes, so I should go. Come over around six? Andrea's on her spring break trip, so we'll have the place to ourselves. I've got both movies on DVD. We'll watch them, and you can decide which one's better."

"You're assuming I don't already have plans?"

Nick leans in for a kiss. "That's right. I'm taking you for granted, Rocky."

"Who are you calling Rocky? You just said my look is more *Flashdance*."

"Uh huh. But your soul is more *Rocky*."

A laugh bubbles out of me. "And why is that?"

"You'll see." Nick's eyes glint as he puts on his jacket and hums the *Rocky* theme song. "Ba ba BUM, ba ba BUM, ba da ba da BA bum!" He jogs through my studio and out the front door.

All day, the memory of him singing and running makes me laugh.

Later, I arrive at his apartment. "I come bearing cheese steak," I say. "That's what they eat in Philadelphia, right?"

"Come in." Nick pulls me close. His kiss gives me a thrill. "Cheese steak sounds great. But we'll start with watching *Flashdance*. That takes place in Pittsburgh."

"Oh. What do they eat in Pittsburgh?"

Nick shrugs. "Steel, I guess."

I roll my eyes and poke his arm. My finger is met with firm muscle. "Such a comedian."

"Yeah. You love me for it."

My breath catches. Do I love Nick? The answer terrifies me.

Nick leads me into his living room, cozy and warm with the flickering light of his gas fireplace. After he plates our cheesesteaks and uncorks a bottle of wine, we settle in. Jennifer Beals rides her bike under a charcoal sky. Irene Cara sings.

Two hours later, we stretch, take a bathroom break, and move straight to *Rocky*. Everything's great until Nick pauses to make popcorn, and I look at my phone.

Thinking of you. It's the 20th in my time zone. Sending love.

I gasp. How could I forget? How could I be so cozy and oblivious, snuggling up to Nick and watching a double feature of movies about people sweating in cold, industrial cities? The revelation comes right as my earlier premonition makes sense.

It's time to break up with Nick.

We've been together almost three months. My adult relationships never last that long. Besides, I broke my *only-dating-assholes policy* just by dating him.

Nick emerges from the kitchen, holding a bowl of popcorn fresh from its microwave bag.

"Now, I don't want to sway you. But listen hard to the part about champions being contenders who don't give up, okay? Maybe then you'll get why I call you Rocky."

I spin towards him. "What?"

Nick sits back down next to me. "Earlier today? I said your soul is more like Rocky? I'm just saying, listen for that line."

My mouth falls open. I must grow pale. Nick places his hand

on my knee. "Are you okay?"

"I . . . umm, I should go home."

"Now? What about the iconic sports montage? You haven't lived until you've seen Rocky Balboa running up the steps."

"Then why'd we start with *Flashdance?*"

Nick shrugs. "Jennifer Beals is hot."

"You think?" As a fair-skinned blonde, I share few physical traits with Jennifer Beals. Jealousy surges through me. Oh, what does it matter? We're about to break up.

"Sure," Nick says. "But she's nothing compared to you."

Something inside me flips. Part of me believes him and leans into his words and the warmth of his hand on my knee. But another part of me—the damaged part—pulls away.

Nick senses my hesitation and confusion. "Can't you stay over? I'd like you to."

I blink several times, trying to see him for the man he is. "Nick, do you ever get scared?"

Nick's eyes search mine for a moment. His hand has moved from my knee to my fingers and clasps them like puzzle pieces fitting together. "Scared of what?"

"Loss. Heartache. Needing people."

"Yeah, of course. Everyone does."

"Not like me." I look away. "I'm a trainwreck."

"No, you're not."

His gaze is strong, compelling me to meet his eyes. "How do you know?"

"Because," he says, "you're the strongest person I know. You're just bad at asking for help."

My lips part—a silent cue for him to continue.

"You're a contender, a champion. And I"—he takes a deep breath—"I hope it isn't too soon to say this. I love you."

"Nick—"

He cuts me off with a kiss.

"Please stay?" he asks.

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of his words. My head spins, all my defenses caught off guard by his raw honesty and the sincerity in his eyes. His hand is warm around mine, steady and reassuring.

"Nick." My voice is a whisper against the thick tension wrapping around us.

"It's okay." His thumb rests against my chin. "And whatever's bothering you, you can tell me."

Pressing my foreheads to his, I let the revelation sink in. "I love you too. Nothing's bothering me. And yes, I'll stay."

He pulls me close. Desire swirls inside me as his lips move along mine. His kiss is patient but hungry—a mirror of contradicting emotions that matches my state of mind. I'm relieved and frightened all at once, but I don't pull away. I lean in deeper, surrendering to the sweet promise of his touch.

We pull and tug at each other's clothing until we're skin against skin. His hands travel along my spine, fingers tracing every ridge, every dip, and every scar like he's memorizing me. The air seems to crackle with electricity as his touch sends sparks through my veins. He pulls back only for a moment, just enough to look at me, his eyes dark with longing.

Then, a crooked smile lights up Nick's face. "I can't believe you're mine."

It's a statement, but I hear the uncertainty hidden beneath his words. Nick's hand cradles my face, the heat of his touch making me gasp.

"I am," I whisper, drawing circles on his chest, "all yours."

He kisses me again.

Later, we spoon on the couch. "Should we finish the movie?" Nick asks. "Or go to bed?"

"Don't we have to finish the movie?" I give him a soft jab with my elbow. "Something about not living until I've seen that sports montage?"

He chuckles. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Let me send a text, and then we'll watch the rest of *Rocky,* alright?"

Nick nods, his face guileless. Either he doesn't care who I'm texting, or he's a better actor than I am, with my fancy theater degree.

I'll call tomorrow. Miss you every day. XOXO.

"Everything okay?" Nick asks.

"Yeah."

He throws his arm around my shoulder, and I snuggle against him.

But my mind replays the last thirty minutes, making me oblivious to the film's dialogue or the soft rise and fall of Nick's chest against my side.

Nick loves me. He called me "Rocky."

Would he think I'm a champion if he knew?

ONE

Thursday, June 20, 2013
8:45 p.m.

As secrets go, mine is not earth-shattering. It's not even a secret. It's more like a huge, invisible elephant in the room that Nick hasn't yet noticed. But he's not stupid, and some reference to my past will force me to explain. And if nothing ever comes up, well, I have a time limit. The play opens in a few weeks.

I know it's weak to make a habit out of hiding, but showing my vulnerable side is my danger zone. Nick isn't that way; he lets his guard down with easy confidence. Like right now. A goofy smile lights up his face while he hums the tune he wrote on GarageBand. Nick is an aspiring musician disguised as a real estate agent. That makes him similar to ninety-five percent of all creative people who've ever lived.

We share a bland yet remarkable moment. I'm already nostalgic because life, unlike love, is finite. The sun sets and songs end. I breathe, letting my lungs expand, and my senses revel in my surroundings.

"You okay?" Nick asks, his gravelly voice pulling me from my thoughts.

"Of course," I tell him. "Keep playing your song."

We sit on my grubby living room carpet. I'm wearing shorts, so bits of dust and dirt press into my thighs. Outside, the moon struggles to appear, even though we're approaching 9 p.m. In the

fading light of my apartment, we drink beer and stretch our legs.

"Okay, wait. This is my favorite part." Nick plays a riff on his keyboard, which is plugged into his laptop. I start belting out the lyrics to that 90s classic, "Song for the Dumped." But I stop when he stares at me.

"What?" I demand. "Your song sounds a lot like Ben Folds Five."

"True." He scrunches his forehead in surprise. "I always figured your knowledge of music didn't extend past Adele."

Nick is right; there aren't many songs on my iPod that aren't also played on Top 40 radio stations. But I have a sordid history with that particular song. "There are all sorts of things you don't know about me," I joke.

Nick doesn't laugh.

"Like?" He leans in with an intensity that makes the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

It's not a big deal. Now isn't the time to explain. I imagine his expression upon hearing my confession. The wounded eyes, the sputter of bewilderment . . .

I scoot towards Nick and press my lips to his.

"Like, I'm a fool for a guy who can carry a tune."

He grins in his adorable, crooked way, changing the geography of his face. "Stick with me, Rocky." He strokes my bare arm with his fingertips. "And I promise I'll learn to sing."

I laugh and we fall into each other—a slow dance on a mild summer evening. He tries to remove my black gingham blouse, but his thick fingers stumble over the bright pink buttons.

"Be careful. It took me hours to sew those buttons on right."

His grin says I'm worth being high maintenance. "Maybe you should take it off yourself. I don't want to wreck it."

Keeping my eyes locked on him, I take off my blouse as he watches, his arms outstretched in anticipation of holding me again. I pull the fabric over my face, and we reach for each other. Soon we grow so close that there's no distinction between where one of us

ends and the other begins. I surrender to a welcome pull of desire.

But somewhere in the back of my mind is the thudding knowledge that pretty soon I'll have to come clean.

Friday, June 21, 2013
6:00 a.m.

I wear a corset. Someone from behind pulls it tight, squeezing my organs and reducing my ability to breathe. Standing in front of a mirror, I'm ready to perform, but how will I say my lines without enough air to speak? He steps out, his reflection next to mine.

My heart drops.

"Jed? What are you doing here?"

Jed offers a ghost of a grin, an imitation of his usual cocksure smile. And goddammit if it doesn't make my heart flutter. "Why wouldn't I be here?" His voice is low and controlled. "It's my play."

"But Georgie doesn't wear a corset."

He ignores me and pulls the strings so tight that my rib bones grind together. "Is it tight enough?"

I try to inhale, but I gasp instead. "Too tight, actually."

Jed shakes his head. "You'll never stay in character if you can breathe."

Several thoughts compete for my attention. Should I tell Jed about Nick? How will I perform when I don't know my lines? And will Jed be offended if I tell him breathing is important to me?

Jed puts his hands on my shoulders and kisses my neck, meeting my eyes in the mirror. "I've missed you, Robin. After the play, we should catch up."

Lucas walks in. "Places, Robin. It's time."

He walks off, all officious, with his stage manager headset and clipboard. Jed fumes.

"That guy has a lot of nerve."

I turn to face him. "What happened with Lucas was forever ago."

"No, it was just last week."

"But . . ."

Jed pushes me towards the stage, a few feet from where we stand. "Go. Break a leg. We'll talk later."

I stumble, fighting for air and to extinguish my sizzling nerves. The glare of lights makes me blink, and then I realize the morning sun streams through my window.

I'm awake.

It's no shock I dreamt about Jed; if anything, I'm surprised it hasn't happened sooner. Still, this is the first time he's appeared in my dreams since last March. As always, I can't decide if I want to shake off the images or cling to them.

When I close my eyes again, my brain shouts, *You're not going back to sleep.* I turn and Nick lets out a soft groan. He tightens his groggy arm, pulling me close as we spoon. No wonder I dreamt of corsets.

"I have to get up," I say.

"You're self-employed," Nick murmurs. "You don't *have* to do anything." He kisses my neck, and his muscles are taut against my stomach. I take a moment before resisting, then resting my head against the pillow and enjoying his heat. But soon I sit up, freeing myself from his grasp. Without the covers and the warmth of him, the air-conditioning prickles my skin.

"I can't sleep, so I'm going before it's too hot out."

He opens one eye. "Again?"

"When I can't sleep, I have to get up and get moving."

Nick smiles, closes his eyes, and nestles back under the covers. "I'm glad I'm not you," he mumbles. I push him in response, but he just laughs and starts humming the *Rocky* theme song. "Have a good run, Rocky."

I get out of bed, brush my teeth, and change into my running gear. After securing my shoulder-length blonde hair into a ponytail and lacing up my Nikes, I exit my apartment building into the soft Midwest morning.

I start running through the streets of my neighborhood. There are more hills than you would expect for a place like West Des

Moines, and my lungs squeeze as I try to maintain an eight-minute mile. Right now, my legs are like sandbags. I should have stayed in bed with Nick. I would have stayed in bed with Nick, except I know my pattern of insomnia. Once I wake up, no amount of tossing or turning puts me back to sleep.

So I keep running, even after the stitch in my side squeals to slow down. Sweat soaks my tank top, but I increase my pace. My lungs must work harder. By now, they should know that little trick of moving fresh air in and wasteful gases out.

Then I turn a corner and approach the house, where I always see her.

Flashdance Girl.

Is it serendipity that she showed up in my life? A sign from the universe? Weeks after Nick hosted that double feature, she started making regular appearances on my morning runs.

She's way too young to know the movie. I guess she streams films made a decade before her birth. Anyway, she has the hairdo: dark, curly, and held back by a headband across her forehead. She wears a t-shirt with a ripped collar, which falls off her shoulders, revealing the straps of her sports bra. And, like in the song, she wears the expression of someone who's dancing (or running) for her life. Her doe-like eyes stay wide and her lips stay parted, no matter how fast she goes. The one exception is when she first sees me. Every morning she waits in her yard, and every morning she sneers right before she takes off.

That curled lip is a challenge, and if I wasn't so winded, I would say, *Sure, hit me hard. I'll keep moving forward.* But I didn't pace myself right. I never pace myself right. And when she crosses over to my side of the street just to gain on me, I can't rise to the challenge.

I try to run fast, but my legs refuse to cooperate. The stitch on my side migrates across my entire stomach. Her footsteps get louder behind me, and they gain speed. It's like she's part cheetah. "On your left!" she demands. I move over, let her pass, and resist the urge to trip her.

"Show off!" I yell. But my yell is weak, and she has on

headphones, so I bet she didn't hear me. Anyway, she couldn't be older than sixteen. What am I doing, getting so worked up by someone almost half my age?

Stupid Flashdance Girl.

When I get home, Isobel, my neighbor/bestie since college, sits on her porch. The still-rising sun bounces light off her shiny black hair, and her blue eyes match her T-shirt.

"Hi," I say. "You're up early."

Isobel sips her coffee. "Couldn't sleep. Are you ready for rehearsal tonight? We're blocking your death scene."

Rolling my shoulders back, I stretch out my calves. "Yeah." I keep my eyes on the pavement. "I'm very ready."

"Liar," Isobel retorts. My head snaps up in shock.

"It's going to be emotional, Robin. Don't kid yourself. I hope you'll come prepared."

I stand up straight and nod. "You're right. Guess time doesn't heal *all* wounds, right?"

She takes another sip of coffee, contemplating. "Or old wounds get reopened."

"Yeah."

We're both quiet as the first evidence of rush-hour traffic begins. People pull out of their driveways, and car radios blast from several feet away. I let out a sigh. "Well, I should take a shower and get moving. I'll see you tonight."

"See you tonight," she says.

I go inside, past my still-sleeping boyfriend, and into the shower. My heart rate slows to normal as I let the water's spray bathe my face. I'm more centered and less shaky than I was when I first woke up, like running exorcized all my demons. I grab the shampoo bottle and squeeze some into my hair. But when the soapy run-down stings my eyes, I think of Isobel . . . and why I agreed to do Jed's play in the first place.

• • •

Last October, Isobel and I were both used to being alone. Living next door provided the perks of a roommate without the sacrifice of privacy, leftovers, or deleted shows on the DVR. We often hung out in the evenings, and sometimes we watched *The Holdout*, the reality show I was on. Isobel applauded when I did well in the competitions. And she yelled at the TV if anyone betrayed me.

Isobel was in the middle of her divorce, and we needed each other like a sea anemone riding on the back of a hermit crab. (Isobel, always the more stable one, was the hermit crab.) One evening, after the latest episode of *The Holdout* ended, I grabbed her remote to shut off the TV, and she turned to me with this Nancy-Drew-like glint in her eyes. I expected some projection about the rest of the season.

I was half right.

"You made it to the jury," she said. "That's huge! Robin, you're a celebrity and you have to capitalize on this."

I scraped the bottom of the popcorn bowl for the last edible kernels and shoved them in my mouth. "I'm not a celebrity. People will forget about me in less than a month."

Isobel shook her head with the force of a hurricane. "Don't let them forget about you."

"I'm fine with being forgotten."

She scooted closer to me on her sagging couch. Then she grabbed my knee, both her grip and tone robust. "Do a play with me. It will be like old times, and the PR will be great. 'Robin from *The Holdout*' starring in a Mirror Image Production!"

Mirror Image is Isobel's theater company.

I laughed, trying in vain to get her to laugh too. "Come on, Isobel. I haven't acted in years."

"But you'll be great!" Her enthusiasm was big enough to sit between us and invade my personal bubble. "You sorta sweat charisma. The audience will adore you, and I bet we'd make record box office. We'll do whatever play you want, okay? *A Doll's House* or *Miss Witherspoon*. Just name your dream role!"

I didn't know what my dream role would be, but I did know that after Isobel caught her ex-husband cheating, the look in her eye said 'leave me alone.' Not now. Her theater company was floundering, but she'd found a way to save it, and that made her come alive. How could I refuse?

"I suppose it might be fun," I conceded. "But I'd get the final say on the costumes."

Isobel bounced up and down in her seat and clapped her hands. "Yay!" she cried. "This will be awesome! Which play should we do?"

"I don't know," I laughed. "I'll have to think about it."

Isobel drew her knees up, resting her chin against them. "You know, we *could* do Jed's play."

There was a time that idea would make me break out in a cold, clammy panic-sweat. Instead, my pulse quickened and my chest thumped, both from nerves and excitement.

"Yeah . . ."

Isobel's voice was as indulgent as Merlot. "You said we'd do it someday."

"'Someday' is always supposed to be a ways away."

"Still," Isobel sighed, "it *has* been a long time. You won't be the right age to play Georgie for much longer."

"True." I grabbed a pillow and put it over my lap, like I needed protection.

"Robin . . ." Isobel paused until I looked at her. "I won't pressure you about this. But I don't want you to never do the play and then regret it later, you know? This *would* be the perfect opportunity. We could get other people from Hoyt involved, like Andrew and Miranda." She jabbed a playful finger into my shoulder. "Hey, I heard Lucas is back in town after working at the Guthrie. He could stage-manage."

"Lucas? Really?"

"He's the best around. Don't you want the best?"

I tilted my head, trying to loosen the knots in my neck. With a deep breath, I turned back towards Isobel. "Catherine is studying

abroad this year. Could we wait until summer? She'd never forgive me if she couldn't come."

"Of course." Isobel smiled. "Summer is perfect."

• • •

As I finish my shower, it occurs to me that, at the time, summer seemed a comfortable distance away. Of course, that was before I'd even met Nick, before I fell in love for the second time in my life. Now summer is here, and the past keeps nudging up against my present-day emotions. My heart is getting a little claustrophobic.

I rinse the shampoo out, turn the water off, grab a towel, and wrap it around me. I exit the steamy bathroom with half a mind to crawl back into bed with Nick and give him a proper good-morning. But when I get to my bedroom, I find an empty bed.

Nick left without saying goodbye.

4:30 p.m.

Throughout the day, thoughts of rehearsal, Jed, and everything I've pushed aside flit through my mind. I keep the doors to my studio space open, so people walking through the East Village of Des Moines can check out my clothes—dresses made from old coats and men's shirts, blouses made from old dresses, and scarves made from whatever I could find.

It's not that I dislike designer clothes. I appreciate a new outfit as much as your next *Vogue* subscriber. And sure, that thrift store smell often makes me wonder if it's worth the trouble of turning trash into treasure. But when it works, it's magical—desperate threads given a new lease on life, woven into something beautiful and unique. The charm of a beat-up vintage leather jacket or the unexpected beauty of a repurposed cashmere sweater. The hidden stories in each piece are worth the effort. I see my creations as

statements—bold declarations that there's always a second chance, one more life to live.

And I love my studio, with the occasional customer wandering in, but most of my sales are made online. So I'm alone, working on a forest green minidress with a removable cape collar, when Nick walks through my door wearing dark pants, a shirt and tie, and black shoes. It's his real estate agent outfit.

"Hi!" I say. "This is a surprise. What brings you here?"

Nick puts on his impish grin. "I'm in the market for an upcycled three-piece suit. Do you have anything in corduroy?"

I raise my eyebrows and smirk. "Corduroy isn't your color."

"Touché." He laughs. "Truth is, I came to apologize."

"For what?"

He fiddles with his watch. "Rushing out this morning while you were in the shower. You should have pushed me out of bed. I was almost late meeting some clients."

"So you're apologizing and blaming me in the same breath?"

"Nah." Nick juts out his chin at a charming angle—an expression he must have learned in third grade. It's dangerous for a grown man to attempt such cuteness without years of experience.

"Was Flashdance Girl out this morning?"

"Yeah, and she almost ran me off the sidewalk."

"What a bully."

"I know."

"I still can't quite believe she exists. Are you sure you're not hallucinating her?"

"I swear, she's as real as you and me." I toss a few buttons onto the dressing table.

"Always out there in those headbands and off-the-shoulder sweatshirts. Besides, why would I create a jogging nemesis for myself?"

"I'm not saying you would. It's just a coincidence. You're Rocky. She's Flashdance Girl . . ." He leans his arm against the door frame. "She sounds like a character from a comic book. Flashdance Girl:

The sidewalk sprinter. Sworn enemy of anyone going in for another round when they don't think they can."

"And that's me? Going in for another round?"

"Yup," he answers, his voice velvety. "We both know how tough you are." The look he gives me squeezes my heart.

"Why are you standing all the way over there?" I ask. "Come closer."

"Okay." He walks up to me and places a light kiss on my mouth. I pull at his loosened tie to steal another smooch. This time, our mouths linger.

"Hey," he mumbles. "How's your day?"

"Getting better," I mumble back. I run my fingers through his short, dark brown hair.

He slides his hands down my torso. "Is this one new? I don't think I've seen it before."

Nick is referring to my red sailor blouse, which I made from a 1990s sundress and this awesome gray figure eight trim that I found at Michaels. "Yeah," I say. "I decided it's too nice to sell."

"A hazard of the profession," Nick replies, kissing my neck. "I like it. You should wear it when we go out sometime."

"Okay." My smile forms at the small of my back. "Not that I'm complaining, but what are you doing here?"

He goes in for a kiss right below my ear. "I was showing a house nearby, and I wanted to talk to you." His dark brown eyes widen, and I'm tempted to lock the door, unbutton his shirt, and change his earnest expression into something a little less appropriate.

"You need to talk to me?" I let go of him. "That's never good. What is it?"

Half of his mouth smiles. "Nothing bad. I need to know when your dad's birthday party is. Also, your play. And anything else that should be on my radar." He whips out his phone from his back pocket. "Can you give me the dates so I can put them on my calendar?"

"Look who's organized!" I go to my desk and turn over pattern

books, sketch pads, and fabric remnants before I find my own phone, underneath a piece of lavender oxford cloth. I swipe to display my calendar.

Nick cocks his head to the side. "Well, I have stuff coming up. I need to make sure I don't overbook and miss something important."

"What do you have coming up?"

"You know. Andrea's getting back . . ."

"Andrea doesn't get back until August." Andrea is Nick's little sister, and he's her guardian. But this summer, she's working at a summer camp, so Nick has more freedom than he's had in years. "And even if she was back, she'd be welcome at my play and at my dad's birthday."

"Yeah, no, I know. But I have showings in the evening sometimes and networking events . . ." He slows down after talking too fast. "This isn't a problem, is it? Trying to figure out my schedule in advance?"

"No, of course not."

I shouldn't be surprised that Nick's planning ahead. His mother died of breast cancer soon after he graduated high school. Nick dealt with it by becoming everything to everyone, taking care of details, filling out official forms, and raising his younger sister, Andrea.

"Is that all?" I ask. "You want to figure out your schedule?"

"Of course." He grins and holds his finger poised over his cell phone, ready to type in dates.

"You don't have to go to anything of mine, not if you don't want to."

Nick narrows his eyes. "What? Before, you said they were important."

"Yeah." I use the piece of lavender oxford cloth to wipe the screen of my cell phone, which makes it more smeared. "But I don't *need* you there."

"Rocky . . ." Nick lowers the hand that holds his phone. He steps towards me. "Don't be like that."

I meet his eyes. "I'm serious. You shouldn't feel burdened. It's okay if you have other stuff going on."

He clenches his jaw and juts out his lower lip. Like he's trying to figure out the correct response. Like he can find it on a multiple-choice exam. He reaches for me, brushing a wayward curl from my forehead. "Being there for you isn't a burden. It's what I want."

"I appreciate that, Nick," I say, swallowing down my unease.

"But . . .?" His finger brushes my cheek.

"But I'll tell you the dates." I yank at both ends of the oxford cloth, as if playing tug of war with myself. "That way, you can choose to come or not."

7:00 p.m.

When I get to rehearsal, Isobel is on stage with Miranda, waving her arms in exaggerated gestures. She sees me, her movements halt, and she skips to the edge of the stage. "Oh good, you're here. We just began blocking the death match. I was thinking you could stand stage left and when you start fighting, she could sort of drag you over here." Isobel flails out her arms to demonstrate.

"Watch it!" cries Miranda. She shields her face with her hands to avoid getting smacked by Isobel.

"Sorry!" Isobel's cheeks redden. "I'm just excited for this scene."

"Because you want to kill me?" I joke.

Isobel puts a dramatic hand to her heart. "Never, my dear! You're too precious to the guild!" She bats her eyelashes at me in a theatrical way that makes Miranda and me laugh.

The play, *The Next Breath*, follows a struggling writer plagued by relationship woes. One fateful night, he pours his heart onto the page. The next day, miraculously, his girlfriend acts out the exact scene he wrote. But as the story continues, all he can do is improvise, unable to control the chaotic turns that lead to her unfortunate death. Act One ends with tragedy, but Act Two delves into his desperate attempts to write her back into existence.

It's a dark comedy wrapped in loss and heartbreak, reflective of life's unpredictable twists and turns.

"So do you want to skip warm-ups and just go right into blocking the scene?" I ask.

"Oh." Isobel swings the hand that holds her script and uses her other hand to scratch her temple. "Sorry. Of course we should warm up. I wasn't thinking." She calls for the stage manager. "Lucas, do you want to lead warm-ups while I go over my notes?"

Lucas agrees, and Andrew, the other actor, comes over. We stand in a sloppy circle, and Lucas takes us through exercises we all learned in college. Controlled breathing, rolling our heads from side to side, making our mouths wide while reciting tongue twisters, and to get our energy going, The Hokey Pokey. All the while, I look around this dim theater, with garage-sale rehearsal furniture and well-worn audience chairs, and imagine the network of nerves surrounding my brain, heart, and lungs. Is it possible to pinpoint one tiny little nerve, snip it out, and relieve this heaviness inside? I need to be light.

Because in a few minutes, I'll die again. And it's always for Jed.

10:30 p.m.

"How was rehearsal?" Nick asks.

"Weird. Difficult."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I'm lying flat on my back, talking on my phone, and staring at the bedroom ceiling. I hear ambient bar noises behind the sound of his voice.

"That's okay," I answer. "Where are you?"

"At The Keg Stand, hanging out with Dave." The Keg Stand is a popular bar in our area. Nick met Dave in a college music course years ago, before Nick had to drop out. But they're still music buddies.

"I'm super tired. You should stay and have fun."

"I'll call you tomorrow." Nick's voice is soft enough to cuddle me through the radio frequencies that connect us. "Love you."

"Me too. Bye."

I shut my phone off and let it fall to the pillow by my side. It's been a long day, and fatigue presses into me. Summoning the necessary energy to rise, brush my teeth, and slip into my nightshirt doesn't seem worthwhile.

There's no point in fighting it. I close my eyes and let the memories materialize.