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NORA ROBERTS

Blue Dahlia

Book One of the **In the Garden** Trilogy

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ROBERTS

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PROLOGUE



Memphis, Tennessee

August 1892

BIRTHING A BASTARD WASN'T IN THE PLANS. WHEN she'd learned she was carrying her lover's child, the shock and panic turned quickly to anger.

There were ways of dealing with it, of course. A woman in her position had contacts, had avenues. But she was afraid of them, nearly as afraid of the abortionists as she was of what was growing, unwanted, inside her.

The mistress of a man like Reginald Harper couldn't afford pregnancy.

He'd kept her for nearly two years now, and kept her well. Oh, she knew he kept others—including his wife—but they didn't concern her.

She was still young, and she was beautiful. Youth and beauty were products that could be marketed. She'd done so, for nearly a decade, with steely mind and heart. And she'd profited by them, polished them with the grace and charm she'd learned by watching and emulating the fine ladies who'd visited the grand house on the river where her mother had worked.

She'd been educated—a bit. But more than books and music, she'd learned the arts of flirtation.

She'd sold herself for the first time at fifteen and had pocketed knowledge along with the coin. But prostitution wasn't her goal, any more than domestic work or trudging off to the factory day after day. She knew the difference between whore and mistress. A whore traded quick and cold sex for pennies and was forgotten before the man's fly was buttoned again.

But a mistress—a clever and successful mistress—offered romance, sophistication, conversation, gaiety along with the commodity between her legs. She was a companion, a wailing wall, a sexual fantasy. An ambitious mistress knew to demand nothing and gain much.

Amelia Ellen Conner had ambitions.

And she'd achieved them. Or most of them.

She'd selected Reginald quite carefully. He wasn't handsome or brilliant of mind. But he was, as her research had assured her, very rich and very unfaithful to the thin and proper wife who presided over Harper House.

He had a woman in Natchez, and it was said he kept another in New Orleans. He could afford another, so Amelia set her sights on him. Wooed and won him.

At twenty-four, she lived in a pretty house on South Main and had three servants of her own. Her wardrobe was full of beautiful clothes, and her jewelry case sparkled.

It was true she wasn't received by the fine ladies she'd once envied, but there was a fashionable half world where a woman of her station was welcome. Where *she* was envied.

She threw lavish parties. She traveled. She *lived*.

Then, hardly more than a year after Reginald had tucked her into that pretty house, her clever, craftily designed world crashed.

She would have hidden it from him until she'd gathered the courage to visit the red-light district and end the thing. But he'd caught her when she was violently ill, and he'd studied her face with those dark, shrewd eyes.

And he'd known.

He'd not only been pleased but had forbidden her to end

the pregnancy. To her shock, he'd bought her a sapphire bracelet to celebrate her situation.

She hadn't wanted the child, but he had.

So she began to see how the child could work for her. As the mother of Reginald Harper's child—bastard or no—she would be cared for in perpetuity. He might lose interest in coming to her bed as she lost the bloom of youth, as beauty faded, but he would support her, and the child.

His wife hadn't given him a son. But she might. She *would*.

Through the last chills of winter and into the spring, she carried the child and planned for her future.

Then something strange happened. It moved inside her. Flutters and stretches, playful kicks. The child she hadn't wanted became her child.

It grew inside her like a flower that only she could see, could feel, could know. And so did a strong and terrible love.

Through the sweltering, sticky heat of the summer she bloomed, and for the first time in her life she knew a passion for something other than herself and her own comfort.

The child, her son, needed her. She would protect it with all she had.

With her hands resting on her great belly, she supervised the decorating of the nursery. Pale green walls and white lace curtains. A rocking horse imported from Paris, a crib handmade in Italy.

She tucked tiny clothes into the miniature wardrobe. Irish and Breton lace, French silks. All were monogrammed with exquisite embroidery with the baby's initials. He would be James Reginald Conner.

She would have a son. Something at last of her own. Someone, at last, to love. They would travel together, she and her beautiful boy. She would show him the world. He would go to the best schools. He was her pride, her joy, and her heart. And if through that steamy summer, Reginald came to the house on South Main less and less, it was just as well.

He was only a man. What grew inside her was a son. She would never be alone again.

When she felt the pangs of labor, she had no fear. Through the sweaty hours of pain, she held one thing in the front of her mind. Her James. Her son. Her child.

Her eyes blurred with exhaustion, and the heat, a living, breathing monster, was somehow worse than the pain.

She could see the doctor and the midwife exchange looks. Grim, frowning looks. But she was young, she was healthy, and she *would* do this thing.

There was no time; hour bled into hour with gaslight shooting flickering shadows around the room. She heard, through the waves of exhaustion, a thin cry.

"My son." Tears slid down her cheeks. "My son."

The midwife held her down, murmuring, murmuring, "Lie still now. Drink a bit. Rest now."

She sipped to soothe her fiery throat, tasted laudanum. Before she could object, she was drifting off, deep down. Far away.

When she woke, the room was dim, the draperies pulled tight over the windows. When she stirred, the doctor rose from his chair, came close to lift her hand, to check her pulse.

"My son. My baby. I want to see my baby."

"I'll send for some broth. You slept a long time."

"My son. He'll be hungry. Have him brought to me."

"Madam." The doctor sat on the side of the bed. His eyes seemed very pale, very troubled. "I'm sorry. The child was stillborn."

What clutched her heart was monstrous, vicious, rending her with burning talons of grief and fear. "I heard him cry. This is a lie! Why are you saying such an awful thing to me?"

"She never cried." Gently, he took her hands. "Your labor was long and difficult. You were delirious at the end of it. Madam, I'm sorry. You delivered a girl, stillborn."

She wouldn't believe it. She screamed and raged and

wept, and was sedated only to wake to scream and rage and weep again.

She hadn't wanted the child. And then she'd wanted nothing else.

Her grief was beyond name, beyond reason.

Grief drove her mad.

ONE



Southfield, Michigan

September 2001

SHE BURNED THE CREAM SAUCE. STELLA WOULD always remember that small, irritating detail, as she would remember the roll and boom of thunder from the late-summer storm and the sound of her children squabbling in the living room.

She would remember the harsh smell, the sudden scream of the smoke alarms, and the way she'd mechanically taken the pan off the burner and dumped it in the sink.

She wasn't much of a cook, but she was—in general—a *precise* cook. For this welcome-home meal, she'd planned to prepare the chicken Alfredo, one of Kevin's favorites, from scratch and match it with a nice field greens salad and some fresh, crusty bread with pesto dipping sauce.

In her tidy kitchen in her pretty suburban house she had all the ingredients lined up, her cookbook propped on its stand with the plastic protector over the pages.

She wore a navy-blue bib apron over her fresh pants and shirt and had her mass of curling red hair bundled up on top of her head, out of her way.

She was getting started later than she'd hoped, but work had been a madhouse all day. All the fall flowers at the garden center were on sale, and the warm weather brought customers out in droves.

Not that she minded. She loved the work, absolutely loved her job as manager of the nursery. It felt good to be back in the thick of it, full-time now that Gavin was in school and Luke old enough for a play group. How in the world had her baby grown up enough for first grade?

And before she knew it, Luke would be ready for kindergarten.

She and Kevin should start getting a little more proactive about making that third child. Maybe tonight, she thought with a smile. When she got into *that* final and very personal stage of her welcome-home plans.

As she measured ingredients, she heard the crash and wail from the next room. Glutton for punishment, she thought as she dropped what she was doing to rush in. Thinking about having another baby when the two she had were driving her crazy.

She stepped into the room, and there they were. Her little angels. Gavin, sunny blond with the devil in his eyes, sat innocently bumping two Matchbox cars into each other while Luke, his bright red hair a dead ringer for hers, screamed over his scattered wooden blocks.

She didn't have to witness the event to *know*. Luke had built; Gavin had destroyed.

In their house it was the law of the land.

"Gavin. Why?" She scooped up Luke, patted his back. "It's okay, baby. You can build another."

"My house! My house!"

"It was an accident," Gavin claimed, and that wicked twinkle that made a bubble of laughter rise to her throat remained. "The car wrecked it."

"I bet the car did—after you aimed it at his house. Why can't you play nice? He wasn't bothering you."

"I was playing. He's just a baby."

"That's right." And it was the look that came into her eyes that had Gavin dropping his. "And if you're going to be a baby, too, you can be a baby in your room. Alone."

"It was a stupid house."

"Nuh-uh! Mom." Luke took Stella's face in both his hands, looked at her with those avid, swimming eyes. "It was good."

"You can build an even better one. Okay? Gavin, leave him alone. I'm not kidding. I'm busy in the kitchen, and Daddy's going to be home soon. Do you want to be punished for his welcome home?"

"No. I can't do *anything*."

"That's too bad. It's really a shame you don't have any toys." She set Luke down. "Build your house, Luke. Leave his blocks alone, Gavin. If I have to come in here again, you're not going to like it."

"I want to go *outside*!" Gavin mourned at her retreating back.

"Well, it's raining, so you can't. We're all stuck in here, so behave."

Flustered, she went back to the cookbook, tried to clear her head. In an irritated move, she snapped on the kitchen TV. God, she missed Kevin. The boys had been cranky all afternoon, and she felt rushed and harried and overwhelmed. With Kevin out of town these last four days she'd been scrambling around like a maniac. Dealing with the house, the boys, her job, all the errands alone.

Why was it that the household appliances waited, just waited, to go on strike when Kevin left town? Yesterday the washer had gone buns up, and just that morning the toaster oven had fried itself.

They had such a nice rhythm when they were together, dividing up the chores, sharing the discipline and the pleasure in their sons. If he'd been home, he could have sat down to play with—and referee—the boys while she cooked.

Or better, he'd have cooked and she'd have played with the boys.

She missed the smell of him when he came up behind her to lean down and rub his cheek over hers. She missed curling up to him in bed at night, and the way they'd talk in the dark about their plans, or laugh at something the boys had done that day.

For God's sake, you'd think the man had been gone four months instead of four days, she told herself.

She listened with half an ear to Gavin trying to talk Luke into building a skyscraper that they could both wreck as she stirred her cream sauce and watched the wind swirl leaves outside the window.

He wouldn't be traveling so much after he got his promotion. Soon, she reminded herself. He'd been working so hard, and he was right on the verge of it. The extra money would be handy, too, especially when they had another child—maybe a girl this time.

With the promotion, and her working full-time again, they could afford to take the kids somewhere next summer. Disney World, maybe. They'd love that. Even if she were pregnant, they could manage it. She'd been squirreling away some money in the vacation fund—and the new-car fund.

Having to buy a new washing machine was going to seriously damage the emergency fund, but they'd be all right.

When she heard the boys laugh, her shoulders relaxed again. Really, life was good. It was perfect, just the way she'd always imagined it. She was married to a wonderful man, one she'd fallen for the minute she'd set eyes on him. Kevin Rothchild, with his slow, sweet smile.

They had two beautiful sons, a pretty house in a good neighborhood, jobs they both loved, and plans for the future they both agreed on. And when they made love, bells still rang.

Thinking of that, she imagined his reaction when, with the kids tucked in for the night, she slipped into the sexy new lingerie she'd splurged on in his absence.

A little wine, a few candles, and . . .

The next, bigger crash had her eyes rolling toward the ceiling. At least this time there were cheers instead of wails.

"Mom! Mom!" Face alive with glee, Luke rushed in. "We wrecked the *whole* building. Can we have a cookie?"

"Not this close to dinner."

"Please, please, please, *please!*"

He was pulling on her pants now, doing his best to climb up her leg. Stella set the spoon down, nudged him away from the stove. "No cookies before dinner, Luke."

"We're starving." Gavin piled in, slamming his cars together. "How come we can't eat something when we're hungry? Why do we have to eat the stupidfredo anyway?"

"Because." She'd always hated that answer as a child, but it seemed all-purpose to her now.

"We're all eating together when your father gets home." But she glanced out the window and worried that his plane would be delayed. "Here, you can split an apple."

She took one out of the bowl on the counter and grabbed a knife.

"I don't like the peel," Gavin complained.

"I don't have time to peel it." She gave the sauce a couple of quick stirs. "The peel's good for you." Wasn't it?

"Can I have a drink? Can I have a drink, too?" Luke tugged and tugged. "I'm thirsty."

"God. Give me five minutes, will you? Five minutes. Go, go *build* something. Then you can have some apple slices and juice."

Thunder boomed, and Gavin responded to it by jumping up and down and shouting, "Earthquake!"

"It's not an earthquake."

But his face was bright with excitement as he spun in circles, then ran from the room. "Earthquake! Earthquake!"

Getting into the spirit, Luke ran after him, screaming.

Stella pressed a hand to her pounding head. The noise was insane, but maybe it would keep them busy until she got the meal under control.

She turned back to the stove, and heard, without much interest, the announcement for a news bulletin.

It filtered through the headache, and she turned toward the set like an automaton.

Commuter plane crash. En route to Detroit Metro from Lansing. Ten passengers on board.

The spoon dropped out of her hand. The heart dropped out of her body.

Kevin. Kevin.

Her children screamed in delighted fear, and thunder rolled and burst overhead. In the kitchen, Stella slid to the floor as her world fractured.

THEY CAME TO TELL HER KEVIN WAS DEAD. STRANGERS at her door with solemn faces. She couldn't take it in, couldn't believe it. Though she'd known. She'd known the minute she heard the reporter's voice on her little kitchen television.

Kevin couldn't be dead. He was young and healthy. He was coming home, and they were having chicken Alfredo for dinner.

But she'd burned the sauce. The smoke had set off the alarms, and there was nothing but madness in her pretty house.

She had to send her children to her neighbor's so it could be explained to her.

But how could the impossible, the unthinkable ever be explained?

A mistake. The storm, a strike of lightning, and everything changed forever. One instant of time, and the man she loved, the father of her children, no longer lived.

Is there anyone you'd like to call?

Who would she call but Kevin? He was her family, her friend, her life.

They spoke of details that were like a buzz in her brain, of arrangements, of counseling. They were sorry for her loss.

They were gone, and she was alone in the house she and Kevin had bought when she'd been pregnant with Luke. The house they'd saved for, and painted, and decorated together. The house with the gardens she'd designed herself.

The storm was over, and it was quiet. Had it ever been so quiet? She could hear her own heartbeat, the hum of the heater as it kicked on, the drip of rain from the gutters.

Then she could hear her own keening as she collapsed on the floor by her front door. Lying on her side, she gathered herself into a ball in defense, in denial. There weren't tears, not yet. They were massed into some kind of hard, hot knot inside her. The grief was so deep, tears couldn't reach it. She could only lie curled up there, with those wounded-animal sounds pouring out of her throat.

It was dark when she pushed herself to her feet, swaying, light-headed and ill. Kevin. Somewhere in her brain his name still, over and over and over.

She had to get her children, she had to bring her children home. She had to tell her babies.

Oh, God. Oh, God, how could she tell them?

She groped for the door, stepped out into the chilly dark, her mind blessedly blank. She left the door open at her back, walked down between the heavy-headed mums and asters, past the glossy green leaves of the azaleas she and Kevin had planted one blue spring day.

She crossed the street like a blind woman, walking through puddles that soaked her shoes, over damp grass, toward her neighbor's porch light.

What was her neighbor's name? Funny, she'd known her for four years. They carpooled, and sometimes shopped together. But she couldn't quite remember. . . .

Oh, yes, of course. Diane. Diane and Adam Perkins, and their children, Jessie and Wyatt. Nice family, she thought dully. Nice, normal family. They'd had a barbecue together just a couple weeks ago. Kevin had grilled chicken.

He loved to grill. They'd had some good wine, some good laughs, and the kids had played. Wyatt had fallen and scraped his knee.

Of course she remembered.

But she stood in front of the door not quite sure what she was doing there.

Her children. Of course. She'd come for her children. She had to tell them. . . .

Don't think. She held herself hard, rocked, held in. Don't think yet. If you think, you'll break apart. A million pieces you can never put together again.

Her babies needed her. Needed her now. Only had her now.

She bore down on that hot, hard knot and rang the bell.

She saw Diane as if she were looking at her through a thin sheen of water. Rippling, and not quite there. She heard her dimly. Felt the arms that came around her in support and sympathy.

But your husband's alive, you see, Stella thought. Your life isn't over. Your world's the same as it was five minutes ago. So you can't know. You can't.

When she felt herself begin to shake, she pulled back. "Not now, please. I can't now. I have to take the boys home."

"I can come with you." There were tears on Diane's cheeks as she reached out, touched Stella's hair. "Would you like me to come, to stay with you?"

"No. Not now. I need . . . the boys."

"I'll get them. Come inside, Stella."

But she only shook her head.

"All right. They're in the family room. I'll bring them. Stella, if there's anything, anything at all. You've only to call. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She stood in the dark, looking in at the light, and waited.

She heard the protests, the complaints, then the scrambling of feet. And there were her boys—Gavin with his father's sunny hair, Luke with his father's mouth.

"We don't want to go yet," Gavin told her. "We're playing a game. Can't we finish?"

"Not now. We have to go home now."

"But I'm winning. It's not fair, and—"

"Gavin. We have to go."

"Is Daddy home?"

She looked down at Luke, his happy, innocent face, and nearly broke. "No." Reaching down, she picked him up, touched her lips to the mouth that was so like Kevin's. "Let's go home."

She took Gavin's hand and began the walk back to her empty house.

"If Daddy was home, he'd let me finish." Cranky tears smeared Gavin's voice. "I want Daddy."

"I know. I do too."

"Can we have a dog?" Luke wanted to know, and turned her face to his with his hands. "Can we ask Daddy? Can we have a dog like Jessie and Wyatt?"

"We'll talk about it later."

"I want Daddy," Gavin said again, with a rising pitch in his voice.

He knows, Stella thought. He knows something is wrong, something's terribly wrong. I have to do this. I have to do it now.

"We need to sit down." Carefully, very carefully, she closed the door behind her, carried Luke to the couch. She sat with him in her lap and laid her arm over Gavin's shoulder.

"If I had a dog," Luke told her soberly, "I'd take care of him. When's Daddy coming?"

"He can't come."

"'Cause of the busy trip?"

"He . . ." Help me. God, help me do this. "There was an accident. Daddy was in an accident."

"Like when the cars smash?" Luke asked, and Gavin said nothing, nothing at all as his eyes burned into her face.

"It was a very bad accident. Daddy had to go to heaven."