

**3 ● D A Y S**

**I N**

**B E L F A S T**



*“The gravitational pull of love has a sense of  
urgency that cannot be rebuffed.”*

— RITA A. GORDON





**3 ● DAYS IN BELFAST**

*A Novel*

**Rita A. Gordon**

**12:56 a.m.**

California

### **30 Days In Belfast**

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DEDICATION

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To my late mother, Hildred, I feel your love.



PROLOGUE

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## We Have Time

*“If you love somebody, let them go, for if they return, they were always yours. If they don’t, they never were.”*

— KAHLIL GIBRAN, *A Tear and a Smile*

“I’LL RACE YA,” SHANNON CALLED AS SHE RAN PAST ROSE TOWARD THE foam remnants of a forgotten wave on the shoreline.

Rose stopped scribing her initials in the sand heart drawing, a covert confession of love to her celebrity crush. She jumped up and headed toward the water. “Wait for me,” she shouted to Shannon, who didn’t see her. The glare from the sun dancing on the waves mimicking a million miniature mirrors distorted her view. Rose chased a wave and jumped in the water, pushing through the powerful current. When it subsided slightly, she popped up. “Shannon!” she called over the waves, but didn’t see her friend. Rose continued to push through the currents, shoving the waves back with her arms that were growing sore by the minute. With each breath she took, she became more panicked, still unable to spot her friend.

Rose looked toward the shore to see if Shannon had made it back. “Shannon, where—” Rose called out before being sucked under by the current. Before it all became a faded memory.

Fifteen years later, the aftermath was fuzzy in her head. She remembered eventually getting herself to shore. The shock and overwhelming sense of loss she felt when she realized Shannon was not by her side finally came into focus as people crowded around her in the sand. An endless stream of questions rushed through her. The sudden end of a forever friendship stolen by sun, sand, and sneaker waves. Rose felt her face grow warm as memories of Shannon flooded her mind. Her heart started to race. Panic washed over her as she relived the day her friend died. All she wanted to do now was run.

“Rose, talk to me. I know it feels like it came out of left field. Tell me what you’re thinking.” The sound of Alejandro’s voice sitting across the table pulled her out of her head. He was staring at her with a mix of concern and longing in his eyes. Shelved was the swoon-worthy smile that usually greeted her. The smile that made her melt after spending weeks away from her man. He reached his hand across the table.

Rose averted Alejandro’s gaze and looked around his London flat, where they had just spent the last three evenings wrapped in each other’s arms. Where they had made love for hours until they were both sore, satiated, and spent. Where they had shared rare stolen moments between their busy schedules. She was the one who convinced him to get the flat since he spent so much time traveling between New York and London. He was busy building his career as an international attorney, and Rose was recently promoted to COO. A reward for endless hours helping her father build his business and developing new technologies to innovate the company. Living on the west coast, paired with the busy travel schedule that came with her new position, meant they spent more time on video calls than in person.

Rose focused her attention on the modern, muted earth tones of the room. Her eyes were drawn to a painting she commissioned: A Black woman with a crown of flowers blooming from her head and partially covering her face. Rose remembered posing for the portrait with her chin turned toward her bare shoulder. “Think about your man,” the artist had instructed her.

Now, she was sitting across the table from the man she thought she could build a life with. His words washed across her, pulling her down like the sneaker wave that snatched her childhood friend from her life forever. Stirring within her was the same sense of shock and sudden loss.

Rose sucked in a breath. “You sure about this?” she said, sounding as if negotiating a business deal—placing a wall around her heart and tamping the need to reach across the table to take his hand.

“No. But I do know we’re both committed to our work. The time in between when we finally get together keeps growing. I’m torn between you and the job, and I don’t want to ask you to bend for me. I respect that you’re building your career, too. I want to make it work but can’t see a way. You just got promoted and want to make a name for yourself away from your father’s shadow. That’s a tall order, and I’ll use all my resources to support you in that effort. But trying to build something more between us is no small feat. Think about it. How many things did you and I have to shift to get these three nights together?”

“Quite a bit,” she answered, hesitant to strengthen his argument.

“That’s exactly the point. You and I know that you had to rearrange twice as much as me. I won’t continue asking you to do that. Your father is my largest client. I know the demand he puts on me. I can only

imagine how exponentially higher that is on you. I care about you, but I won't be the one to stifle your success. Let's take a step back and focus. Let's give ourselves a year." Alejandro leaned back in his chair and ran his hands through his hair.

Rose knew he was rethinking his words. But they were out, weighing heavy between them.

Was he right? Should they take a break, allowing time to establish themselves? Could they walk away and get back when the time was right? Would it ever be right?

The idea of them not being a couple made Rose feel like she did when she lost her best friend. The same emotions flowed through her all over again. She paused to think, unaware of what was keeping her from ending the conversation, putting her foot down, and refusing his suggestion.

Rose closed her eyes, inhaled, and opened them. Alejandro's gaze was still locked on her. "This isn't about something else. Or is it? You—" she started.

Alejandro stood, rounded the table, and pulled Rose to her feet and into a tight embrace. He planted kisses all over her face before touching his forehead to hers.

"Oh, Rose. Don't ever think that. I... I'd be hard-pressed to believe I could be with anyone other than you. You are the center of my universe, but I know I'm not yours. This is me setting you free—giving you time to do what you need to do. To be you without me interfering."

Rose listened intently, her breath becoming synchronized with his.

"I'm not saying it's just about you," he continued. "I also need to figure out why I haven't moved heaven and earth to be by your side. And for that, I'm at fault." Alejandro swallowed, then turned to look

out the window. Rose held onto his hand, walked up behind him, and pressed her chin to his back.

“Okay.” Rose paused. “We’ll give it some time.”

## A Rose is Still a Rose

*“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet.”*

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

“I’VE GOT EYES ON THE PICASSO,” TROY, ROSE’S CHIEF OF SECURITY, said into his headset.

Troy surveyed the airport tarmac before opening the car door for Rose. Picasso was the security handle Rose chose because of her love for art. A love that led her to establish an art foundation in her name, and to open an art gallery filled with art she had curated. As far as Troy was concerned, Rose could refer to herself as whatever she wanted, granted she followed his endless list of security protocols.

Rose Ross was the thirty-two-year-old chief operations officer for Rick Ross Enterprises, and the daughter of Rick Ross, CEO of the company bearing his name. But unlike her father, who possessed a string of monikers—the country’s richest Black man, Black billionaire, father, and husband—Rose had just one: daughter of Rick Ross, or Rick Ross’ daughter, depending on who was talking. She winced inside every time someone referred to her outside her name. Rose loved her dad, but she wanted to be known as more than just the daughter of Rick



Ross. To not be swallowed in the shadow of the wealthiest man in the country. To pave a path that hadn't already been walked. That was why she was about to board a plane and fly over five thousand miles from San Francisco to Ireland to do a favor for a sick friend and host the annual patron of the art exhibition in Belfast.

"I'm about to board now, Mia," Rose said in her earpiece as she stepped out of the vehicle. "I'll check my rough draft as soon as I board. We'll make the timing work. Even if you're there for an hour. Anyway, who's to say that I can even pull something like this off in less than thirty days. It's never been done before." Rose put her hand in Troy's as he helped her from the car.

"Thank you," Rose mouthed to Troy. She touched his shoulder as she passed him and headed to the plane.

Once onboard, Rose greeted all the staff, sat at one of the tables, took off her earbuds, and put her phone on speaker. "Okay, I'm pulling up the schedule now," Rose announced, opening her laptop.

"I'm telling you I'll be cutting it close," Mia said over the speaker.

"You're right. It's close, but it's doable. You can fit in about an hour—maybe more at the exhibition before your flight. Looking at the photos, the main gallery has a domed glass ceiling. I need to account for the long days and push the event time out to take advantage of the night sky. I'm not sure how it'll play into the final plan, but that's why it starts so late," Rose said, pointing to her draft art exhibition outline on her screen as if her friend could see it over the phone.

"Don't worry. I'll be there. I'm so glad you're doing this." Mia's voice was cheery.

Rose looked up as Troy entered the plane and watched while he gave the crew instructions. When the door closed, Troy went to sit

across the aisle from Rose in one of the leather seats near the window. She observed as he set up his laptop.

“Hey, if you hadn’t introduced me to Brianna, I wouldn’t be on my way to Belfast. The least I can do is ensure you’re there to see it. Anyway, I have a lot to think about while I’m there.” Rose scrolled through her screen.

“Please tell me you’re not pulling double duty,” Mia urged.

“A team member is filling in for me while I’m traveling, but I’ll still attend key meetings via video, of course,” Rose answered, glossing over the weight of her work as a major world provider of sophisticated machine learning platforms for artificial intelligence. Additionally, she was spearheading work on legislation to propose uniform standards related to data access, data sharing, and data protection. She shifted in her seat. “But that’s not the issue. Dad’s pressuring me on some things.”

“I suppose stuff you can’t talk about.”

“Nothing you need to worry about,” Rose said matter of factly. But in reality, anything related to her dad was a big deal.

“And I suppose there’s a timeline associated with whatever it is?”

“I—” Rose stopped when one of the attendants approached her.

“Ms. Ross, we’ll be taking off shortly. We have a flight time of ten hours and twenty-five minutes. The weather should be about sixty-five degrees when we arrive. Would you like anything to drink?”

“Nothing. Thank you,” Rose replied. The attendant nodded her head and went to address Troy before heading back to her station.

“Rose?” Mia piped up over the phone.

“We’re about to—” Mia cut Rose off before she could finish.

“Wheels up. I heard. What are you not telling me, Rose?” Mia asked, her voice filled with concern.

Rose thought about her call with her dad earlier that morning. The proud tone in his voice was etched in her brain when he told her he wanted her to succeed him as CEO. She hadn't thought about what was next for her at Rick Ross Enterprises. She had been hyper-focused on work and had given up everything—including her man—to focus on the business. Now, she felt she was finally in a place where she was firing on all cylinders, allowing her to pursue her passion in art on the side. Although it was inevitable that her dad would eventually decide to hand the reins over to someone, the timing felt odd. Did he accelerate his plans because of her—because of what she was doing in Belfast? She wanted to make a name for herself, not get lost behind his. She needed time to think.

Rose sighed. “I have three weeks to get back to Dad with a decision on something.”

“Whatever it is, I know you got this. Just stay focused. Don't get distracted, and call me if you need *anything*,” Mia said.

“Thanks, Mia. And if a distraction is your code word for men, don't worry. I'll be focused on the event. Anyways, I gotta go. I'll see you at the end of the month.”

“I sent you a brief to review before we land,” Troy said while tapping his screen, just as Rose ended her call. She had gotten used to his all-business-all-the-time communication style.

Rose pulled the documents he sent her up on her screen. “Give me the Cliff Notes, Troy.”

“You need to read through what I sent. The folder labeled *staff* is the people who work in the house as house staff. The one labeled *trade* is the contract resources you requested. I included a layout of the grounds for the property and all the building schematics.”

“And? I know you sent more than just what I requested. What’s this?” Rose asked, clicking into a folder on the screen. “The one labeled *king*.”

“Biographies. It seems your host, Brianna, has two brothers visiting her.”

Rose scrolled through a list of articles and files detailing their backgrounds, and settled on a link to the King Enterprise company website. She clicked through to the founder section. “Are these her brothers?” Rose turned her screen toward Troy, displaying two well-suited gentlemen that could pass for billionaire book boyfriend male models.

“Yes. Those are the brothers.”



ON ROSE’S FIRST DAY IN BELFAST, SHE FELT A LITTLE ANXIOUS AS SHE drove up the private lane leading to the three-story gray house in the distance. It was a symptom of not sleeping during the whole day’s plane ride across the pond. All her travel tricks failed, even in a private jet devoid of strangers. Even her attempt to read Darwin’s *The Origins of Species* could not induce an appearance by the elusive sandman. There was a constant weight dangling in the back of her head, remnants of the unfinished conversation she had with her father before she left town.

“I need to name my successor before the end of the month,” her dad had disclosed. “Don’t make me put anyone but a Ross forward to the board.” Rose felt a twinge of pain in her stomach as his words echoed through her mind. She had spent her whole life ensuring she never disappointed her father, and proved her allegiance by working alongside

him, eventually becoming his chief operations officer. But since she was determined to carve a name for herself, distant from the legacy her father had created, she did double duty, managing his company while following her passion in the world of curating art. Between the two careers she led, well, there was no room for anything else, including distractions. For Rose, distractions meant men. She had already tried and failed on that front, surrendering to the notion that she couldn't have a man and run one of the largest companies in the world, all while trying to make a name for herself in her so-called spare time. Rose breathed a heavy sigh and tried to push the thoughts from her mind as she headed toward her client's house. Instead, she had to focus on the road ahead and a project that had the potential to change her career trajectory.

Rose turned her attention to the old, castle-like house at the end of the drive. Ornate and intricate hand-chiseled stone rosette detailing framed the enormous arched door and oversized windows lining the façade. As she approached the house, she instinctively made a mental note of her surroundings. It was a tactical move that her security adviser had taught her. Two cars were parked near the front entrance, an AMG, and a Maybach SUV, which Rose supposed belonged to Brianna Morrison's brothers. Born into wealth, Rose was all too familiar with the life of grandeur spread like a feast before her, which meant she felt simultaneously at home yet not at home at all, noting the unfamiliarity of the building before her, and the distance she had travelled to get here. Rose was a visitor, and these weren't her people.

Except for what she discovered through research during the plane ride, Rose did not know much about her client's brothers. As for Brianna, she was more familiar with her. Four previous video conferences leading

up to her trip revealed a more conservative yet welcoming woman with impeccable taste and style. She was more likely to drive the Jag parked in the garage, which Rose could see through the open oversized carriage doors. Whatever the case, she would later learn those details and more during her visit to the historic house where she planned to spend the next thirty days.

Tires rolling over gravel made a crunching sound as Rose pulled into the driveway and parked her rented black luxury SUV to the left of the AMG. More crunching and dust filled the air as a car following close behind pulled alongside hers, completing the single row of vehicles, looking more like a luxury dealership than a driveway. “99 Miles From LA,” by Johnny Mathis, played over the stereo, and Rose listened for a few seconds before shutting down the engine. Music and mantras helped ease her anxiety and help her feel more centered, and today she wanted to be on point for her meeting with Brianna Morrison, the one name synonymous with art in Europe.

“Breathe. You can do this. You are the descendant of queens, and you belong here,” Rose told her reflection as she checked her face in the rearview mirror. She took a deep breath and, in one fluid motion, grabbed her keys and cell phone, and threw them in her handbag before exiting the car. Anticipating Troy would not be too far behind, Rose raised her hand to signal him to stay in place and continued alone up the granite stairs to the landing near the massive front doors. She had already pushed his limits, driving herself to the house so she could fully experience the countryside. And now, the initial meeting with her new clients did not warrant a strong security presence.

Troy had a habit of overdoing it when it came to her security. The last time she came through Heathrow, he almost got them detained for

interfering with airport security when they threw out her conditioner. “Hey, that’s under the limit,” he had yelled at the agent, who ignored his objections. The container hit the trash with a loud *thud*, followed by another as the agent rifled through Rose’s luggage. “Hey!” Troy protested, but Rose raised her hand to keep him from irritating the agent further, and he grudgingly backed off.

That was the last time Troy succumbed to her whims of flying commercial versus private. She wanted to have some semblance of normalcy. To walk the streets without a security detail or tracking devices. But there was nothing normal about her life. Rose was the daughter of the wealthiest Black man in the country, and there was nothing normal about that. Like it or not, she knew that Troy—her six-foot-five man-of-steel chief of security—was on task saving her from herself, and from any distractions she may fall victim to.

As Rose made her way toward the house, she noticed that the centuries-old home was well maintained. The modern carriage doors and newly pointed stone walls were evidence of the home’s recent renovations. The front doors, which dwarfed her even in her stilettos, opened just as she reached the threshold. Standing about four inches taller than herself, a fine young muscular gentleman greeted her. She recognized his face from her research, recalling the article where the headline read, “Celebrity Chef Marina Mack Spotted With a Hot New Man.”

“Hi, I’m Niall King, Brianna’s brother. You must be Ms. Ross,” he said, smiling down at her.

He was cute and clean-shaven. Inky black, curly hair covered his head; it was slightly longer than corporate, cut neat and tucked behind his ears, starkly contrasting his fair skin and deep Mediterranean blue

eyes. She found it peculiar in such a grand house that he casually greeted her at the door in his bare feet. Rounding out the look, he wore dark blue jeans with a tightly fitted, white, silk t-shirt emphasizing the flex in each muscle in his arm as he extended his hand to her. Rose's eyes followed his hand as it reached her own, waiting to shake his. Nothing was lacking with his grip. Strong. Sturdy. Manly. He was the complete package. *I can work with casual*, she thought, trying not to stare.

"Nice to meet you, Niall. I'm Roselyn Ross, but people call me Rose. Your sister is expecting me," she greeted, looking past him into the foyer.

"Welcome, Rose. How apropos. It's my pleasure. Indeed, we're expecting you."

Niall held her hand a few seconds longer than expected while studying her head to toe. Finally, when his eyes met hers, he released her hand.

Although Rose was no stranger to people staring, certain situations still gave her anxiety. At first, she was paralyzed with the fear of having to speak in front of an audience. Over time, she learned to spend extra time preparing for her meetings until she knew the material inside out. She could tackle tough questions when she was focused. A double master's in computer science focused on artificial intelligence combined with art history had served her well in front of audiences. But the dread that something could go wrong always niggled at her, so she got into the habit of meditating moments before stepping in front of an audience. But that was business, and this look from Niall felt different. She wondered whether this was his first time seeing someone like herself up close. How many women with long, textured, brown hair, almond-



shaped brown eyes, and caramel-colored skin had he encountered in her profession? Or even in Ireland, for that matter. From what little she knew of Niall, he spent most of his time in countries less diversified than the United States. If bleach-blond, blue-eyed women like Marina Mack were his type, he certainly would have no interest in her, and she was okay with that.

Her recent research revealed that very few people in Northern Ireland were of African descent. Until recently, laws prohibited any foreigners from seeking to gain citizenship. She was surprised to learn that starting in the early nineties, a great migration that lasted about ten years led to enhanced racial tensions in the region as more foreigners tried to integrate into the area. Foreigners that looked like her. This information led to an overflow of questions in her mind. Would she encounter lingering sentiments during her visit? How would her client respond to her? Would she feel the hateful stares of citizens burning through her flesh?

She was careful to prepare herself for the political landscape and moral sentiments she might encounter while traveling abroad. That, coupled with the security briefs from Troy, dictated the number of staff members she brought. It dictated the length of her stay. And her least favorite of all, it dictated how involved her dad was in her affairs. And since her dad's company was known worldwide, safeguards were always in place wherever she traveled. How many people—members of the invisible security detail—had he sent to watch over her? Maybe their recent conversation got through to him. She closed her eyes a second, tamping the thought from her mind, and opened them to refocus on Niall, who was still smiling down at her. Still staring.

*What does he see when he's looking at me?* she thought.

“Are they joining us?” Niall tipped his head toward the driveway without breaking his gaze.

Before Niall had the chance to invite her in, Rose bent to remove her stilettos. She had been vacillating between keeping them on and taking them off, but opted to follow Niall’s casual lead; she quickly undid the ankle straps, slipped them off her feet, and held them as she stepped into the foyer.

“They won’t be coming in. My team is going to the gallery for a walkthrough. Afterward, they’ll go to the city to get settled. Your sister was gracious enough to have me as her guest.”

“She briefed me. The gallery you’ll be working in is the building you passed to the left of the driveway. You can access it via any of the doors on this side of the house, then through the courtyard. Brianna felt a short commute would be more suitable for you, in addition to providing you with the comforts of a home.”

“The closer, the better. Everything else is a bonus,” she remarked in her business voice.

“Great. My brother and I are visiting Brianna and staying overnight. We can help you get settled. By the way, I’ve heard good things about you.”

“It’s always nice to hear that. Maybe we can chat over tea when I get settled, and you can tell me more about what you heard.” She chose her words carefully, not wanting to send the wrong signals. She was there on business and didn’t have time for distractions.

“I’d like that very much. Say, the gentleman you arrived with—your security person—I can tell by how he’s canvassing the place he has a trained eye. But I doubt you’ll need a bodyguard during your stay here. My brother and I can look out for you when we’re here if that’s a concern.”

Rose's brow furrowed at the thought that Niall may have researched her. The idea of Troy not being around made her stomach churn ever so slightly.

Nine years and hundreds of trips later, Troy's loyalty was old hat. He went with her everywhere. Any media pictures of Rose reveal Troy not too far from her. They were so close that people often mistook them for a couple. Troy was a tall, fierce, fine dark chocolate man who was always well suited. She appreciated how close they had become. But it was not always like that. After his initial assignment, Rose tried to ditch him several times that year. Rebellious was her modus operandi when her parents mandated something, despite the legitimate reasons for their concern. In reality, the childhood trauma she experienced caused her to keep a small circle of friends, so she was initially cautious about letting Troy in. Then, there was the fact that she had separation anxiety following the retirement of her former chief of security. "Rose, it's time for me to hang my hat. I promise you'll be fine," her former advisor assured her, attempting to convince her that Troy was well trained and had passed even the most rigorous tests he could put him through. "Give him a year. If, after a year, you two can't adjust, I'll come out of retirement until we find the right one." Rose agreed. Eventually, she adjusted to Troy. Now, they were virtually inseparable.

"I appreciate the offer, and don't doubt that you and your brother could offer the security I may need, but Troy has me covered for now." Rose attempted to take a step forward into the foyer.

"Forgive my manners, Rose. Please come inside." Niall gestured toward the long hallway.

Rose smiled at Niall when she passed. Walking into the house was like stepping back in time when there were working castles. The

finishings were grandiose, and the floors were covered with oversized white marble tiles that were unexpectedly warm to the touch.

Rose stopped and turned to Niall. “Is your sister in the main study?”

“Yes, how did you know?” He stopped short in his tracks behind Rose.

“That’s where she took most of her video calls with me. She said it was her favorite room in the house. I had hoped to see it live one day after getting a glimpse of her incredible artwork collection on video.”

They entered the room to find Brianna sitting in a chair on the far side, finishing up a call. She was dressed in an olive-green sheath dress and matching heels. Rose wasn’t surprised that Brianna had the same signature black hair and blue-eyed traits as her brother, except her hair flowed past her shoulders. However, Rose was alarmed to see how pale Brianna’s skin was and how much weight she had lost as the tailored sheath dress hung strangely loose on her.

Still on the phone, Brianna waved them in and nodded her head. “That’s fine. Have it delivered to the gallery entrance. I’ll—” Brianna paused.

Rose picked up on the gist of the conversation, waved, pointed at herself, and mouthed the words *to me*. She was ready to do business and wanted Brianna to know she had her act together.

“Someone will be here to receive it. The name? Of course, please have it sent to the attention of Rose Ross. Thank you. Sure. Great.” Brianna ended her call, pushed herself up from the chair, and stood to greet Rose.

“Welcome to my home, Rose.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person. I hope you don’t mind me jumping right in while you were on the call.”

“The pleasure is all mine. Thanks for jumping in. So, you had a long journey to get here. How was your flight?”

“It was smooth. Uneventful.” Sleepless, she wanted to add, but stopped herself, vowing to remain professional.

“That is good to hear. However, I imagine jet lag will be setting in soon. May I suggest you take a few days to rest, get familiar with the grounds, and visit the city before you jump into work?” Brianna asked.

“Thanks, but I feel fine. A full day’s work is the best way to thwart jet lag. Besides, we have a tight timeline. I’m anxious to get started.” And she had reason to be. Although she had a head start before arriving, most of the work had to be done in Belfast. Her events usually took six months to several years to create, dependent upon the subject, venue, and budget. Four weeks would be the shortest time she spent curating and executing any exhibition.

“My home is yours for however long you choose to stay.”

“I appreciate that. Being here is truly a great honor for me, Mrs. Morrison.”

Brianna held out a hand, inviting Rose to sit on the leather daybed, doubling as a couch near a glass-topped kidney-shaped table in the center of the room. “Have a seat. And please call me Brianna,” she insisted, returning to her chair as if she were adjusting to a hot tub of water.

Rose did not know how much Brianna’s family knew about Brianna’s ailment other than she had a congenital heart defect that became exacerbated following her husband’s death. Brianna didn’t feel she had the strength to pull off the event alone this year, so she handed the reins over to Rose. She also commissioned Rose to retool and breathe new life into the event. It was a big deal for Rose. She would be the first woman of color and the first Black woman to curate this prestigious art

event in Europe. Given the good press, this could prove to be a pinnacle moment in her career.

“I’m okay to stand for the moment. After the long flight and the drive, I need to stretch my legs a bit. Please accept my wishes for your speedy recovery.”

Brianna nodded. Rose could tell by the subtle squint of her blue eyes she was attempting to mask some pain.

“I would love to have recovered by the day of the exhibition, but only time will tell. In the meantime, there are no words to express my gratitude for having you step in on my behalf. Mia, who I trust dearly, sings your praises. I can’t thank her enough for introducing us. She’ll be attending the event?”

“Yes, she confirmed with me. We’ve grown quite close. Did she tell you how we met?”

“She said it was at one of your shows.”

“That’s right. About five years ago in San Francisco, she attended one of my exhibits on an artist she’d been following. We’ve been great friends ever since. When she told me about this opportunity, I didn’t hesitate to answer the call.”

Brianna’s phone buzzed. “Speaking of calls, my apologies; I need to take this,” Brianna held up an index finger and answered her phone.

Rose looked around. The room seemed more like a library than a study. The long wall to her left housed an ebony-stained wooden bookshelf stretching floor to ceiling, lined with books of various heights and thicknesses. Sprinkled throughout the shelves was an eclectic grouping of paintings. An abstract by Joan Miró sat on a shelf opposite a portrait of a little girl by Mary Cassatt. Adjacent to the bookshelf was an oversized gilded mirror leaned against a striate-painted wall

mimicking fabric. In the mirror, Rose could see her reflection alongside Niall's, who was watching her watching him. She wanted to know more about this man whose stare she felt at her core, but she would not allow herself to be distracted. That was not the purpose of her visit. She dropped her eyes and looked at Brianna instead.

"I'm sorry about that, Rose. My doctor is checking up on me. Do you have everything you need?"

"I received your email with the gallery plans and your guest list. I'll schedule time with you later this week to review the proposed theme and run-of-show before we get too far down the planning. My team is doing a gallery walkthrough, but I expect we have everything we need."

Brianna stood and walked towards Niall, who had quietly observed their exchange.

"Perfect. I'm relieved you're here. I know we are in good hands, and the exhibition will be spectacular. You and your team have the full range of the property. If you can find the time, I suggest you familiarize yourself with my private art collection. I sometimes incorporate pieces into gallery showings. You're welcome to do the same. Now, please forgive me. I need to get some rest. My brothers are here helping me, although at times, a little overprotective. Especially this one." Brianna shot a glance at Niall. "But they can make themselves available to you if you need anything."

Rose and Niall stepped aside, allowing Brianna to pass and exit the room. Niall's eyes stayed fixed on Rose's, and his lips slightly quirked up on one side whenever she unintentionally glanced his way. Rose forced a subtle smile to mask the range of emotions she felt. Jet lag was beginning to kick in. She felt the anxiety to impress her client and pressure to deliver a fantastic exhibit on behalf of Brianna and herself.

It all left her feeling exhausted. The room felt like it was starting to spin. Rose leaned back slightly, allowing her shoulder to rest on the trim of the doorframe, but she quickly adjusted her posture to avoid the perception of fatigue. *Breathe*, she told herself.

“Are you okay?” Niall’s voice was low and calming. “If you’re tired, your room is on the second floor in the front of the house overlooking the courtyard. I think you’ll find it very accommodating. I can show you the way.” Niall gestured toward the hallway.

“I’m okay. My things are still in the car.”

“I’ll have someone on staff take care of that. Is that okay?” Niall asked. Rose nodded.

Something about Niall’s presence helped her relax. A few seconds of silence passed between them before she spoke up. “So, is there anyone else here I need to meet? Brianna hinted that your brother is here, and I recall seeing two cars in the driveway. I’d like to meet him if he’s available.”

Niall’s lips parted slightly, then curled into a hungry smile. He moved closer, leaned down, and lowered his right hand to retrieve her stilettos while holding her gaze. His scent, an earthy-sweet mix of cardamom and plum, wafted past her. She tried but failed to hold her breath, allowing him to satiate her senses. Rose wondered how many Irish women had fallen prey to the sweet-smelling blue-eyed god gazing back at her.

“No one of particular importance. I’ll get your things ready for you,” he said before disappearing into the foyer with her shoes.

Rose didn’t wait for Niall’s return. She had work to do. Art lovers, celebrities, and socialites from across Europe would descend upon that location to witness a spectacular art showing in twenty-eight days. She had magic to work. So, she exited barefoot through the patio doors taking



the long-paved path leading to the row of vehicles. There, she met with Troy, whose eyes were fixed on her every move as she powered toward him. Although she didn't know the exact details of things he did or had done to keep her safe, he was the one person she felt completely safe around.

Rose gently placed a hand on Troy's shoulder, which relaxed beneath her fingers. "I suppose Kris is in the gallery?" she asked.

"He went to the gallery to take pictures and measurements and prepare an inventory list. I can walk you over to Kris now. He'll take your things into the house when he's through in the gallery." Rose shifted her weight from one leg to the other. Troy looked down. "Better yet, wait here; let me grab your shoes from the car," he said, taking long strides toward the car.

"Niall sent the staff for my luggage. Just grab my driving shoes from the passenger seat," Rose called to Troy, who was already near the car.

Within a few seconds, he returned and placed the shoes on the ground near Rose. She looked down, wiggled her toes, then stepped into her tan-colored Birkenstocks that served as a pleasant break from her stilettos.

"How are you feeling about staying here versus in town?"

"I realize it's a disruption in our normal routine, but with Niall and his brother here, I'll be fine. This will also give you a little time to yourself after hours."

"I can't take time to myself when it comes to your security. Besides, I'm not here on vacation."

"I just meant things seem low-key here. Consider this. Once I get settled for the evening, I'll let you know when it's time to leave. Later, I'll text you at our usual time to confirm things are good before I crash.

Does that work for you?” Rose knew Troy needed every detail mapped out. Neither of them liked surprises.

“I can work with that.”



THE SUN LAY PARALLEL TO THE HORIZON, CAUSING THE FINAL RAYS OF light to reflect against the house, highlighting it in vibrant flows of color. Rose exited the gallery, where she had spent a significant part of the afternoon familiarizing herself with the structure of each room to update her renderings. She wanted to explore the grounds while there was still light, so she walked back through the courtyard toward the main house.

Once inside the u-shaped courtyard, she could fully appreciate the centuries-old home’s grand scale. Rose imagined the space as a gathering spot for people to converge throughout the exhibition. She envisioned patrons standing around highboy tables having drinks and networking following the show. Rose looked to see her room perched on the cornerstone of the house and was generous enough to overlook the gallery and the courtyard entrance. Next to her room, in one of the large, picturesque windows, she spotted the silhouette of a man sitting in the window. It appeared his attention was on something in his hand. The glow reflected upon his face told her it was a digital device. *That must be Aedan*, she thought. “Why haven’t you come down to meet me?” she asked aloud, knowing he couldn’t hear her.

Rose continued walking until her path led her through a slight transition point to the pool area at the rear of the house. Maybe she

would string fairy lights on the patio and add some additional lounge seating and coffee tables for when patrons made their way poolside. She contemplated whether to add floating flower arrangements with lights in the pool. “Maybe I can use these,” she spoke to herself when she reached a patch of lavender.

She picked a few flowers, rubbed them in her hands, raised them to her nose, closed her eyes, and inhaled. Her mind wandered to her childhood best friend, whose parents grew lavender, educating her about the flower’s various uses. Rose liked the scent of lavender so much that she made spritz water with it, and when she got older, she combined it with vanilla and made it her signature scent.

“Rose.” The deep familiar voice shattered the silence and pulled her out of her thoughts. When she turned, she saw that Troy stood a few feet from her.

“It’s a good thing I know hand-to-hand combat. I didn’t hear you coming.”

“You didn’t notice me because you’re distracted,” Troy smiled while gesturing his hand for her to lead the way forward.

“I feel a lecture coming,” Rose continued walking.

“I’m not a professor. I’m here to protect you. This property is immense, and the woods are quite dense. I need to be with you if you plan on exploring. But you know that already.”

Rose turned and narrowed her eyes at Troy. “It feels a little dramatic, don’t you think?”

“I know you don’t mean that. You’re easily distracted when under pressure. It’s a defense mechanism. My job is to keep that in mind and ensure you’re covered. You say you never want to know what’s happening behind the scenes, then stick to protocol.”

Rose feigned a frown. “I should have drop-kicked you the second you called my name.”

“Next time, you can show me what you got. Are you ready to head in?” Troy looked to Rose for a response.

“I suppose. There’s a lot to do, and the best way through this is one day at a time.” Rose opened her hands to let the crushed flowers fall to the ground, then reluctantly headed toward the house.