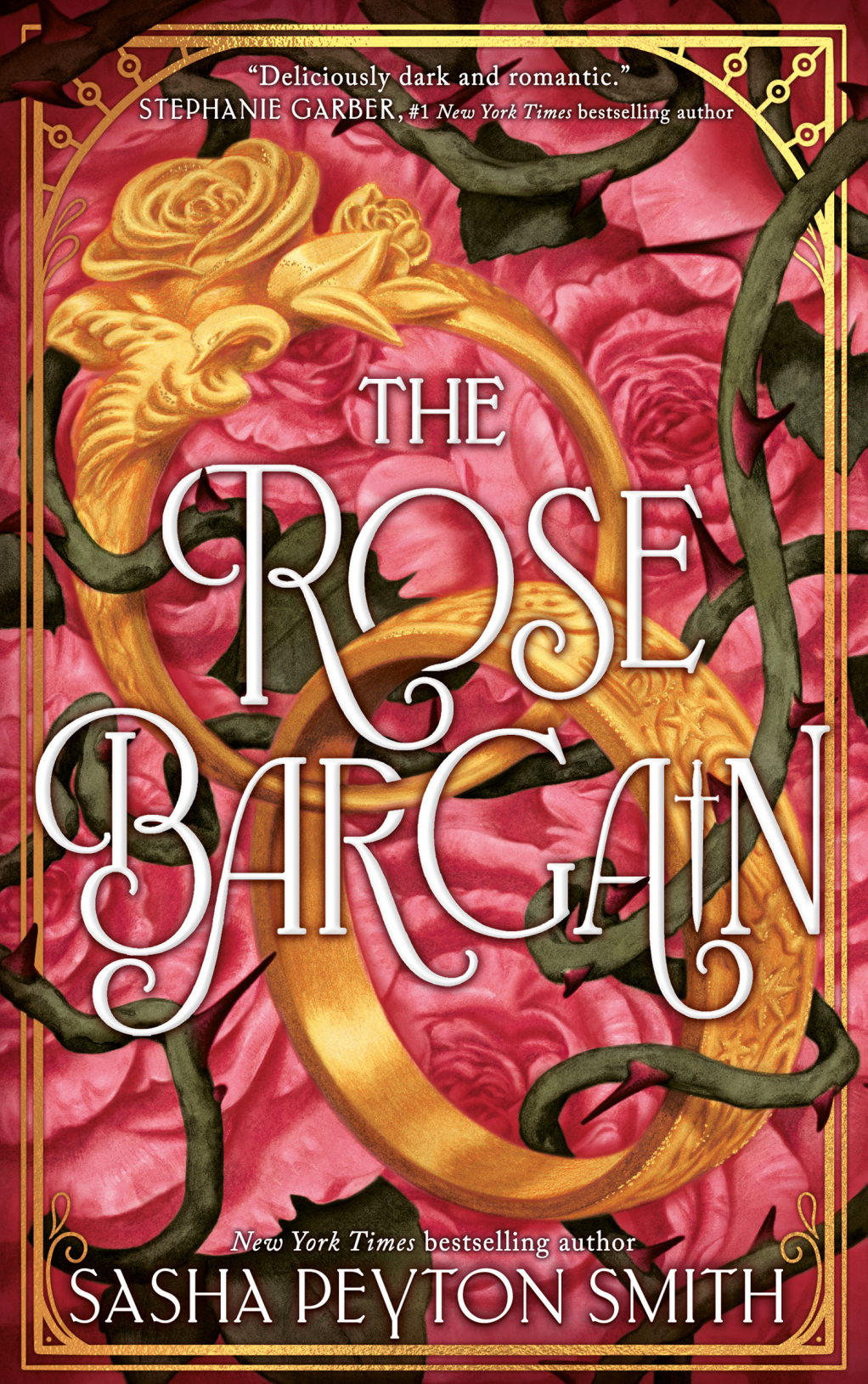


"Deliciously dark and romantic."

STEPHANIE GARBER, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author



THE
ROSE
BARGAIN

New York Times bestselling author

SASHA PEYTON SMITH

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Dear Reader,

It brings me great joy that you're holding *The Rose Bargain* in your hands, because for a long time I doubted this book would ever exist. *The Rose Bargain* was born from a time of darkness in my life. In my worst moments, I thought perhaps I'd never be able to write again.

It was only when I was visiting my parents, in my childhood bedroom, surrounded by all my favorite books from my teenage years, that I resolved to write something for myself, something that gave me the same feeling those books gave me. The kind of book that made me march to my sister's room and insist she read it so I'd have someone to talk to, that got passed around my high-school lunch table, or that made me cry under the covers long after I'd told my mom I was asleep. Something *fun*, I promised myself, at a time when nothing felt very fun at all.

Books were my refuge growing up, and this book became a similar kind of life raft. I threw everything I love into the pages of *The Rose Bargain*: handsome princes, sparkling balls, remote inns with conveniently just one bed left (on a cold night, always!).

This is fundamentally a book about love, in all its forms: the fierce and complicated love between sisters, the devotion of friends, the bittersweet bloom of a doomed first love, the butterflies of being kissed in the garden by a charming faerie prince (I know this last feeling a little less well than the others).

I hope the joy I found while writing this book is tangible to readers, that Ivy and Emmett and Bram's story provide a similar light in the dark for those seeking it. This is a book for my fifteen-year-old self who escaped into books, for my thirty-one-year-old self who rediscovered that feeling, and now it's for you, too.

There will always be a light on (and one singular bed) in my metaphorical inn for those who need it.

Love (because it's always about love, isn't it?),

Sasha Peyton Smith

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faerie, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than
you can understand.

—WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Take pains. Be perfect.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,
A Midsummer Night's Dream



THEN



1471

The War of the Roses



King Edward's face was streaked with mud and blood when the woman first appeared at the tree line. His sword hung by his side, limp, in a single moment of pause, and then he fell to his knees.

There had been rumors of the Others' involvement in the war from the first moment a sword plunged through the belly of a banner knight from the Midlands, but denial goes down easy. Surely there were plausible explanations for the sudden turns in weather or the flocks of sheep found skinned and headless. But those whose grans taught them never to go into the woods without a sprig of holly in their pocket knew. They'd known for months, for decades, for generations.

Like the gods meddling in the affairs of men in the Trojan War, the Others too played with mortal conflicts for fun.

That's what they were called back then. *The Others*.

The Lancasters and the Yorks both believed themselves to be the legitimate successors to the Plantagenet line. But a country cannot have two kings, and as neither side was willing to concede to the other's claim to the throne, banners were raised and blades were sharpened.

The war was brutal, as all wars are, pointless and cruel. Within

the first year, the soil of England ran wet with blood. But the war did not end. Like the beat of the drums that led farmers to slaughter, it marched on.

It wasn't until the Battle of Barnet that the tide truly turned. Every schoolchild on the island knows the story. It's carved into marble stones outside Buckingham Palace, set upright for all to read. The story of the day Queen Moryen saved all of England.

It went like this.

The battlefield was burning, and Edward was desperate.

Whether it was the scent of desperation or blood that called her is still some matter of debate, but what matters is she came.

They say the entire battlefield went still as she strode out into the fray. Her bone white gown trailed gauzy behind her, catching the leaves and pulling them along in her wake. She had onyx hair and eyes even blacker than that. Her skin was ghostly pale, her sharp features so beautiful that looking at her felt like a physical blow. Some men bent over and retched, unable to take the sight of her.

She walked across the battlefield on slipper-clad feet, slowly, like she knew they'd all wait for her.

Edward dropped to his knees before her.

"Stand," she commanded, and he did. "I come to help."

Tears streaked tracks through the dirt on his face as he nodded in wordless, profound gratitude.

She leaned into him, her perfect profile silhouetted in the ashy smoke of the battlefield, and whispered into his ear.

The conversation wasn't long; whatever she offered, he readily agreed to. Then she pulled a dagger from her belt and slashed his palm. The bargain was made.

On the other side of the clearing, Henry VI dropped dead.

Britain had a new king, decisively. Edward IV.

The Lancasters went home, and the York camp torches burned all night as the victory celebration raged.

But the strange woman didn't watch them. She was already on the road in a carriage pulled by snow-white horses. With a coronation to plan, there was no time to waste.

Twenty-four hours and one minute later, Edward IV was dead as well. He closed his eyes and fell to the ground as if a string had been cut.

She had promised Edward he would be king, but she never specified for how long.

And so Queen Moryen of the Others took the throne at Hampton Court Palace, a serene smile on her face and a crown on her head.

All who raised a hand or sword against her found themselves suddenly unable to move, as if the act itself was forbidden.

The war was over, and Britain had a new queen. Immortal. Uncrossable. Inevitable.

NOW



CHAPTER ONE

London, February 1848



Lydia has been missing for eight days, and I'm beginning to fear that our parents are going to wake up in the morning and find my bed empty too.

A noise in the dark alley to my left makes me jump, but it's just a rat tearing through a pile of rubbish.

I've shivered my way through the city for miles, ignoring hecklers and stepping over half-dead beggars. Usually, my parents say to pay them no mind, that they've had the same opportunity to bargain with the queen as the rest of us, but they're harder to ignore tonight.

My freedom is usually limited to turns around the park arm in arm with Mama or safely ensconced within the velvet walls of our family's carriage. What I lacked in experience I made up for in confidence. That confidence feels a lot flimsier now, lost, and cold down to my bones.

I thought it would be safer to stick to the main roads rather than risk traipsing through the ink dark of Hyde Park alone, but one wrong turn down a serpentine side street has me hopelessly turned around. Even the flicker of the gas lamps is weak. The biting February air is thick with coal dust, blotting out what little light the flames throw off. I pull back the hood of my cloak and tip my head

to the sky in an attempt to get my bearings. Cassiopeia should be north, but the twinkle of the stars is too dim to be sure. An errant tear flows out of the corner of my eye and into the hollow of my ear.

I've been searching Lydia's room for days, praying fruitlessly for a clue about her sudden disappearance. It's as if she vanished into nothing, but I refuse to accept that.

Tonight, after Mama, Papa, and our skeleton crew staff had gone to bed, I pulled on my cloak, wrapped myself in Papa's thickest scarf, and took off into the night.

Maybe I was being brave, like the knights in the stories Lydia and I read as little girls, noble and driven by love, or maybe I just wanted to feel something other than the maddening terror I've felt since my sister disappeared.

The police say she's either eloped or dead, but I don't believe them. She'd have told me if she planned to elope, and I'd be able to feel it if she were dead. There's no possible universe in which my sister's heart stops beating and I keep on living, unaltered.

My breath comes out in puffs of vapor as I cut down another alley. I sigh in relief as I finally recognize where I am.

The gates of Kensington Palace loom like a mouth in the near distance, the dark shadows of the Queen's Guard beside them.

I thumb over the cool surface of the necklace sitting deep in the pocket of my cloak like a talisman. I'll have to be clever, circle around Hyde Park again maybe, and sneak in the back way. I don't need to get too near the palace, only to the trees surrounding it. My feet are numb in my boots, but I must keep walking lest I look suspicious to the guards, now in sight.

When Lydia and I were small and our family still owned the

country house in Oakham, we spent our summers in the woods, catching frogs or making little houses out of leaves for the ducklings. Our legs scraped to ribbons, twigs in our wild hair, we'd only come inside once the moon rose and the bats emerged. We'd enter through the kitchen to avoid getting scolded by Mama, and there we'd be attended to by a particularly indulgent old cook named Mrs. Osbourne. Mrs. Osbourne was the oldest person I'd ever known, and as she bandaged our legs and snuck us lemon ices, she'd tell us stories. We loved the ones about the Others best of all.

She read to us from an old book that was wrapped in fraying sage-green fabric and dented at the corners. I was particularly taken by the concept of a faerie door. As the stories went, the Others could be compelled to open the door between our worlds, usually hidden in gnarled old trees, for clever humans who left objects of great significance at their thresholds.

I begged Lydia to try it with me. We found a squat ironwood tree, and in the divot of its roots we left our matching baby necklaces, one strung with a small pearl *L* charm and the other with a matching *I*. They were too short to fit around our big-girl necks, but they still hung on the posts of our beds. I was giddy with anticipation for the rest of the day, peeking through windows, desperate for a glimpse of one of Them.

The next morning, Lydia and I ran across the dew-damp lawn and dug our chubby little hands into the dirt at the base of the tree. The necklaces had vanished. I jumped and hollered with joy, so loud that my mother stomped out into the garden and demanded to know why I was giving her a headache. I told her everything. Without another word, she marched to the kitchens and made Mrs. Osbourne

burn her faerie book. I was only six then, and I didn't understand that owning something like this was illegal. I wailed for days.

A year later, I found Lydia's necklace shoved in the back of her wardrobe. Two years older than me, she placed her hands on her hips and told me I had to leave babyish things like magic behind. It was the first of her three great betrayals.

She sauntered out of the room before I could ask her why we never did find the second of the matching necklaces—or if she also saw the silhouette of the man by the trees that night.

An icy wind whips down the street, sending a swirl of dead leaves scattering. My blond curls whip around my face, and I pull the cloak tighter around my neck.

The stories from Mrs. Osbourne's books were of an England where Others ran wild. Queen Mor would have us believe that she and her son are the only ones of their kind who live here now, but they came from somewhere, and even locked doors can be opened again. I can't get up north to our old home in Oakham, nor to the memorial battlefield from the Battle of Barnet, but if a door exists in London, wouldn't it be in the trees surrounding the queen's residence? I can't not try.

I double back toward the public entrance of the park, to where the bargain lines form on Sundays. The trees stand like specters in the dark, indistinguishable from one another. There's nothing remarkable about any of them, I'm just going to have to choose at random. I clutch the necklace in my pocket.

A shadow moves in the dark. "Who's there?" shouts one of the Queen's Guard.

I curse under my breath, drop my sister's necklace at the base of

the nearest tree, and run.

I sprint down the path and across the wide lawns, then make a sharp left, turning back onto the street and off palace grounds.

From out of the silence comes the sudden clatter of wheels pitching over cobblestones.

I jump back, hoping to hide in the shadows, but I don't see the loose stone until it is too late.

My boot catches on the edge of it, and I trip and fall, my temple colliding with the curb. My body splays out like a rag doll in the dirt.

At first there is the blinding, sharp sting of pain, and then there is nothing but darkness.

I blink back to consciousness, unsure of how long I've been under, to find a shadowy figure sitting beside me in a carriage.

"I've got a knife," I whisper, terrified. I don't mention that it's a kitchen knife shoved in my boot, too dull to cut through anything and too difficult to reach now anyway.

"Are you going to stab me?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

My vision obscures as something warm pours over my left eye. I reach up to wipe it, and my hand comes away sticky with blood.

The figure swears and shrugs off his coat. "Take this. You can stab me later."

He presses his coat to my temple. It's still warm with his body heat, and I resist the urge to sigh in relief at even the smallest reprieve from the cold.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

“You hit me with your carriage,” I reply weakly.

“I didn’t hit you, you tripped.”

“I tripped to avoid getting trampled by your—” I pause to look around. The carriage is massive, at least a six-seater, with thick velvet upholstery and polished brass fixtures. “Behemoth,” I finish.

“I wasn’t the one skulking around the dark.”

“I wasn’t skulking. I was lost.”

“Where were you headed? Maybe I can help you?” The stranger taps on the window to the driver’s seat and it slides open.

“Where to, Miss?” the driver asks gruffly.

Even I can admit when a mission has failed. “Belgravia Square,” I answer, giving him my home address.

The horses whinny, and we’re off with a lurch. As we make a wide right turn onto a main thoroughfare, a beam of yellow lamplight streams in through the carriage window.

The boy brushes his unkempt hair from his forehead, and recognition hits me like a blow. I’m dizzy from the trauma to my head, but that’s not why it feels as if the world has suddenly tilted.

Sitting opposite me, concern sketched across his fine features, is a face I’ve seen in portraits and across crowded concert halls my entire life. He looks younger tonight than any time I’ve seen him previously. He’s usually in stiff cravats with well-coifed hair. Tonight it falls in dark waves over his forehead, partially obscuring his hazel eyes, but the high cheekbones, sharp jaw, and sullen mouth are the same. *Prince Emmett.*

“It’s you.” I blink.

A bemused smile crosses his face. “Who?”

“You’re Prince Emmett.”

“You must have hit your head rather hard,” he replies. There’s a crackle of fragility in the edge of his voice.

“I know who you are. There’s no point in hiding it.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “We’ve met.” It isn’t a question.

We haven’t, not really, but I’ve seen him from a distance at enough events to be certain—and then there was that thing with Lydia.

“Lady Benton.” I nod my head in some semblance of a bow, but he senses the sarcasm in the gesture and his mouth quirks up in a half smile. “Second daughter of the Marquess of Townshend.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be missing?” Emmett asks. “I’ve heard the rumors.”

I shake my head. “No. I’m the other one. I was looking for my sister, that’s why I was out.” I feel the sharp stab of failure as the carriage carries us farther from Kensington Palace. I’ve just tossed Lydia’s necklace into the dirt for nothing.

“Ahh, yes, the younger sister.” He gestures vaguely to my face. “The resemblance is uncanny. You’ve got the same eyes.”

“I’m surprised you remember her,” I answer tensely.

“You think she’s out there somewhere?” he asks, pointedly not addressing my remark.

“Yes. I can’t explain it, but I’d be able to feel it if she were gone.”

Emmett looks at me, unnervingly still. “Feel it?”

We jolt as the carriage rounds another corner.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I have a brother,” he says. “I might understand better than you think.”

I’m surprised to hear him refer to Prince Bram as his brother.

Emmett's status as prince is still a lightning rod for gossip, nearly two decades after his birth. He's the human son of Queen Moryen's husband, Prince Consort Edgar, and his first, human, wife, who died in childbirth. The queen legitimized Emmett on his eighth birthday, though whether it was a favor to his father, an act of love, or something else entirely, no one knows.

His name is whispered in drawing rooms across town. *A rake of a prince, why can't he be sweet like Bram?* There are always new rumors about who he is spotted with at whatever social events he deigns to attend. There was the scullery maid scandal in Lord Tremaine's rose garden last season. Only a month later, he was caught wrapped up in the curtains of Duke Cambere's study with the family's middle daughter. Just last week I heard my mother mutter something about a ballerina. And my face still burns with anger when I think about how he was with Lydia during her first season. I wasn't there, but she told me all about it when she returned home in tears.

When he's not sullyng someone else's reputation, he's causing an uproar over his refusal to begin his studies at Oxford—or his hunting trips with his friends, other lords, and second sons that sound more like bacchanalia.

Emmett turns to me, the full force of his gaze hitting me for the first time. I've never seen him about town without a surly frown on his face. But he doesn't look anything like that now. His eyes are a peculiar shade of hazel, lined with dark lashes and glinting with fire. This close, I can see the spray of soft freckles across his nose. I never recognized the refined, handsome face behind the pouting. But it *is* handsome. He's so handsome it nearly knocks the breath from me.

The carriage clatters through the night, down the still streets of a sleeping London. I tilt my head against the back of the seat and wonder how I'm going to get the blood out of this dress without Mama or the maids finding out.

"What are you thinking about?" Emmett asks.

"Stabbing you," I reply, eyes closed.

"That's not very polite."

"Running me over wasn't very polite."

"Again, you tripped."

There's a sudden flood of heat, and I open my eyes to find Emmett crowded into my space, peering up at me intently. I'm still holding his coat against my bleeding head, and gingerly, he raises his fingers and peels away the edges of the wool. It's gone sticky, half dried, and it pulls at my hair as he tugs it away.

"Ouch." I resist the urge to jab him with my elbow.

"Stop squirming. The bleeding has slowed," he declares. "But you should keep the pressure on it."

With the hand that isn't holding the coat, I salute.

He tilts his head slightly, still staring at me. "You know, you're really quite pretty."

An infuriating blush rises in my chest. "Are you trying to seduce me right now? I know your reputation, but I didn't expect the nerve."

"My reputation?"

"Being seen with you would ruin me."

His eyes narrow. "You don't seem like the kind of girl to worry about things like that." Men never do understand. The slow death of being cast out of society is a fate few are strong enough to bear.

"You don't know anything about the kind of girl I am."

“I know you snuck out in the middle of the night to search for your sister.”

The carriage slows. I pull back the curtain to see my family’s town house, the white limestone and soaring columns lit up with gas lamps.

I tap on the window and ask the driver to drop me around the back. I stand less of a chance of being caught if I go through the service entrance in the basement.

“Thank you for your assistance,” I say as I take the driver’s hand and hop down from the carriage.

Emmett leans out the door, a calling card clutched between his knuckles. He reaches out to me. “Please. Can I see you again?”

“Absolutely not,” I reply.

“I beg of you, consider it.”

I take the card out of habit and am a few steps away, nearly to the back staircase, when Emmett’s voice calls from the darkness.

“You can keep the coat.”

I turn back to him. He’s enveloped in shadows, but his smirk is visible even from here. “No, thank you, I’ve got plenty of my own.” I chuck the coat back in his direction, and it smacks him square in the chest. I’ve always been rather proud of my throwing arm.

He waits until I’m inside to pull away.

The fireplace is cold, nothing like Mrs. Osbourne’s kitchen, where the bricks by the hearth were always warm. I’m not six years old anymore. There is no one waiting to tend to my wounds, no big sister’s bed to crawl into.

I climb the limewashed back staircase up to my second-floor bedroom like I’m a ghost haunting this house.

I peel out of my bloodstained dress and am pulling my arms through the warm flannel of my dressing gown when I hear a commotion down in the foyer.

Someone is pounding on the door. For a minute, I freeze with terror, mortified at the thought that perhaps Prince Emmett has come back for me.

Then I hear footsteps. Someone shrieks.

I race out onto the landing just in time to see Lydia stumble into the marble hall, leaving a smear of muddy footprints in her wake.