

RACHAEL FERNANDES

say
what
you
think

Fox & Ink Books



One

*Call it over
Call it whenever
But for one night
We'll be together*

‘Call It’ from *The In-Between*

‘THREE, TWO, ONE,’ we chorus in unison, watching the timer on my laptop screen tick down.

Spotify refreshes and there it is, each greyed-out song title changing to shiny tappable white: Rose Conrad’s new album, *The In-Between*.

All three of us scream. Kira grabs me. ‘What are you waiting for? Let’s put it on!’

I immediately press play, listening with heightened senses. It’s impressive how awake I feel, considering it’s midnight and it feels like I’ve been up forever at this point. At least Rose

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Conrad released this during the summer holidays, so we could listen to it all night.

At this exclusive listening party are Kira, Faye and me. And by exclusive, I mean I didn't invite anyone else because right now all I need are these two. We've been Rose Conrad fans since Year 7, when her first album came out. In fact, I think it's the reason we're all friends. I had a pin of her signature rose symbol on my blazer and Faye shyly asked me about it, and then Kira loudly asked me about it, and it's been the three of us ever since.

The first listen, we sit in near silence, only quickly speaking during the outros.

'Ooh, that one was good.'

'The chorus is *brutal*.'

'Oh wow, did you see she's announced a tour for this?' This is followed by more screaming.

Then on the second listen, more raptured comments.

'I think this one is about that year she spent in Paris,' says Faye.

'She mentioned it in the Vogue interview,' says Kira.

'*Your words are sharp as diamonds, but as dark as coal* is a line.'

"Call It" as a single doesn't describe the complexity of this whole album.'

Around the fourth listen, we're all getting sleepy. I turn off the music, and we all clamber into my bed. Only-child privileges means my king-size bed can safely fit all three of us.

‘You know why I love Rose Conrad?’ I say. I catch a glimpse of us in the mirror next to my bed. We are certainly an ethnically diverse British collection: myself, Indian; Faye, Irish; and Kira, Ghanaian. Kira likes to call us the Neapolitan.

‘Is Selena Pia, the world’s biggest Rose Conrad fan, only going to give us one reason?’ says Kira, yawning and nearly smacking me in the face. Okay, maybe this king-size bed doesn’t work for three.

‘Yeah, can you say anything about Rose Conrad without bursting into a speech?’ says Faye.

I roll my eyes and continue. ‘It’s because every time she releases a new album, I feel like something pivotal is going to happen in my life. The last time she did, it was our GCSE year, remember? Faye, you had that thing with Eric—’

‘We shall not mention his name,’ says Faye, holding up her hand.

‘And Mum’s arthritis had just got worse, and the album really helped me through it.’

‘Ahem,’ says Kira.

‘Oh, and Kira was really worried about not having the top GCSE result in our year,’ I say, deadly seriously, and this time she hits me on purpose.

‘The point,’ I continue, ‘is that Rose Conrad always releases an album at the moment something new is happening. And we’re going into upper sixth this year. It is a big year. And this album is going to be the soundtrack to the year.’

I feel inspired and moved by my speech.

‘Or you might be taking your English A level too seriously and reading into symbols that aren’t there,’ says Kira.

I shove her and she falls out of the bed laughing.



The next day, Faye leaves early as she’s working in her parents’ shop, so Kira and I have breakfast together.

‘I’ve got to go around lunchtime. No binge-watching TV,’ says Kira. ‘There’s a summer Young New Left party meet up that I want to make in London.’

‘I can’t believe it’s nearly the end of the summer holidays and you want to spend it talking about politics. You’ll be back to studying it in a couple of weeks,’ I say.

‘I need all of this for my uni applications,’ says Kira. ‘I want to be as prepared as possible. This girl ain’t going to make it to Prime Minister by slacking!’

Kira is obsessed with becoming Prime Minister. Considering she’s Black and a woman, the statistics aren’t in her favour, but good for her. But rather than a pipe dream at eighteen, she’s making it her life mission to do everything possible to get there as soon as she can. It’s either genius or delusional, I can’t say. Either way, it’s a drive that I don’t have.

‘You need to start thinking about what you’re going to put on your application,’ says Kira. ‘You don’t have any extracurriculars.’

‘I do cross country,’ I say. ‘Occasionally.’ When the weather

looks okay and I feel like turning up to practice. Which, with the weather in England, isn't that frequently.

'Yeah, but nothing subject-related. How are you going to show you care about what you want to study?'

'I don't even know what I want to study yet,' I say, picking at my cereal with my spoon.

'You need to sort that out too, Selena,' says Kira, pointing her spoon at me. 'Time is running out. You've got until January to do your application.'

I sigh and put my bowl in the dishwasher. I know for Kira the deadline is motivational, but for me it brings a torrent of anxiety.

'How was your listening party?' says Mum, saving us from the argument. She walks into the kitchen with a slight hobble. Everyone can tell Mum and I are related: we're both tall, slight, and have the same long faces and wide eyes. When I learnt about cloning in Year 8 Biology, I joked to Mum that it had basically happened with me because we look the same. Plus, I have no idea who my dad is, so for all I know I could have one set of genetics. Mum assured me I definitely have two.

'It is unreal,' says Kira, just as I say—

'Phenomenal, outstanding, the album is another lyrical masterpiece,' I say.

'Good to see that English A level is coming into use with your vocabulary,' says Mum, moving towards the kettle.

I get ahead of her and start making her a cup of tea. She shakes her head but goes and sits down at the dining table.

This is her first tea of the day. Of about fifteen. I don't know how she's never jittery, the amount of caffeine she consumes in tea form.

'You know we study books and write essays, not learn the thesaurus?' I say, handing her the mug.

'I know, I know.' She laughs. 'I've done my time with essays.'

Mum used to be a museum curator, back in the day, despite not going to university. She went around the world, as an archeologist's assistant, then got pregnant and moved back here and became an art dealer and sat on the board of some museums. While she was there, she long-distanced her degree and graduated when I was twelve. Then she got some joint problems, and couldn't commute into Central London any more, so now she is a programme manager for the Croydon museum. She went from working in some of the most prestigious artistic places in the world, to our hometown museum, which barely anyone visits. Even the people who work there mostly work from home.

'How's it going, Kira?' says Mum. 'What are you doing today?'

'I'm going to a Young New Left meet up,' says Kira. 'For my uni application.' She looks at me pointedly.

'And have you thought any more about your uni application?' says Mum, turning to me.

I look away. 'No.'

She sighs. 'Okay, well think about it? You can talk to me.'

And normally I do talk to Mum about everything. I know

both of us want me to go to university, but as I watch her shuffle out of the door, I wonder: how can I leave her alone here by herself, while I go away?