


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NORA ROBERTS



Dance Upon The Air

First in the
bewitching new
Three Sisters Island
trilogy

NORA ROBERTS



*Dance
Upon
the Air*



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

DANCE UPON THE AIR

A Jove Book / published by arrangement with
the author

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2001 by Nora Roberts.

Excerpt from *Heaven and Earth* copyright © 2001 by Nora Roberts.

This book, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form
without permission.

For information address: The Berkley Publishing Group,
a division of Penguin Putnam Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

ISBN: 0-7394-1792-4

A JOVE BOOK®

Jove Books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group,
a division of Penguin Putnam Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

JOVE and the "J" design
are trademarks belonging to Penguin Putnam Inc.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To the Broads, the Brats, the Brawn,
and the Babes,
For the fun and the friendships*

*It is sweet to dance to violins
When Love and Life are Fair:
To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes
Is delicate and rare:
But it is not sweet with nimble feet
To dance upon the air!*

—Oscar Wilde

Prologue

SALEM VILLAGE, MASSACHUSETTS

JUNE 22, 1692

*I*n the dark green shadows of the deep woods, an hour before moonrise, they met in secret. Soon the longest day would become the shortest night of the solstice.

There would be no celebration, no rite of thanksgiving for the light, the warmth, on this Sabbath of Litha. This midsummer was a time of ignorance, and of death.

The three who met, met in fear.

“Have we all we need?” The one known here as Air pulled her hood closer so that not a single pale lock of hair could be seen in the light of the dying day.

“What we have shall do.” Earth laid her parcel on the ground. The part of her that wanted to weep and to rage over what had been done, over what was to come, was buried deep. With her head bent, her thick brown hair fell forward free.

"Is there no other way for us?" Air touched a hand to Earth's shoulder, and both looked at the third.

She stood, slim and straight. There was sorrow in her eyes, but behind it lived a firm purpose. She who was Fire threw back her hood in a gesture of defiance. Curling waves of red spilled out.

"It is because of our way there is no other. They will hunt us down like thieves and brigands, murder us, as they have already murdered a poor innocent."

"Bridget Bishop was not a witch." Earth spoke bitterly as she rose to her feet.

"No, and so she told the court of oyer and terminer. So she swore. Yet they hanged her. Murdered over the lies of a few young girls and the ravings of the fanatics who smell brimstone in every breath of air."

"But there have been petitions." Air linked her fingers together like a woman preparing to pray. Or plead. "Not everyone supports the court, or this terrible persecution."

"Too little," Earth murmured. "And far too late."

"It will not end with one death. I have seen it." Fire closed her eyes, saw again the horrors to come. "Our protection cannot outlast the hunt. They will find us, and they will destroy us."

"We have done nothing." Air dropped her hands to her sides. "No harm."

"What harm did Bridget Bishop do?" Fire countered. "What harm have any of the others accused and waiting trial done to the people of Salem Town? Sarah Osborne died in a Boston prison. For what crime?"

Temper lanced through her, hot and keen, and was

ruthlessly rejected. Even now she refused to let power be stained by anger and hate.

"The blood is up in these Puritans," she continued. "These *pioneers*. Fanatics they are, and they will bring a wave of death before sanity returns."

"If we could help."

"We cannot stop it, sister."

"No." Fire nodded at Earth. "All we can do is survive. So we leave this place, the home we made here, the lives we might have led here. And make another."

Gently, she cupped Air's face in her hands. "Grieve not for what can never be, but celebrate what can. We are the Three, and we will not be vanquished in this place."

"We will be lonely."

"We will be together."

And in that last flicker of the day they cast the circle—one by two by three. Fire ringed around the earth, and the wind lifted the flames high.

Inside the magic circle they formed another, joining hands.

Accepting now, Air lifted her face to the sky. "As night takes the day, we offer this light. We are true to the Way and stand for the right. Truth here is done, a circle of one."

Earth, defiant, raised her voice. "This hour is our last upon this ground. Present, future, past, we will not be found. Strength not rue, a circle of two."

"We offered our craft with harm to none, but the hunt for our blood has already begun. We will make our place away from here." Fire lifted joined hands high. "Away from death, away from fear. Power lives free, a circle of three."

The wind kicked, the earth trembled. And the magic fire speared through the night. Three voices rose, in unison.

“Away from hate let this land be torn. Lift it from fear, from death and scorn. Carve rock, carve tree, carve hill and stream. Carry us with it on midsummer moonbeam. Out past the cliff and out past the shore, to be severed from this land forever more. We take our island out to the sea. As we will, so mote it be.”

And a great roar sounded in the forest, a swirling torrent of wind, a wild leap of fire. While those who hunted what they never understood slept in their righteous beds, an island rose up toward sky, circled madly toward sea.

Settled safe and serene on quiet waves. And took its first breath of life on that shortest night.

One

THREE SISTERS ISLAND

JUNE, 2001

*S*he kept staring straight ahead as the knuckle of land, bumpy and green with distance, began revealing its secrets. The lighthouse, of course. What was an offshore New England island without its stalwart spear? This one, pure and dazzling white, rose on a craggy cliff. Just as it should, Nell thought.

There was a stone house near it, fog-gray in the sharp summer sunlight, with peaked roofs and gables and what she hoped was a widow's walk circling the top story.

She'd seen paintings of the Light of the Sisters and the house that stood so strong and firm beside it. It was the one she'd seen in the little shop on the mainland, the one that had sent her impulsively to the car ferry.

She'd been following impulse and instinct for six months, just two months after her meticulous and hard-worked plan had freed her.

Every moment of those first two months had been

terror. Then, gradually, terror had eased to anxiety, and a different kind of fear, almost like a hunger, that she would lose what she had found again.

She had died so she could live.

Now she was tired of running, of hiding, of losing herself in crowded cities. She wanted a home. Wasn't that what she'd always wanted? A home, roots, family, friends. The familiar that never judged too harshly.

Maybe she would find some part of that here, on this spit of land cradled by the sea. Surely she could get no farther away from Los Angeles than this pretty little island—not unless she left the country altogether.

If she couldn't find work on the island, she could still take a few days there. A kind of vacation from flight, she decided. She would enjoy the rocky beaches, the little village, she would climb the cliffs and roam the thick wedge of forest.

She'd learned how to celebrate and cherish every moment of being. It was something she would never, ever forget again.

Delighted with the scatter of clapboard cottages tucked back from the dock, she leaned on the rail of the ferry, let the wind blow through her hair. It was back to its natural sun-drenched blond. When she'd run, she'd hacked it short as a boy's, gleefully snipping off the long, tumbling curls, then dying it deep brown. Over the past months, she'd changed the color periodically—bright red, coal black, a soft sable brown. She still kept it fairly short and very straight.

It said something, didn't it, that she'd finally been able to let it be. Something about reclaiming herself, she thought.

Evan had liked it long, with a riot of curls. At times he had dragged her by it, across the floor, down the stairs. Using it like chains.

No, she would never wear it long again.

A shudder ran through her, and she glanced quickly over her shoulder, scanning the cars, the people. Her mouth went dry, her throat hot as she searched for a tall, slim man with gilded hair and eyes as pale and hard as glass.

He wasn't there, of course. He was three thousand miles away. She was dead to him. Hadn't he told her a hundred times that the only way she would be free of him was in death?

Helen Remington had died so Nell Channing could live.

Furious with herself for going back, even for a moment in her mind, Nell tried to calm herself. She breathed in slowly. Salt air, water. Freedom.

As her shoulders relaxed again, a tentative smile played around her mouth. She stayed at the rail, a small woman with short, sunny hair that danced cheerfully around a delicate face. Her mouth, unpainted and soft, curved up and teased out the hint of dimples in her cheeks. Pleasure brought a rosy glow to her skin.

She wore no makeup, another deliberate act. There was a part of her that was still hiding, still hunted, and she did whatever she could to pass unnoticed.

Once she had been considered a beauty, and had groomed herself accordingly. She'd dressed as she'd been told to dress, wearing sleek, sexy, sophisticated clothes selected by a man who claimed to love her above all things. She'd known the feel of silk against her skin, what it was to casually clasp diamonds

around her throat. Helen Remington had known all the privileges of great wealth.

And for three years had lived in fear and misery.

Nell wore a simple cotton shirt over faded jeans. Her feet were comfortable in cheap white sneakers. Her only jewelry was an antique locket that had been her mother's.

Some things were too precious to leave behind.

As the ferry slowed to dock, she walked back to her car. She would arrive on Three Sisters with one small bag of belongings, a rusted secondhand Buick, and \$208 to her name.

She couldn't have been happier.

Nothing, she thought as she parked the car near the docks and began to wander on foot, could have been farther from the pleasure palaces and glitz of Beverly Hills. And nothing, she realized, had ever called more truly to her soul than this little postcard village. Houses and shops were both tidy and prim with their colors faded by sea salt and sun. Cobblestone streets were curvy and whistle-clean as they climbed the hilly terrain or arrowed back to the docks.

Gardens were lovingly tended, as if weeds were illegal. Dogs barked behind picket fences and children rode bikes of cherry red and electric blue.

The docks themselves were a study in industry. Boats and nets and ruddy-cheeked men in tall rubber boots. She could smell fish and sweat.

She hiked up the hill from the docks and turned to look back. From there she could see the tour boats plugging along in the bay, and the little sickle slash of sand beach where people spread out on towels or bobbed in the energetic surf. A little red tram with

white letters that read THREE SISTERS TOURS was rapidly filling up with day-trippers and their cameras.

Fishing and tourism, she supposed, were what kept the island afloat. But that was economics. It stood against sea, storms, and time, surviving and flourishing at its own pace. That, she thought, was courage.

It had taken her too long to find her own.

High Street speared across the hill. Shops and restaurants and what she supposed were island businesses lined it. One of the restaurants should be her first stop, she thought. It was possible she could hook a job as a waitress or short-order cook, at least for the summer season. If she could find work, she could hunt up a room.

She could stay.

In a few months, people would know her. They'd wave as she walked by, or call out her name. She was so tired of being a stranger, of having no one to talk to. No one who cared.

She stopped to study the hotel. Unlike the other buildings it was stone instead of wood. Its three stories with elaborate gingerbread, iron balconies, and peaked roofs were undeniably romantic. The name suited it, she decided. The Magick Inn.

It was a good bet that she'd find work there. Waitressing in the dining room, or as part of the house-keeping staff. A job was the first order of business.

But she couldn't make herself go inside, deal with it. She wanted time first, a little time before she settled down to the practical.

Flighty, Evan would have said. You're much too flighty and foolish for your own good, Helen. Thank God you have me to take care of you.

Because his voice played all too clearly in her ears, because the words nipped at the confidence she'd slowly rebuilt, she turned deliberately away and walked in the opposite direction.

She would get a damn job when she was ready to, but for now she was going to wander, to play tourist, to explore. When she was finished roaming High Street, she'd go back to her car and drive all over the island. She wouldn't even stop at the Island Tourist Board to get a map.

Following her nose, she hitched up her backpack and crossed the street. She passed craft shops, gift shops, loitered at the windows. She enjoyed pretty things that sat on shelves without purpose. One day, when she settled again, she'd make a home just as she pleased, full of clutter and fun and color.

An ice cream shop made her smile. There were round glass tables and white iron chairs. A family of four sat at one, laughing as they spooned up whipped cream and confetti-colored sprinkles. A boy wearing a white cap and apron stood behind the counter, and a girl in snug cutoff jeans flirted with him as she considered her choices.

Nell sketched the picture in her mind and walked on.

The bookstore stopped her, made her sigh. Her home would be full of books, too, but not rare first editions never meant to be opened and read. She'd have old, scarred books, shiny new paperbacks all in a jumble of stories. In fact, that was one thing she could start now. A paperback novel wouldn't add much weight to her pack if she had to move on.

She looked up from the display in the window to

the Gothic lettering spilling across the glass. Café Book. Well, that was perfect. She would hunt through the stacks, find something fun to read, and look through it over a cup of coffee.

She stepped inside to air that was fragrant with flowers and spice, and heard music played on pipes and harps. Not only the hotel was magic, Nell thought the minute she crossed the threshold.

Books, in a banquet of colors and shapes, lined deep blue shelves. Overhead, tiny pricks of light showered down from the ceiling like stars. The checkout counter was an old oak cabinet, deeply carved with winged faeries and crescent moons.

A woman with dark, choppy hair sat on a high stool behind it, idly paging through a book. She glanced up and adjusted silver-framed reading glasses.

"Morning. Can I help you?"

"I'm just going to look around, if that's all right."

"Enjoy. Let me know if I can help you find anything."

As the clerk went back to her book, Nell roamed. Across the room two generous chairs faced a stone hearth. On the table between stood a lamp fashioned from a figurine of a robed woman with her arms lifted high. Other shelves held trinkets, statues of colored stone, crystal eggs, dragons. She wandered through, passing books on one side, rows of candles on the other.

At the rear, stairs curved to the second floor. She climbed and found more books, more trinkets, and the café.

Half a dozen tables of glossy wood were arranged near the front window. Along the side was a glass dis-

play and counter boasting an impressive array of pastries, sandwiches, and a kettle of that day's soup. The prices were on the high side, but not unreasonable. Nell thought she might have some soup to go with her coffee.

Moving closer, she heard the voices from the open door behind the counter.

"Jane, this is ridiculous, and totally irresponsible."

"It is not. It's Tim's big chance, and it's a way off this damn island. We're taking it."

"The possibility of an audition for a play that may or may not be produced Off Broadway is *not* a big chance. Neither one of you will have a job. You won't—"

"We're going, Mia. I told you I'd work till noon today, and I worked till noon."

"You told me that less than twenty-four hours ago."

There was impatience in the voice—a low, lovely voice. Unable to help herself, Nell edged closer.

"How the hell am I going to keep the café up without anyone to cook?"

"It's all about you, isn't it? You can't even wish us luck."

"Jane, I'll wish you a miracle, because that's what it's going to take. No, wait—don't go off in a huff."

Nell caught movement in the doorway and stepped to the side. But she didn't move out of earshot.

"Be careful. Be happy. Oh, damn it. Blessed be, Jane."

"Okay." There was a loud snuffle. "I'm sorry, really, I'm sorry for leaving you in the lurch this way. But Tim needs to do this, and I need to be with Tim. So . . . I'll miss you, Mia. I'll write."