



Rose
HOUSE

A NOVEL



TINA ANN FORKNER

Praise for
Rose House

“In *Rose House*, Tina Ann Forkner brings us back to the beauty of California wine country and draws us into a story fit for the misty gothic moors. Just as the Rose House itself sits within a mass of beautiful, entwined roses and vines, so is the story nestled in a masterful weaving of secrets, betrayals, hope, and healing.”

—ALLISON PITTMAN, author of *Stealing Home*
and *Saturdays with Stella*

“Tina Ann Forkner pens a compelling tale of betrayal and grief of hope and forgiveness in *Rose House*. The unique setting and her lyrical descriptions enticed me into the scene, where I was captivated by the appealing characters and the story’s underlying mystery. I couldn’t put it down.”

—ANE MULLIGAN, editor and weekly columnist,
Novel Journey blog

“With *Rose House*, Tina Ann Forkner paints a breathtaking canvas of lush prose brushstrokes. Don’t get lulled into a sense of calm; the story line casts suspenseful shadows on this masterpiece of women’s fiction. Delightful!”

—PATTI LACY, author of *An Irishwoman’s Tale*
and *What the Bayou Saw*

“Captivating, mysterious, and romantically enticing, Forkner’s *Rose House* keeps the pages turning.”

—ALICE J. WISLER, author of *Rain Song*
and *How Sweet It Is*

Praise for
Ruby Among Us
by Tina Ann Forkner

“*Ruby Among Us* is a powerful story that will linger long after reading it. Forkner’s writing transported me to California’s vineyards and wove a fascinating saga of how secrets and decisions impact the lives of following generations—and how love can redeem.”

—CINDY WOODSMALL, *New York Times* best-selling author
of *When the Morning Comes*

“Ms. Forkner has given us a gift that like fine music rises at an ever-spiraling pace. Neither rushed nor delayed, *Ruby Among Us* offers a satisfying journey I will long remember.”

—JANE KIRKPATRICK, award-winning author
of *A Mending at the Edge*

“A multigenerational saga of hope, regret, and the grace that brings us home, *Ruby Among Us* evokes an invitational sense of place, a cache of characters you enjoy knowing, and a story that rips and mends your heart all at once.”

—MARY E. DEMUTH, author of *Watching the Tree Limbs*
and *Wishing on Dandelions*

“Reading is a passion of mine, and when I find myself identifying with the characters, anxious to get to the next page to find answers to my questions, I know I’m into a good book! The daughter-mother-grandmother theme in *Ruby Among Us* pulled me in. Wonderful storytelling.”

—JORDIN SPARKS, 2007 winner of *American Idol*

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PRESS

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*For my parents,
Dennis and Barbara Ann Gray*

IT SEEMED TO BE A COTTAGE that was alive, but it was only the vines twining in on themselves and clinging to the structure that were living, not unlike the memories and feelings people had attached to the house over time, making it mean more than mere sticks, pieces of wood, nails, and peeling paint could ever imply on their own.

The camera zoomed out to trace the rose brambles wrapping along the awning, curling over the banister and into the flowering borders along one side of the porch. The rest of the house gradually came into view, filling the scene with an abundance of roses in shades of scarlet draping the windows like curtains, then rambling across the roof, around the chimney and sweeping to the edges of the house, where they seemed to reach out their thorny branches toward passersby.

The lens didn't capture the woman's form at first as it swept away from the house down toward the yard and footpath with its border of snow white Shasta daisies and purple coneflowers. It leisurely zoomed in on a mass of daisies, capturing the breeze that sent an occasional ripple through the border, until the camera was forced to pause at the surprise interruption: a foot that intruded on the otherwise perfect scene.

To the artist behind the lens it was an exquisitely formed foot with a milky white ankle and pink-painted toenails. The lens suddenly tightened its view to capture the sandal decorated with pink and white pearlescent beads and a delicate pink ribbon that wound around the ankle and tied neatly above the heel.

The camera's focus rose to the hem of a white peasant skirt that billowed softly in the breeze. Traveling upward, the lens skimmed long sleeves of gauzy blue adorned with tiny silver beads that crisscrossed both shoulders, edging along the neckline where beads dangled from the ends of a pink ribbon tie. The camera paused on a silver cross pendant that sparkled with the morning sunrise, glinting off the red jewel nested in the center. Moving up her profile, the lens traced blond tendrils escaping from beaded combs that held back her amber-streaked hair threatening to tumble from a loosely arranged bun. The lens paused, studying the dampness of her flushed cheeks, the unsteady rhythm to which her shoulders rose and fell, how her slight body slumped forward just a little, as if she might throw herself at the mercy of the house.

She straightened, startled, when a succession of clicks broke the silence surrounding the Rose House. Rather abruptly, the lens zoomed out. She was looking directly into the camera. More clicks. Her reddened eyes grew wide as she turned unexpectedly and ran down the path toward the main house of the Frances-DiCamillo Vineyards.

The camera zoomed in on her departing figure, following her for a moment, capturing in its lens the way her glossy hair slipped from its bun and cascaded over her shoulders. After a few more clicks, the lens panned back to the house, zooming in on a flawless wine-colored blossom. It was a perfect rose, a work of art.

Click.



LILLIAN DROPPED HER CAMERA INTO her pocket. She had thought she was alone, but someone else was there, taking pictures of the Rose House—and of her. Ice encircled the nape of her neck as she recalled the words of the investigators.

“You probably shouldn’t be alone until we have this figured out,” they had said. But she’d gone against their advice, not even telling them she was taking a trip alone to La Rosaleda.

She paled as the man continued to photograph her *Why is he taking pictures of me?* Then she noticed a second man. He was too far away to distinguish his features, but she could see that he held a cell phone to his ear and wore a hat and jacket, even though the morning wasn’t cool.

Her hand flew to her mouth as he strode toward her. Her pulse raced and the chill on her arms seem to lift her skin away as she turned to him. *Who are these men?*

“There is more to this than you think, Mrs. Hastings, the investigator had told her. “Your family might have been murdered.”

“Impossible!” she had cried, but the news footage of her precious babies and husband, covered with bloodstained sheets and lying dead beside Mosquito Road, had rolled through her mind, just as it had every day since she’d seen it on the local television station.

“Have you seen your sister since the accident, ma’am?”

Geena’s face on the news had revealed shock and guilt, obviously distraught at the sight of her niece, nephew, and brother-in-law lying lifelessly nearby. What had her sister been doing there?

Lillian nearly tripped when the tie on one of her sandals came loose. She reached down and pulled off her sandal to keep running, fleeing thoughts of murderers and a traitorous sister. Not sure where she should go, she ran into the Frances-DiCamillo Vineyard tasting room, where tourists were gathering. She wanted to scream for help as she flew through the doorway, but she regained her composure when curious eyes turned to study her.

She turned to peer outside, careful not to lean so far out the door that she might be seen by her pursuers. She expelled a burst of air. The men she thought had been watching her were nowhere to be seen. She smoothed her hair and straightened her disheveled skirt, thinking of how paranoid she had become.

She was so distracted by her thoughts that she didn't notice the older woman when she spun away from the door. They crashed together. Lillian was horrified at seeing the woman wobbling on her cane and grabbed hold of her to steady her balance.

"Whatever is the matter?" said the woman. "What are you running from, dear?"

The woman peered at her through concerned eyes.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am." Lillian, still holding her sandal in one hand, patted the woman's arm. "I am so sorry."

"It's quite okay." The woman glanced down at Lillian's feet. "Whatever happened to your shoe? Come, sit down and put it back on. Catch your breath and tell Kitty what the matter is."

Lillian's eyes widened as she looked more closely at the woman. Everyone in the region knew who Kitty was, and Lillian recalled seeing her face recently on a television program. Assisted by her cane, the woman guided Lillian through the tasting room and into her office.

"You are Kitty? Mrs. DiCamillo?"

“Technically I’m Kitty Birkirt, but try telling that to anyone besides me and my husband. I think people will think of me as a DiCamillo until the day I die.”

Lillian tried to hide her surprise. This was truly Kitty DiCamillo, the owner of the Frances-DiCamillo Vineyards. The Rose House had been her home decades ago, built for her by her husband, Blake. Lillian recalled the story. Blake and Kitty had had a falling out decades earlier. During their estrangement, Blake had cared for the vineyard. Kitty had been gone for so long that, during her absence, the roses Blake planted around their cottage had engulfed it, earning it its nickname, the Rose House.

Kitty, her caramel skin complemented by a red muumuu-style dress, smiled at Lillian. “Is everything okay, dear? It looked like you were afraid of something when you came barreling through the door.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I thought some men were—” She paused, shaking her head. “It’s difficult to explain, but I thought someone was following me.”

“Following you?” She looked alarmed. “One moment, dear.” She leaned on her cane and walked toward a young man. Lillian watched through the open doorway as Kitty said something in Spanish to him. He nodded at Kitty and walked outside.

When Kitty returned, she sat down and patted Lillian’s hand. “I’ve asked security to look around. Can I get you a cup of tea?”

Lillian risked a smile. “As nice as that sounds, Mrs.—”

“Just Kitty.” She nodded.

“Thank you for the offer, Kitty, but I really need to get back home.”

“Where is home?”

“Sacramento.”

“Ah. A nice city. You are here with your husband? A little getaway?” She glanced at Lillian’s wedding ring.

Lillian's smile faded and she looked away. Kitty began to apologize. Lillian shook her head again. "It's okay. Anyone would think I'm married since I'm still wearing this." She held up her hand to show her wedding ring. "I'm a widow."

Kitty nodded, admiring the ring. Lillian laughed in an effort to keep tears at bay.

Understanding registered on Kitty's face as she reached for Lillian's hand. "It's recent, I can see. I'm so sorry to have pried, dear. And I didn't mean to gawk at your ring. It's just that it is stunningly beautiful." She patted Lillian's hand. "He must have loved you very much, dear." The words cut through Lillian, but she kept her face calm. Kitty continued her questions. "And your children—do you have children?"

"My children too. They aren't here, because—" Lillian glanced at her feet. "They are—" Kitty understood without needing to hear the rest of the sentence. She gave Lillian's hand a squeeze.

"I wish you would stay and have some tea, child."

Lillian would have liked to but couldn't explain her need to get back to Sacramento as soon as possible. She wanted to brighten up her family's resting place by planting flowers there.

She sat with Kitty for a few more minutes, talking about the vineyard's gardens and the Rose House, until a middle-aged man in black slacks and a white shirt walked in. He spotted Lillian through the open doorway and walked toward her.

"Mrs. Hastings, are you ready for the car?"

She nodded at her chauffeur, then turned toward Kitty. "I'm sorry for nearly knocking you over. I was just being silly. I'm sure nobody was following me." Her heart hammered at the memory of those men, but she didn't want to burden Kitty with her problems.

Lillian stood to leave but stopped all at once before a painting of the

Rose House. She stood in front of it, transfixed by how the painted images nearly came off the canvas at her. The way the roses rambled over the roof swept her into its warm colors. Unwittingly, she reached her fingertips toward the roses, their exquisite detail inviting her to touch them. Her hand hovered there but then drew back. She didn't want to harm the painting, but the roses looked so real, she felt transported. It was as if she stood, captivated, before the real Rose House.

"It is lovely, isn't it?" Kitty said.

"Yes, it's striking, almost as if the house is alive. It has a personality."

"Of sorts," said Kitty.

"Hopeful."

"I have noticed," Kitty said, "that people often describe the Rose House by whatever is in their hearts. Sad, cheerful, sentimental, and even hopeful, like you." She smiled knowingly. "I once asked the artist what he was feeling when he painted it, but he wouldn't tell me."

Lillian leaned in to read the artist's signature, but it was too small to identify. "Who is he?"

"Truman Clark, our little town's claim to fame. He is the painter of roses."

"I would love to see the rest of his work."

Kitty smiled. "You should be able to find it in Sacramento. I know for a fact that his paintings are on display at the private university's gallery. Do you know of it?"

"I do. I'll visit it," said Lillian.

"Let me know if you don't find his work, and I'll find out where he is exhibiting in your area." Kitty handed Lillian her number. "Call if you ever want to talk about painting or anything else. I'm a good listener. We could have tea." She squeezed Lillian's hand. "I doubt grief ever goes away, dear, but the good Lord willing, it will soften in time. It has for me."

Kitty's smile was so genuine, Lillian felt drawn, but the newness of grief residing so close to the surface kept her silent. Her eyes glistened at the kindness of Kitty's offer, but she did have her adoptive mother to talk to. Of course, Aunt Bren lived far away in Oklahoma, and her sister seemed to have disappeared, so really she was alone.

She returned Kitty's smile. "Maybe I will, sometime." Saying good-bye, she reached out to shake her hand, but Kitty gently brushed the hand aside as she leaned in and gave Lillian an affectionate hug.



During the drive back to Sacramento, the familiar swell of the vineyards stirred memories of times she and Robert had visited wine country. They had both loved it, but truth be told, she and Geena had spent more time together in the Sonoma and Napa Valleys than Lillian had spent there with Robert. *Geena would have loved the Rose House*, mused Lillian, her heart growing heavy. Lillian had happened upon the well-known site once she arrived in La Rosaleda, trying to escape the emptiness of the quiet house she'd shared with her family only twelve days earlier.

Studying the trees as they passed through a heavily wooded area of the valley, she thought about the men she'd encountered at the Rose House. She regretted asking her driver to leave her at the vineyard alone, but the investigators' warning had seemed unfounded at the time. She considered mentioning the incident to Jake now but decided there was no need to worry him.

Jake had been her favorite driver for a long time, but she couldn't bother him with her problems. It was enough that he was kind to her, patient with her silence, and never asked personal questions. He had given up a personal day off just to take her on her much-needed drive away from Sacramento, where nothing waited but loneliness and grief.

She hadn't expected to find such beauty on this morning so soon after Sheyenne and Lee, with their curling ebony hair and liquid-blue eyes, were so violently ripped from her life. Like their cherub smiles, the lines of the cottage had etched themselves into her mind. Nestled within the thorny vines and softened by sloping vivid red arcs of rambling roses, the beauty of the cottage seemed to have spoken gentle words to her tired spirit. At least it had until those men showed up.

"Would you like to stop anywhere before we reach the interstate, Mrs. Hastings?" Jake's voice boomed into the backseat, surprising her. She smiled at him in the rearview mirror and shook her head.

"No, thank you."

Looking out the window at the vineyards, which stretched on for miles, she stroked the velvety petals she'd taken from the ground beside the Rose House and imagined her children weren't gone at all and that her husband was sitting beside her in the car. The twins would have loved the Rose House, and she could imagine them running around the house, dipping behind the brambles and through the gardens, playing hide-and-seek.

Warmth filled her chest as it had on the morning of the accident. It seemed such a short time ago, she'd kissed them both on their little faces before putting them into their daddy's car, kissing his cheek too, and sending them off to their lessons. Swirling grief welled and stretched into her throat.

Ignoring sad eyes that periodically glanced at her through the rearview mirror, she lifted the rose petals and brushed them in a circle against her cheek, a loving caress from what had passed from her life. She moved them to her mouth, feeling their softness graze her lips, and imagined she could hold Sheyenne and Lee one last time, their soft kisses warm against her face. Taking a ragged breath, she let the rose petals fall onto her lap. Her shoulders shook with the immensity of her grief as she tried

to brush the petals away, until they lay crushed and bruised on the floor, like her dreams.

Jake's eyes in the mirror clouded, but he said nothing. He had driven her to the cemetery every day since the funeral and knew that she only wanted silence.

Two hours later, he pulled into the cemetery without being asked. He didn't make it around to open her door before she was out of the car and stumbling toward the gravestones.