

Jewels of the Sun

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Extract

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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 students, 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 devoted 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?

It didn't have to be six months, she reminded herself as her body tensed up again. It wasn't a law. She wouldn't be arrested in Customs if she went back after six weeks. Or six days. Or six hours, for that matter.

And as a psychologist, she should know her biggest problem lay in struggling to live up to expectations. Including her own. Though she accepted that she was much better with theories than action, she was going to change that right now, and for as long as she stayed in Ireland.

Calm again, she switched on the radio. The stream of Gaelic that poured out had her goggling, poking at the buttons to find something in English, and taking the turn into Ardmore instead of the road up Tower Hill to her cottage.

Then, as soon as she realized her mistake, the heavy skies burst open, as if a giant hand had plunged a knife into their heart. Rain pounded the roof, gushed over her windshield while she tried to find the control for the wipers.

She pulled over to the curb and waited while the wipers gaily swished at the rain.

The village sat on the southern knob of the county, kissing the Celtic Sea and Ardmore Bay. She could hear the thrash of water against the shore as the storm raged around her, passionate and powerful. Wind shook the windows, whined threateningly in the little pockets where it snuck through.

She'd imagined herself strolling through the village, familiarizing herself with it, its pretty cottages, its smoky, crowded pubs, walking the beach her grandmother had spoken of, and the dramatic cliffs, the green fields.

But it had been a lovely, sun-washed afternoon, with villagers pushing rosy-cheeked babies in carriages and flirty-eyed men tipping their caps to her.

She hadn't imagined a sudden and violent spring storm bringing wild gusts of wind and deserted streets. *Maybe no one even lives here*, she thought. Maybe it was a kind of Brigadoon and she'd fumbled in during the wrong century.

Another problem, she told herself, was an imagination that had to be reeled in with distressing regularity.

Of course people lived here, they were just wise enough to get the hell out of the rain. The cottages were pretty, lined up like ladies with flowers at their feet. Flowers, she noted, that were getting a good hard hammering just now.

There was no reason she couldn't wait for that lovely sun-washed afternoon to come back down to the village. Now she was tired, had a bit of a tension headache, and just wanted to get inside somewhere warm and cozy.

She eased away from the curb and crept along in the rain, petrified that she would miss the turn yet again.

She didn't realize she was driving on the wrong side of the road until she narrowly missed a head-on collision. Or, to be perfectly accurate, when the oncoming car missed her by swerving around her and blasting the horn.

But she found the right turn, which she reminded herself should have been impossible to miss, given the stone spear of the great round tower that topped the hill. Through the rain it lanced up, guarding the ancient and roofless cathedral of Saint Declan and all the graves, marked with stones that tipped and tilted.

For a moment she thought she saw a man there, wearing silver that glinted dully, wetly in the rain. And straining to see, she nearly ran off what there was of a road. Nerves didn't make her sing this time. Her heart was pounding too violently to allow it. Her hands shook as she inched along, trying to see where he was, what he was doing. But there was nothing but the great tower, the ruins, and the dead.

Of course there hadn't been anyone there at all, she told

herself. No one would stand in a graveyard in the middle of a storm. Her eyes were tired, playing tricks. She just needed to get somewhere warm and dry and catch her breath.

When the road narrowed to little more than a muddy track bordered on both sides by man-high hedgerows, she considered herself well lost and hopeless. The car jerked and bumped over ruts while she struggled to find some place to turn around and head back.

There was shelter in the village, and surely someone would take pity on a brainless American who couldn't find her way.

There was a pretty little stone wall covered with some sort of bramble that would have been picturesque at any other time, then a skinny break that turned out to be someone's excuse for a driveway, but she was too far past it when she realized what it was and was terrified to attempt backing up and maneuvering in the mud.

The road climbed, and the ruts became second cousin to ditches. Her nerves were fraying, her teeth clicking audibly as she negotiated another bump, and she seriously considered just stopping where she was and waiting for someone to come along and tow her all the way back to Dublin.

She groaned aloud with relief when she saw another break. She turned in with a coat of paint to spare, then simply laid her forehead against the wheel.

She was lost, hungry, tired, and had to pee rather desperately. Now she was going to have to get out of the car in the pouring rain and knock on a stranger's door. If she was told the cottage was more than three minutes away, she'd have to beg for the use of a bathroom.

Well, the Irish were known for their hospitality, so she doubted that whoever answered the door would turn her

away to relieve herself in the hedgerows. Still, she didn't want to appear wild-eyed and frantic.

She tipped down the rearview mirror and saw that her eyes, usually a calm and quiet green, were indeed a bit wild. The humidity had frizzed her hair so that it looked as though she had some wild, bark-colored bush on her head. Her skin was dead pale, a combination of anxiety and fatigue, and she didn't have the energy to dig out her makeup and try to repair the worst of it.

She tried a friendly smile that did manage to convince the dimples to flutter in her cheeks. Her mouth was a little too wide, she thought, just as her eyes were a little too big, and the attempt was much closer to a grimace than a grin.

But it was the best she could do.

She grabbed her purse and shoved open the car door to meet the rain.

As she did, she caught a movement in the second-story window. Just a flutter of curtain that had her glancing up. The woman wore white and had pale, pale hair that tumbled in lush waves over her shoulders and breasts. Through the gray curtain of rain, their eyes met briefly, no more than an instant, and Jude had the impression of great beauty and great sadness.

Then the woman was gone, and there was only the rain.

Jude shivered. The windy wet cut clean to the bone, and she sacrificed her dignity by loping to the pretty white gate that opened into a tiny yard made glorious by the rivers of flowers flowing on either side of a narrow white walk.

There was no porch, only a stoop, but the second story of the cottage pitched over it and provided much welcome cover. She lifted a brass knocker in the shape of a Celtic knot and rapped it against a rough wooden door that looked thick as a brick and was charmingly arched.

While she shivered and tried not to think of her bladder,

she scanned what she could from under her shelter. It was like a doll's house, she thought. All soft white with forest-green trim, the many-paned windows flanked by shutters that looked functional as well as decorative. The roof was thatched, a charming wonder to her. A wind chime made up of three columns of bells sang musically.

She knocked again, more sharply now. Damn it, I know you're in there, and tossing manners aside, she stepped out in the rain and tried to peer through the front window.

Then she leaped back guiltily when she heard the friendly *beep-beep* of a horn.

A rusty red pickup with an engine that purred like a contented cat pulled in behind her car. Jude dragged dripping hair out of her face and prepared to explain herself when the driver popped out.

At first she took it to be a trim and tiny man with scarred, muddy boots, a filthy jacket, and worn work pants. But the face that beamed at her from under a dung-brown cap was definitely female.

And very nearly gorgeous.

Her eyes were as green as the wet hills surrounding them, her skin luminous. Jude saw tendrils of rich red hair tumbling out of the cap as the woman hurried forward, managing to be graceful despite the boots.

"You'd be Miss Murray, then. That's fine timing, isn't it?"

"It is?"

"Well, I'm running a bit behind today, as Mrs. Duffy's grandson Tommy stuffed half his building blocks down the loo again, then flushed away. It was a hell of a mess altogether."

"Hmmm," was all Jude could think to say as she wondered why she was standing in the rain talking to a stranger about blocked toilets.

"Can't you find your key?"

"My key?"

"To the front door. Well, I've mine, so we'll get you in and out of the wet."

That sounded like a wonderful idea. "Thank you," Jude began as she followed the woman back to the door. "But who are you?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, I'm Brenna O'Toole." Brenna shot out a hand, gripped Jude's and shook briskly. "Your granny told you, didn't she, that I'd have the cottage ready for you?"

"My gran—the cottage?" Jude huddled under the overhang. "My cottage? This is my cottage?"

"It is, yes, if you're Jude Murray from Chicago." Brenna smiled kindly, though her left brow had arched. "You'll be more than a bit tired by now, I'll wager, after your trip."

"Yes." Jude rubbed her hands over her face as Brenna unlocked the door. "And I thought I was lost."

"Appears you're found. *Ceade mile failte*," she said and stepped back so Jude could enter first.

A thousand welcomes, Jude thought. She knew that much Gaelic. And it felt like a thousand when she stepped into the warmth.

The foyer, hardly wider than the outside stoop, was flanked on one side by stairs polished by time and traffic. An arched doorway to the right led to the little living area, pretty as a picture with its walls the color of fresh biscuits, honey-toned trim, and lace curtains warmly yellowed with age so that everything in the room looked washed by the sun.

The furniture was worn and faded, but cheerful with its blue and white stripes and deep cushions. The gleaming tables were crowded with treasures—bits of crystal, carved

figures, miniature bottles. Rugs were scattered colorfully over the wide-planked floor, and the stone fireplace was already laid with what Jude thought must be hunks of peat.

It smelled earthy, and of something else faint and floral.

"It's charming, isn't it?" Jude pushed at her hair again as she turned a circle. "Like a playhouse."

"Old Maude, she liked pretty things."

Something in the tone had Jude stopping her circle, to look back at Brenna's face. "I'm sorry, I didn't know her. You were fond of her."

"Sure, everyone loved Old Maude. She was a grand lady. She'll be pleased you're here, looking after the place. She wouldn't want it standing alone and empty. Should I show you about, then? So you have your bearings."

"I'd appreciate it, but first I'm desperate for the bathroom."

Brenna let out a quick laugh. "A long ride from Dublin. There's a little powder room right off the kitchen. My dad and I put it in for her out of a closet only three years back. Straight that way it is."

Jude didn't waste any time exploring. "Little" was exactly the word for the half bath. She could have rapped her elbows on the side walls by crooking her arms and lifting them. But the walls were done in a pale, pretty rose, the white porcelain gleamed from fresh scrubbing, and there were sweetly embroidered fingertip towels hung neatly on the rack.

One glance in the oval mirror over the sink told Jude that yes, she looked every bit as bad as she'd feared. And though she was of average height and build, beside the fairylike Brenna she felt like a galumphing Amazon.

Annoyed with herself for the comparison, she blew her frizzed bangs off her brow and went back out.

"Oh, I would have gotten those."

Already the efficient Brenna had unloaded her luggage and hauled it into the foyer. "You've got to be ready to drop after your travels. I'll get your things upstairs. I imagine you'll want Old Maude's room, it's pleasant, then we'll put the kettle on so you can have some tea and I'll start your fire. It's a damp day."

As she spoke she carried Jude's two enormous suitcases up the stairs as if they were empty. Wishing she'd spent more time in the gym, Jude followed with her tote, her laptop, and her portable printer.

Brenna showed her two bedrooms, and she was right—Old Maude's, with its view of the front gardens, was the more pleasant. But Jude got only a hazy impression, for one look at the bed and she succumbed to the jet lag that dropped into her body like a lead weight.

She only half listened to the cheerful, lilting voice explain about linens, heat, the vagaries of the tiny fireplace in the bedroom as Brenna set the peat to light. Then she followed as if walking through water as Brenna clattered downstairs to put on tea and show her how the kitchen operated.

She heard something about the pantry being freshly stocked and how she should do her marketing at Duffy's in the village when she needed supplies. There was more—stacks of peat outside the back door, as Old Maude had preferred it, but wood as well in case she herself preferred that, and how the telephone had been hooked back up again and how to light the fire in the kitchen stove.

"Ah, there, now, you're asleep on your feet." Sympathetic, Brenna pressed a thick blue mug into Jude's hands. "Take that on up with you and have a lie-down. I'll start the fire down here for you."

"I'm sorry. I can't seem to focus."

"You'll do better after some sleep. My number's here

by the phone if you're needing anything. My family's barely a kilometer from here, my mother and dad and four sisters, so if there's anything you need, you've only to call or come by the O'Tooles'."

"Yes, I—four sisters!"

Brenna laughed again as she led Jude back down the hall. "Well, my dad kept hoping for a boy, but that's the way of it. Surrounded by females, he is, even the dog. Up you go, now."

"Thank you so much. Really, I'm not usually so . . . vague."

"Well, it's not every day you fly over the ocean now, is it? Do you want anything before I go?"

"No, I . . ." She leaned on the banister, blinked. "Oh, I forgot. There was a woman in the house. Where did she go?"

"A woman, you say? Where?"

"In the window." She swayed, nearly spilled the tea, then shook her head clear. "There was a woman in the window upstairs, looking out when I got here."

"Was there now?"

"Yes. A blond woman, young, very lovely."

"Ah, that would be Lady Gwen." Brenna turned, slipped into the living room, and lit the stack of peat. "She doesn't show herself to just everyone."

"Where did she go?"

"Oh, she's still here, I imagine." Satisfied that the peat had caught, Brenna rose, brushed off the knees of her trousers. "She's been here three hundred years, give or take. She's your ghost, Miss Murray."

"My what?"

"Your ghost. But don't trouble yourself about her. She won't be after harming you any. Hers is a sad tale, and a story for another time, when you're not so tired."

It was hard to concentrate. Jude's mind wanted to shut down, her body to shut off, but it seemed important to clear up this one point. "You're trying to say the house is haunted?"

"Sure and it's haunted. Didn't your granny tell you?"

"I don't believe she mentioned it. You're telling me you believe in ghosts."

Brenna lifted her brow again. "Well, did you see her or didn't you? There you are," she said when Jude merely frowned. "Have yourself a nap, and if you're up and about later, come on down to Gallagher's Pub and I'll buy you your first pint."

Too baffled to concentrate, Jude merely shook her head. "I don't drink beer."

"Oh, well now, that's a bloody shame," Brenna said, sounding both shocked and sincere. "Well, good day to you, Miss Murray."

"Jude." She murmured it and could do nothing but stare.

"Jude, then." Brenna flashed her gorgeous smile and slipped out the door into the rain.

Haunted, Jude thought, as she started up the stairs with her head circling lazily several inches over her shoulders. Fanciful Irish nonsense. God knew, her grandmother was full of fairy stories, but that's all they were. Stories.

But she'd seen someone . . . hadn't she?

No, the rain, the curtains, the shadows. She set down the tea that she'd yet to taste and managed to pull off her shoes. There weren't any ghosts. There was just a pretty house on a charming little hill. And the rain.

She fell facedown on the bed, thought about dragging the spread over her, and tumbled into sleep before she could manage it.

And when she dreamed, she dreamed of a battle fought on a green hill where the sunlight flashed on swords like jewels, of faeries dancing in the forest where the moonlight lay as tears on the leaves, and of a deep blue sea that beat like a heart against the waiting shore.

And through all the dreams, the one constant thing was the sound of a woman's quiet weeping.