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NORA ROBERTS

Black Rose

Book Two of the **In the Garden** Trilogy

NORA
ROBERTS

Black rose



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Dear Reader:

When spring slides toward summer, and the flood of color from my azaleas has faded, the heavy heads of my peonies have given way to a dance of daylilies, my flower beds are approaching peak. I like mixed gardens, cottage gardens, shade gardens, herb gardens, sunny cutting gardens. I have nothing formal—formality wouldn't work for me, or my land. I live on a rocky hillside, with rough, uneven ground, but love finds a way. And I love flowers.

I have a long, long stream of raised beds behind my house, and more lining the land down my long front slope. They're a lot of work to maintain, and a great joy for me. In summer, I have purple floods of centaurea, feathery red heads of monarda, cheery yellow petals of coreopsis, pools of sage, and oceans of black-eyed Susans. The columbine and coralbells are done for the season, but there's always something new budding up or bursting out. Veronica, coneflowers, verbena, garden phlox, nasturtium. At a recent trip to a garden center, my son commented that I probably had everything in the place already. Because I rarely see a plant I can resist, there's always something spilling or spearing or spreading.

So are the weeds I hunt out and destroy like a soldier on an endless mission.

In the shade, my astilbes are fanning their soft plumes, and my hostas are islands of soothing green. The deer love the hostas, and I love the deer. But that doesn't stop me from warding them off. I pour bags of dried blood and spray gallons of vile-smelling deer repellent annually. And have been known to run out of the house waving my arms like a mad-woman if I spot a deer snacking on my dianthus or morning glories. I have dogs, but they don't seem to be interested in guarding my flowers against Bambi.

Take a walk in the garden. Pull a weed, smell a flower. See if it doesn't make you smile.

NORA ROBERTS

Number-one bestselling author Nora Roberts presents the second novel of her *In the Garden* trilogy, as three women must discover the secrets from the past contained within their historic home . . .

A Harper has always lived at Harper House, the centuries-old mansion just outside of Memphis. And for as long as anyone alive remembers, the ghostly Harper Bride has walked the halls, singing lullabies at night . . .

At forty-seven, Rosalind Harper is a woman whose experiences have made her strong enough to bend without breaking—and weather any storm. A widow with three grown sons, she survived a disastrous second marriage and built her *In the Garden* nursery from the ground up. Through the years, *In the Garden* has become more than just a thriving business—it is a symbol of hope and independence to Roz, and to the two women she shares it with. Newlywed Stella and new mother Hayley are the sisters of her heart, and together, the three of them are the future of *In the Garden*.

But now the future is under attack, and Roz knows they can't fight this battle alone. Hired to investigate Roz's Harper ancestors, Dr. Mitchell Carnegie finds himself just as intrigued with Roz herself. And as they begin to unravel the puzzle of the Harper Bride's identity, Roz is shocked to find herself falling for the fascinating genealogist. Now it is a desperate race to discover the truth ~~before the~~ unpredictable apparition lashes out at the one woman who can help her rest in peace . . .

“Roberts shines.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

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PROLOGUE



Memphis, Tennessee

December 1892

SHE DRESSED CAREFULLY, ATTENDING TO THE DETAILS of her appearance as she hadn't done for months. Her personal maid had run off weeks before, and she had neither the wit nor the will to hire another. So she spent an hour with the curling rods herself—as she had in the years before she'd been kept so lavishly—meticulously coiling and arranging her freshly rinsed hair.

It had lost its bright gold luster over the long, bleary autumn, but she knew what lotions and potions would bring back its shine, what pots of paint to select to put false color in her cheeks, on her lips.

She knew all the tricks of the trade. How else could she have caught the eye of a man like Reginald Harper? How else had she seduced him into making her his mistress?

She would use them again, all of them, Amelia thought, to seduce him once more, and to urge him to do everything that must be done.

He hadn't come, in all this time, in all these months, he hadn't come to her. So she'd been forced to send notes to his businesses, begging him to come, only to be ignored.

Ignored after all she had done, all she had been, all she had lost.

What choice had she had but to send more notes, and to his home? To the grand Harper House where his pale wife reigned. Where a mistress could never walk.

Hadn't she given ~~him~~ all he could ask, all he could want? She'd traded her body for the comfort of this house, the convenience of servants, for the baubles, like the pearl drops she fixed on her ears now.

Small prices to pay for a man of his stature and wealth, and such had been the limits of her ambitions once. A man only, and what he could give her. But he'd given her more than either ~~of them~~ had bargained for. The loss of it was more than she could bear.

Why had he not come to comfort her? To grieve with her?

Had she complained, ever? Had she ever turned him from her bed? Or mentioned even once the other women he kept?

She had given him her youth, and her beauty. And, it seemed, her health.

And he would desert her now? Turn away from her *now*?

They said the baby had been dead at birth. Stillborn, they said. A stillborn girl child that had perished inside her.

But . . . but . . .

Hadn't she felt it move? Felt it kick, and grow vital under her heart? In her heart. This child she hadn't wanted who had become her world. Her life. The son she grew inside her.

The son, the son, she thought now as her fingers plucked at the buttons of her gown, as her painted lips formed the words over and over.

She'd heard him cry. Yes, yes, she was sure of it. Sometimes she heard him cry still, in the night, crying for her to come and soothe him.

But when she went to the nursery, looked in the crib, it was empty. Like her womb was empty.

They said she was mad. Oh, she heard what servants she had left whispering, she saw the way they looked at her. But she wasn't mad.

Wasn't mad, wasn't mad, she told herself as she paced the bedroom she'd once treated like a palace of sensuality.

Now the linens were rarely changed, and the drapes always drawn tight to block out the city. And things went missing. Her servants were thieves. Oh, she knew they were thieves and scoundrels. And spies.

They watched her, and they whispered.

One night they would kill her in her bed. One night.

She couldn't sleep for the fear of it. Couldn't sleep for the cries of her son inside her head. Calling her. Calling her.

But she'd gone to the voodoo queen, she reminded herself. Gone to her for protection, and knowledge. She'd paid for both with the ruby bracelet Reginald had once given her. The stones shaped like bloody hearts against the icy glitter of diamonds.

She'd paid for the gris-gris she kept under her pillow, and in a silk bag over her heart. She'd paid, and dearly, for the raising spell. A spell that had failed.

Because her child lived. This was the knowledge the voodoo queen had given her, and it was worth more than ten thousand rubies.

Her child lived, he lived, and now he must be found. He must be brought back to her, where he belonged.

Reginald must find him, must pay whatever needed to be paid.

Careful, careful, she warned herself as she felt the scream beating at her throat. He would only believe her if she remained calm. He would only heed her if she were beautiful.

Beauty seduced men. With beauty and charm, a woman could have whatever she wanted.

She turned to the mirror and saw what she needed to see. Beauty, charm, grace. She didn't see that the red gown sagged at the breasts, bagged at the hips, and turned her pale skin a sallow yellow. The mirror reflected the tum-bling tangle of curls, the overbright eyes, and the harshly rouged cheeks, but her eyes, Amelia's eyes, saw what she had once been.

Young and beautiful, desirable and sly.

So she went downstairs to wait for her lover, and under her breath, she sang.

"Lavender's blue, dilly, dilly. Lavender's green."

In the parlor a fire was burning, and the gaslight was lit. So the servants would be careful, too, she thought with a tight smile. They knew the master was expected, and the master held the purse strings.

No matter, she would tell Reginald they needed to go, all of them, and be replaced.

And she wanted a nursemaid hired for her son, for James, when he was returned to her. An Irish girl, she thought. They were cheerful around babies, she believed. She wanted a cheerful nursery for her James.

Though she eyed the whiskey on the sideboard, she poured a small glass of wine instead. And settled down to wait.

Her nerves began to fray as the hour grew late. She had a second glass of wine, then a third. And when she saw through the window his carriage pull up, she forgot to be careful and calm and flew to the door herself.

"Reginald. Reginald." Her grief and despair sprang out of her like snakes, hissing and coiling. She threw herself at him.

"Control yourself, Amelia." His hands closed over her bony shoulders, nudged her back. "What will the neighbors say?"

He shut the door quickly, then with one steely look had a hovering servant rushing forward to take his hat and walking stick.

"I don't care! Oh, why haven't you come sooner? I've needed you so. Did you get my letters? The servants, the servants lie. They didn't post them. I'm a prisoner here."

"Don't be ridiculous." A momentary disgust flickered over his face as he evaded her next attempt at an embrace. "We agreed you'd never attempt to contact me at my home, Amelia."

"You didn't come. I've been alone. I—"

"I've been occupied. Come now. Sit. Compose yourself."

Still, she clung to his arm as he led her into the parlor. "Reginald. The baby. The baby."

"Yes, yes." He disentangled himself, nudged her into a chair. "It's unfortunate," he said as he moved to the sideboard to pour himself a whiskey. "The doctor said there was nothing to be done, and you needed rest and quiet. I've heard you've been unwell."

"Lies. It's all a lie."

He turned to her, his gaze taking in her face, the ill-fitting gown. "I can see for myself you're not well, Amelia. I think perhaps some sea air. It would do you good." His smile was cool as he leaned back against the mantel. "How would you like an ocean crossing? I think it would be just the thing to calm your nerves and bring you back to health."

"I want my *child*. He's all I need."

"The child is gone."

"No, no, no." She sprang up to clutch at him again. "They stole him. He lives, Reginald. Our child lives. The doctor, the midwife, they planned it. I know it all now, I understand it all. You must go to the police, Reginald. They'll listen to you. You must pay whatever ransom they demand."

"This is madness, Amelia." He pried her hand from his lapel, then brushed at the creases her fingers had caused in the material. "I'll certainly not go to the police."

"Then I will. Tomorrow I'll go to the authorities."

The cold smile faded until his face was hard as stone. "You will do nothing of the kind. You will have a cruise to Europe, and ten thousand dollars to assist you in settling in England. They will be my parting gifts to you."

"Parting?" She groped for the arm of a chair, melted into it as her legs gave way. "You—you would leave me now?"

"There can be nothing more between us. I'll see to it that you're well set, and I believe you'll regain your health with a sea voyage. In London you're bound to find another protector."

"How can I go to London when my son—"

"You will go," he interrupted, then sipped his drink. "Or I will give you nothing. You have no son. You have nothing but what I deem to give you. This house and everything in it, the clothes on your back, the jewels you wear are mine. You'd be wise to remember how easily I can take it all away."

"Take it away," she whispered, and something in his face, something in her fractured mind gave her truth. "You want to get rid of me because . . . you know. It's you who've taken the baby."

He finished his drink as he studied her. Then set the empty glass on the mantel. "Do you think I'd allow a creature like you to raise my son?"

"My son!" She sprang up again, hands curled like claws.

The slap stopped her. In the two years he had been her protector, he had never raised a hand to her.

"Listen to me now, and carefully. I will not have my son known as a bastard, one born of a whore. He will be raised at Harper House, as my legitimate heir."

"Your wife—"

"Does what she is told. As will you, Amelia."

"I'll go to the police."

"And tell them what? The doctor and midwife who attended you will attest that you delivered a stillborn girl, while others will attest my wife delivered a healthy boy. Your reputation, Amelia, will not stand to mine, or theirs. Your own servants will swear to it, and to the fact that you've been ill, and behaving strangely."

"How can you do this?"

"I need a son. Do you think I selected you out of affection? You're young, healthy—or were. You were paid, and paid well for your services. You will be recompensed for this one."

"You won't keep him from me. He's mine."

"Nothing is yours but what I allow you. You would have rid yourself of him, had you been given the opportunity. You'll come nowhere near him, now or ever. You will make the crossing in three weeks. A deposit of ten thousand dollars will be put in your account. Until that time your bills will continue to come to me for payment. It's all you'll get."

"I'll kill you!" she shouted when he started out of the parlor.

At this, for the first time since he'd arrived, he looked amused. "You're pathetic. Whores generally are. Be assured of this, if you come near me or mine, Amelia, I will have you arrested, and put in an asylum for the criminally insane." He gestured for the servant to bring his hat and stick. "You wouldn't find it to your taste."

She screamed, tearing at her hair and her gown; she screamed until blood ran from her flesh from her own nails.

When her mind snapped, she walked up the stairs in her tattered gown, humming a lullaby.

ONE



Harper House

December 2004

DAWN, THE AWAKENING PROMISE OF IT, WAS HER FAVORITE time to run. The running itself was just something that had to be done, three days a week, like any other chore or responsibility. Rosalind Harper did what had to be done.

She ran for her health. A woman who'd just had—she could hardly say “celebrated” at this stage of her life—her forty-seventh birthday had to mind her health. She ran to keep strong, as she desired and needed strength. And she ran for vanity. Her body would never again be what it had been at twenty, or even thirty, but, by God, it would be the best body she could manage at forty-seven.

She had no husband, no lover, but she did have an image to uphold. She was a Harper, and Harpers had their pride.

But, Jesus, maintenance was a bitch.

Wearing sweats against the dawn chill, she slipped out of her bedroom by the terrace door. The house was sleeping still. Her house that had been too empty was now occupied again, and rarely completely quiet any longer.

There was David, her surrogate son, who kept her house in order, kept her entertained when she needed entertaining, and stayed out of her way when she needed solitude.

No one knew her moods quite like David.

And there was Stella, and her two precious boys. It had been a good day, Roz thought as she limbered up on the terrace, when she'd hired Stella Rothchild to manage her nursery.

Of course, Stella would be moving before much longer and taking those sweet boys with her. Still, once she was married to Logan—and wasn't that a fine match—they'd only be a few miles away.

Hayley would still be here, infusing the house with all that youth and energy. It had been another stroke of luck, and a vague and distant family connection, that had Hayley, then six-months pregnant, landing on her doorstep. In Hayley she had the daughter she'd secretly longed for, and the bonus of an honorary grandchild with the darling little Lily.

She hadn't realized how lonely she'd been, Roz thought, until those girls had come along to fill the void. With two of her own three sons moved away, the house had become too big, too quiet. And a part of her dreaded the day when Harper, her firstborn, her rock, would leave the guesthouse a stone's throw from the main.

But that was life. No one knew better than a gardener that life never stayed static. Cycles were necessary, for without them there was no bloom.

She took the stairs down at an easy jog, enjoying the way the early mists shrouded her winter gardens. Look how pretty her lambs ear was with its soft silvery foliage covered in dew. And the birds had yet to bother the bright fruit on her red chokeberry.

Walking to give her muscles time to warm, and to give herself the pleasure of the gardens, she skirted around the side of the house to the front.