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JEWELS OF THE SUN

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OF THE SUN

NORA ROBERTS

DOUBLEDAY DIRECT LARGE PRINT EDITION



DOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

This Large Print Edition, prepared especially for Doubleday Direct, Inc., contains the complete unabridged text of the original Publisher's Edition.

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JEWELS OF THE SUN

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For information address: The Berkley Publishing Group,
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375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

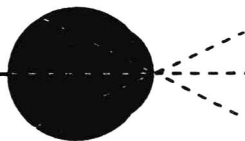
ISBN: 0-7394-0577-2

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Group, a division of Penguin Putnam Inc.,
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



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Titles by Nora Roberts

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HONEST ILLUSIONS
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BORN IN FIRE
BORN IN ICE
BORN IN SHAME
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HOLDING THE DREAM
FINDING THE DREAM
MONTANA SKY
SEA SWEEP
RISING TIDES
INNER HARBOR
SANCTUARY
HOMEPORT
THE REEF
JEWELS OF THE SUN
RIVER'S END
FROM THE HEART (*anthology*)

Titles written as J. D. Robb

NAKED IN DEATH
GLORY IN DEATH
IMMORTAL IN DEATH
RAPTURE IN DEATH
CEREMONY IN DEATH
VENGEANCE IN DEATH
HOLIDAY IN DEATH
CONSPIRACY IN DEATH

For Ruth Ryan Langan

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

—W. B. YEATS

ONE

Obviously, without question, she'd lost her mind.

Being a psychologist, she ought to know.

All the signs were there, had been there, hovering and humming around her for months. The edginess, the short temper, the tendency toward daydreaming and forgetfulness. There'd been a lack of motivation, of energy, of purpose.

Her parents had commented on it in their mild, you-can-do-better-Jude way. Her colleagues had begun to glance at her, covertly, with quiet pity or unquiet distaste. She'd come to detest her job, resent her stu-

dents, find a dozen petty faults with her friends and her family, her associates and superiors.

Every morning the simple task of getting out of bed to dress for the day's classes had taken on the proportions of scaling a mountain. Worse, a mountain she had absolutely no interest in seeing from a distance, much less climbing.

Then there was the rash, impulsive behavior. Oh, yes, that was the final tip-off. Steady-as-she-goes Jude Frances Murray, one of the sturdiest branches on the family tree of the Chicago Murrays, sensible and devoted daughter of Doctors Linda and John K. Murray, quit her job.

Not took a sabbatical from the university, not asked for a few weeks' leave, but quit, right in the middle of the semester.

Why? She didn't have the faintest idea.

It had been as much a shock to her as to the dean, to her associates, to her parents.

Had she reacted in this manner two years before when her marriage had shattered? No, indeed. She'd simply continued her routine—her classes, her studies, her appointments—without a hitch, even while shuffling

in the lawyers and neatly filing the paperwork that symbolizes the end of a union.

Not that there'd been much of a union, or a great deal of hassling for the lawyers to legally sever it. A marriage that had lasted just under eight months didn't generate a great deal of mess or trouble. Or passion.

Passion, she supposed was what had been missing. If she'd had any, William wouldn't have left her flat for another woman almost before the flowers in her bridal bouquet had faded.

But there was no point in brooding over it at this late date. She was what she was. Or had been what she was, she corrected. God only knew what she was now.

Maybe that was part of it, she mused. She'd been on some verge, had looked down at the vast, dark sea of sameness, of monotony, of tedium that was Jude Murray. She'd pinwheeled her arms, scrambled back from the edge—and run screaming away.

It was so unlike her.

Thinking about it gave her such sharp palpitations she wondered if she might be having a heart attack just to cap things off.

AMERICAN COLLEGE PROFESSOR FOUND DEAD
IN LEASED VOLVO

It would be an odd obituary. Perhaps it would make it into the *Irish Times*, which her grandmother so loved to read. Her parents would be shocked, of course. It was such an untidy, public, *embarrassing* kind of death. Completely unsuitable.

Naturally, they'd be heartbroken as well, but overall they would be puzzled. What in the world was the girl thinking of, going off to Ireland when she had a thriving career and a lovely condo on the lakeside?

They would blame Granny's influence.

And, of course, they would be right, as they had been right since the moment she'd been conceived in a very tasteful mating precisely one year after they'd married.

Though she didn't care to imagine it, Jude was certain that her parents' lovemaking was always very tasteful and precise. Rather like the well-choreographed and traditional ballets they both so enjoyed.

And what was she doing, sitting in a leased Volvo that had its stupid wheel on the stupid wrong side of the car and thinking about her parents having sex?

All she could do was press her fingers to her eyes until the image faded away.

This, she told herself, was just the sort of thing that happened when you went crazy.

She took a deep breath, then another. Oxygen to clear and calm the brain. As she saw it, she now had two choices. She could drag her suitcases out of the car, go inside the Dublin airport and turn the keys back in to the leasing agent with the carrot-red hair and the mile-wide smile, and book a flight home.

Of course she had no job, but she could live off her stock portfolio very nicely for quite some time, thank you. She also no longer had a condo, as she'd rented it to that nice couple for the next six months, but if she did go home she could stay with Granny for a while.

And Granny would look at her with those beautiful faded blue eyes full of disappointment. *Jude, darling, you always get right to the edge of your heart's desire. Why is it you can never take that last step over?*

"I don't know. I don't know." Miserable, Jude covered her face with her hands and rocked. "It was your idea I come here, not mine. What am I going to do in Faerie Hill Cottage for the next six months? I don't even know how to drive this damn car."

She was one sob away from a crying jag. She felt it flood her throat, ring in her ears. Before the first tear could fall, she let her head roll back, squeezed her eyes tight shut, and cursed herself. Crying jags, temper tantrums, sarcasm, and otherwise rude behavior were merely various ways of acting out. She'd been raised to understand it, trained to recognize it. And she would not give in to it.

“On to the next stage, Jude, you pathetic idiot. Talking to yourself, crying in Volvos, too indecisive, too goddamn paralyzed to turn on the ignition and just go.”

She huffed out another breath, straightened her shoulders. “Second choice,” she muttered. “Finish what you started.”

She turned the key and, sending up a little prayer that she wouldn't kill or maim anyone—including herself—on the drive, eased the car out of Park.

She sang, mostly to keep herself from screaming every time she came to one of the circles on the highway that the Irish cheerfully called roundabouts. Her brain would fizzle, she'd forget her left from her right, visualize plowing the Volvo into half a

dozen innocent bystanders, and belt out whatever tune jumped into her terrified brain.

On the route south from Dublin to County Waterford, she shouted show tunes, roared out Irish pub songs, and at a narrow escape outside the town of Carlow, screeched out the chorus of "Brown Sugar" loud enough to make Mick Jagger wince.

After that it calmed down a bit. Perhaps the gods of the traveler had been shocked enough by the noise to step back and stop throwing other cars in her path. Maybe it was the influence of the ubiquitous shrines to the Blessed Virgin that populated the roadside. In either case, the driving smoothed out and Jude began, almost, to enjoy herself.

Roll after roll of green hills shimmered under sunlight that glowed like the inside of seashells and spread back and back into the shadows of dark mountains. The hulk of them rambled against a sky layered with smoky clouds and pearly light that belonged in paintings rather than reality.

Paintings, she thought, as her mind wandered, so beautifully rendered that when you looked at them long enough you felt yourself

slipping right into them, melting into the colors and shapes and the scene that some master had created out of his own brilliance.

That was what she saw, when she dared take her eyes off the road. Brilliance, and a terrible, stunning beauty that ripped the heart even as it soothed it again.

Green, impossibly green, the fields were broken by rambling walls of rough hedges or lines of stunted trees. Spotted cows or shaggy sheep grazed lazily in them, figures on tractors putted over them. Here and there they were dotted with houses of white and cream where clothes flapped on lines and flowers burst with wild and careless color in the dooryards.

Then wonderfully, inexplicably, there would be the ancient walls of a ruined abbey, standing proud and broken against the dazzling field and sky as if waiting for its time to come round again.

What would you feel, she wondered, if you crossed the field and walked up the smooth and slick steps left standing in those tumbling stones? Would you—could you—feel the centuries of passing feet that had trod those same steps? Would you, as her grandmother claimed, be able to hear—if

only you listened—the music and voices, the clash of battles, the weeping of women, the laughter of children so long dead and gone?

She didn't believe in such things, of course. But here, with this light, with this air, it seemed almost possible.

From the ruined grandeur to the charmingly simple, the land spread out and offered. Thatched roofs, stone crosses, castles, then villages with narrow streets and signs written in Gaelic.

Once she saw an old man walking with his dog on the side of the road where the grass grew tall and a little sign warned of loose chippings. Both man and hound wore little brown hats that she found absolutely charming. She kept that picture in her mind a long time, envying them their freedom and the simplicity of their routine.

They would walk every day, she imagined. Rain or shine, then go home to tea in some pretty little cottage with a thatched roof and a well-tended garden. The dog would have a little house of his own, but would most usually be found curled at his master's feet by the fire.

She wanted to walk those fields with a de-

voted dog, too. Just to walk and walk until she felt like sitting. Then to sit and sit until she felt like standing. It was a concept that dazzled her. Doing what she wanted when she wanted, at her own pace and in her own way.

It was so foreign to her, that simple, everyday freedom. Her great fear was to finally find it, nip the silvered edge of it with her fingertips, then bungle it.

As the road wound and ribboned around the coast of Waterford, she caught glimpses and stretches of the sea, blue silk against the horizon, turbulent green and gray as it spewed against a wide, sandy curve of beach.

The tension in her shoulders began to slide away. Her hands relaxed a bit on the wheel. This was the Ireland her grandmother had spoken of, the color and drama and peace of it. And this, Jude supposed, is why she'd finally come to see where her roots had dug before being ripped free and replanted across the Atlantic.

She was glad now she hadn't balked at the gate and run back to Chicago. Hadn't she managed the best part of the three-and-a-half-hour drive without a single mishap?

She wasn't counting the little glitch at that roundabout in Waterford City where she'd ended up circling three times, then nearly bashing into a car full of equally terrified tourists.

Everyone had escaped without harm, after all.

Now she was nearly there. The signs for the village of Ardmore said so. She knew from the careful map her grandmother had drawn that Ardmore was the closest village to the cottage. That's where she would go for supplies and whatever.

Naturally, her grandmother had also given her an impressive list of names, people she was supposed to look up, distant relatives she was to introduce herself to. That, Jude decided, could wait.

Imagine, she thought, not having to talk to anyone for several days in a row! Not being asked questions and being expected to know the answers. No making small talk at faculty functions. No schedule that must be adhered to.

After one moment of blissful pleasure about the idea, her heart fluttered in panic. What in God's name was she going to *do* for six months?