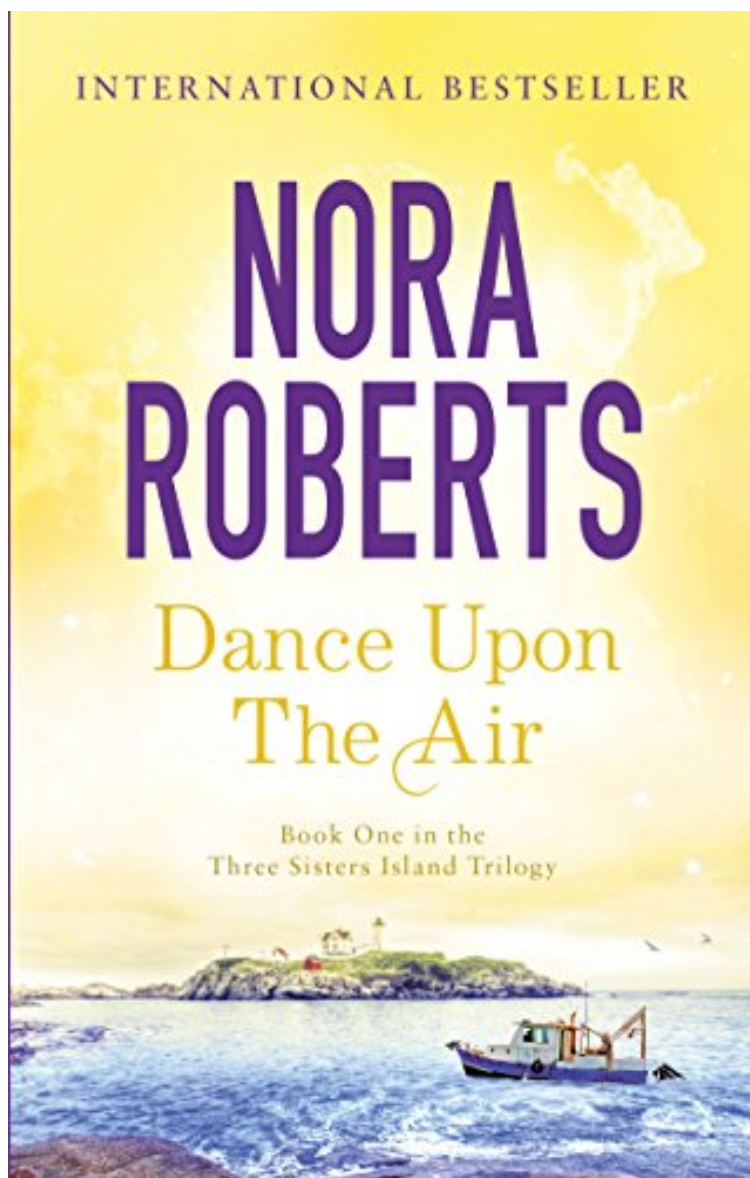


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## Dance Upon The Air: Number 1 in series



*Par Nora Roberts*

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**Description :** Description du produitFrom the #1 New York Times bestselling author-the first book in the reissued Three Sisters Island trilogy is a tale of friendship, fate, and the mysterious ways of the heart.

Prsentation de l'diteurWhen Nell Channing arrives on Three Sisters Island, she dares to hope she's found refuge from the life of terror she has left behind. But even in this quiet sanctuary, Nell remains alert to danger. Concealing her true identity, she takes a job at the local bookstore-caf - and begins to explore her feelings for Sheriff Zack Todd. As Nell starts her new life, she discovers that the island suffers under a terrible curse. It can only be lifted by the descendants of the Three Sisters, the witches who settled on the island in 1692. Haunted by her past, and with the help of two gifted women, Nell must find the power to save her home, her love and herself....com's Best of 2001Setting: Three Sisters Island, coast of New

England, present day Sensuality rating: 6 Perennial New York Times bestselling author Nora Roberts's new Three Sisters Island trilogy is pure magic! No, I mean really magic. An intriguing combination of *The Witches of Eastwick* and *Sleeping With the Enemy*, *Dance Upon the Air* introduces readers to the idyllic town of Three Sisters Island. Reputedly conjured by a trio of sisters seeking to escape the Salem witch-hunts, the island remains a place of quiet refuge for one and all, including pretty Nell Channing who arrives in town afraid of her own shadow, with few possessions and no past. But the warm, sunny days and cool, windswept nights, as well as the loving concern of new friends--especially hunky sheriff Zack Todd--soon lure skittish Nell into a much-welcome fresh life. Nell's new boss, the captivatingly lovely bookstore owner Mia Devlin (look for Mia's story, hopefully, in the not-too-distant future), wonders from what or whom Nell is running. Mia treats Nell as she would a sister, which isn't too far off the mark, helping Nell discover and explore her inner resources while Zack's romantic attentions bring a rosy glow to Nell's cheeks and to her future. But something wicked this way comes Will Nell be ready to face and conquer her past? Even with the love and support of Mia, Zack, and Zack's fellow police officer, his peppery, down-to-earth sister Ripley, Nell has the fight of her life--the fight for her life--on her hands. Roberts continues to delight fans and create new believers with her talent and imagination. --Alison Trinkle

Chapter One She 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 housekeeping 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. Caf 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 caf. Half a dozen tables of glossy wood were arranged near the front window. Along the side was a glass display 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 caf 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 sniffle. "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." Nell managed to duck behind shelves just as a weeping woman raced out of the back and ran down the stairs. "Well, isn't this just fine." Nell peeked out, blinked in automatic admiration. The woman who stood in the doorway was a vision. Nell couldn't think of another word for her. She had a mass of hair the color of autumn leaves. Reds and golds spilled over the shoulders of a long blue dress that left her arms bare to the silver bracelets that winked bright on each wrist. Her eyes, sparking with temper, were gray as smoke and dominated a flawless face. Slashing cheekbones, a full, wide mouth painted siren red. Skin like . . . Nell had heard skin compared to alabaster, but this was the first time she'd seen it. She was tall, willow-slim and perfect. Nell glanced toward the caf tables to see if any of the customers who loitered there were as awestruck as she herself. But no one seemed to notice the woman or the temper swirling around her like water on the boil. She inched out to get a better look, and those gray eyes shifted. Pinned her. "Hello. Can I help you?" "I was . . . I thought . . . I'd like a cup of cappuccino and a bowl of soup. Please." Annoyance flashed in Mia's eyes and nearly sent Nell back behind the shelves. "I can handle the soup. We have lobster bisque today. I'm afraid the espresso machine is beyond my current capabilities." Nell looked at the beautiful copper-and-brass machine, felt a little tingle. "I could make it myself." "You know how to work this thing?" "Yes, actually, I do." Considering, Mia gestured and Nell scurried behind the counter. "I could make you one while I'm at it." "Why not?" Brave little rabbit, Mia mused, as she watched Nell take over the machine. "Just what sent you to my door? Backpacking?" "No. Oh." Nell flushed, remembering her pack. "No, just exploring a little. I'm looking for a job, and a room." "Ah." "Excuse me, I know it was rude, but I overheard your . . . conversation. If I understand it correctly, you're in a bit of a jam. I can cook." Mia watched the steam rise, listened to the hiss. "Can you?" "I'm a very good cook." Nell offered Mia the frothing coffee. "I've done catering, I've worked in a bakery, and I've waitressed. I know how to prepare food and how to serve it." "How old are you?" "Twenty-eight." "Do you have a criminal record?" A giggle nearly burst out of Nell's throat. For a moment it danced lively in her eyes. "No. I'm tediously honest, a dependable worker and a creative cook." "Don't babble, don't babble!" she ordered herself, but she couldn't seem to stop. "I need the job because I'd like to live on the island. I'd like a job here because I enjoy books and I liked the, well, the feel of your shop as soon as I walked in." Intrigued, Mia angled her head. "And what did you feel?" "Possibilities." Excellent answer, Mia mused. "Do you believe in possibilities?" Nell considered. "Yes. I've had to." "Excuse me?" A couple stepped up to the counter. "We'd like to have two iced mochas and two of those clairs." "Of course. Just a moment." Mia turned back to Nell. "You're hired. Apron's in the back. We'll work out the details later today." She sipped her cappuccino. "Well done," she added and stepped out of the way. "Oh—what's your name?" "I'm Nell. Nell Channing." "Welcome to Three Sisters, Nell Channing." Mia Devlin ran Caf Book the way she ran her life. With a style born out of instinct, and largely for her personal amusement. She was a crafty businesswoman who enjoyed making a profit. But always on her own terms. What bored her, she ignored. What intrigued her, she pursued. At the moment, Nell Channing intrigued her. If Nell had been exaggerating her skills, Mia would have fired her as quickly as she'd hired her, and with no regret. She may have, if the spirit moved her, helped Nell secure a job elsewhere. But that wouldn't have taken much time, or interfered with her business. She'd have taken that step only because something about Nell had tugged at her the instant those big blue eyes met hers. Injured innocence. That had been Mia's first impression, and she trusted her first impressions implicitly. Competence as well, Mia thought, though the confidence was a little shaky. Still, once Nell had suited up and started work at the caf,

she'd steadied in that area, too. Mia observed her through the afternoon, noted that she handled the food orders, the customers, the cash register, and the baffling mystery of the espresso machine smoothly. They'd need to spruce her up a bit, Mia decided. They were casual on the island, but the ancient jeans were a bit too laid-back for Mia's personal taste. Satisfied for the moment, Mia walked back into the caf kitchen. It impressed her that the counters and appliances were clean. Jane had never managed to be a tidy cook, even though most of the baked goods had been prepared by her off-site. "Nell?" Taken by surprise, Nell jolted and spun around from the stove, where she'd been scrubbing burners. Her cheeks flushed as she looked at Mia and the young woman beside her. "Didn't mean to startle you. This is Peg. She works the counter from two to seven." "Oh. Hello." "Hi. Jeez, I can't believe Jane and Tim are just leaving. New York City!" Peg sounded a bit envious. She was little and perky, with a mop of curly hair bleached nearly white. "Jane made awesome blueberry muffins." "Yes, well, Jane and her muffins aren't here anymore. I need to talk to Nell now, so you're in charge of the caf." "No problem. Catch you later, Nell." "Why don't we use my office? We'll get to those details. We're open from ten to seven, summer hours. In the winter we cut back and close at five. Peg prefers the afternoon shift. She likes to party and isn't a morning person. In any case, since we start serving at ten, I'll need you here in the morning." "That's okay with me." She followed Mia up another flight of steps. She hadn't paid attention, Nell realized. She hadn't known the shop had three floors. A few months before, she would never have missed that detail. She'd have checked out the space, the exits. Relaxing didn't mean getting sloppy, she reminded herself. She had to be ready, at any time, to run again. They passed a large storeroom, lined with bookshelves and stacked with boxes, then went through a doorway into Mia's office. The antique cherry desk suited her, Nell thought. She imagined Mia surrounded by the rich and the beautiful. There were flowers here, and thriving plants, little bits of crystal and polished rocks in bowls. Along with the stylish furnishings were a top-of-the-line computer, a fax, filing cabinets, and shelves for publishers' catalogs. Mia gestured to a chair and took the one behind the desk for herself. "You had a few hours in the caf, so you've seen the type of fare we offer. There's a specialty sandwich each day, the day's soup, a small selection of alternate sandwiches. Two or three varieties of cold salads. Pastries, cookies, muffins, biscotti. In the past I left the menu choices up to the cook. Are you comfortable with that?" "Yes, ma'am." "Please, I'm barely a year older than you. It's Mia. Until we're sure this is going to work, I'd prefer you make up the next day's menu for my approval." She took a legal pad out of the drawer, passed it across the desk. "Why don't you write down what you have in mind for tomorrow?" Panic wanted to crawl through her, tremble in her fingers. Nell took a deep breath, waited until her mind was blank and clear, then began to write. "This time of year, I think we should keep the soups light. Herbed consommé. Tortellini salad, a white bean, and a shrimp. I'd do a spiced-chicken pita for the sandwich, and a vegetarian selection, but I'd have to see what's in season. I can make you tarts, again depending on what looks good fruit-wise. The clairs are popular. I can duplicate those. A six-layer chocolate-and-cream torte. Awesome blueberry muffins, as well as walnut. You're low on hazelnut biscotti. Cookies? Chocolate chip is never wrong. Macadamia. Instead of a third cookie, I'd offer brownies. I make an irresistible triple-fudge brownie." "How much can you prepare on-site?" "All of it, I guess. But if you're going to serve the pastries and muffins starting at ten, I'll need to start about six." "If you had your own kitchen?" "Oh, well." What a lovely fantasy that was. "I'd prep some of the menu the night before, bake fresh in the morning." "Um-hmm. How much money do you have, Nell Channing?" "Enough." "Don't be prickly," Mia advised breezily. "I can advance you a hundred dollars. Going against a salary, to start, of seven an hour. You'll log your shopping, cooking hours daily. You'll charge what you need, food-wise, to the store's account. I'll want the receipts, again daily." When Nell opened her mouth to speak, Mia simply lifted one slim, coral-tipped finger. "Wait. You'll be expected to serve and to clear tables when there's a rush, and to assist customers in the book section on your level during lulls. You get two half-hour breaks, Sundays off, and a fifteen percent employee discount on purchases, not including food or drink which unless you turn out to be a glutton, will be part of your perks. With me so far?" "Yes, but I'm here every day. If you have a question or problem you can't handle, get me. If I'm not available, go to Lulu. She's usually at the counter on the main floor, and she knows everything. You look quick enough to catch on; if you don't know an answer, don't be afraid to ask. Now, you're looking for a place to stay." "Yes." It was like being swept away by a fast, unexpected wind. "I hope to." "Come with me." Mia pulled a set of keys out of a drawer, pushed away from the desk and clipped out—she wore gorgeous, needle-thin heels, Nell noted. Once they were on the main level, she walked straight toward a rear door. "Lulu!" she called out. "Back in ten." Feeling clumsy and foolish, Nell followed her through the back exit and into a small garden paved with stepping-stones. A huge black cat sunned itself on one of them and blinked open

one luminous gold eye as Mia stepped nimbly over. "That's Isis. She won't trouble you." "She's beautiful. Is the garden your work?" "Yes. No place is a home without flowers. Oh, I didn't askdo you have transportation?" "Yes, I have a car. It can loosely be called transportation." "That's handy. You won't have far to go, but it'd be troublesome to cart your goods on foot every day." At the edge of the lot she turned left, kept up her brisk pace, passed the backs of shops, across from neatly kept houses. "Ms. I'm sorry, I don't know your last name." "It's Devlin, but I told you to call me Mia." "Mia, I'm grateful for the job. For the chance. And I can promise you, you won't be sorry. But . . . can I ask where we're going?" "You need a place." She turned a corner, stopped and gestured. "That should do it." Across the narrow side street sat a little yellow house, like a cheerful sunbeam at the edge of a tiny grove of stunted trees. The shutters were white, as was the narrow strip of porch. There were flowers there, too, in a happy dance of bright summer colors. It sat back from the road on a neat square of lawn with trees tucking it into shade and dappled sunlight. "Is this your house?" Nell asked. "Yes. For the moment." Jangling the keys, Mia walked up the flagstone path. "I bought it last spring." Had been compelled to, Mia remembered. An investment, she'd told herself. Though she, a businesswoman down to the bone, had done nothing so far about renting it out. She'd waited, just as, she understood, the house had waited. She unlocked the front door, stepped back. "It's been blessed." "Excuse me?" Mia only nodded. "Welcome." The furnishings were sparse. A simple sofa that desperately needed re-covering, a deep-cushioned chair, a scatter of tables. "Bedrooms on either side, though the one to the left is more suited to an office or study. The bathroom's minute, but charming, and the kitchen's been modernized and should do very well. It's straight back. I've worked on the gardens, but they need more care. There's no AC, but the furnace works. Still, you'll be glad the fireplace works as well come January." "It's wonderful." Unable to resist, Nell wandered, poking her head in the main bedroom where a pretty bed with a white iron headboard stood. "Like a fairy cottage. You must love living here." "I don't live here. You do." Nell turned back, slowly. There was Mia, in the center of the little room, her hands cupped together with the keys in her palm. Light beamed through the two front windows and seemed to set her hair to flame. "I don't understand." "You need a place, I have a place. I live on the cliffs. I prefer it there. This is your place, for now. Don't you feel it?" She only knew she felt happy, and full of nerves at the same time. And that the moment she'd stepped into the house, she'd wanted to stretch and settle, very much like the cat in the sunshine. "I can stay here?" "Life's been hard, hasn't it?" Mia murmured. "That you'd tremble at good fortune. You'll pay rent, for nothing that comes free holds its value. We'll work the terms out of your salary. Settle in. You'll have to come back and sign forms and so on. But that can wait for the morning. Island Market is your best source for the ingredients you'll need for tomorrow's menu. I'll let them know you're coming, so you can charge to the store account. Any pots, pans, whatever are your expense, but I'll float that until the end of the month. I expect to see you, and your creations, by nine-thirty sharp." She stepped over and dropped the keys into Nell's limp hand. "Any questions?" "Too many to know where to begin. I don't know how to thank you." "Don't waste your tears, little sister," Mia replied. "They're too precious. You'll work hard for what you make here." "I can't wait to get started." Nell held out her hand. "Thank you, Mia." Their hands touched, clasped. A spark snapped out, blue as flame and quickly gone. With a half laugh, Nell jerked back. "Must be a lot of static, or something, in the air." "Or something. Well, welcome home, Nell." Turning, Mia started for the door. "Mia." Emotion gathered in her throat, ached there. "I said this was like a fairy cottage. You must be my fairy godmother." Mia's smile was dazzling, and her laughter low and rich as warmed cream. "You'll find out soon enough I'm far from it. I'm just a practical witch. Don't forget to bring me the receipts," she added and quietly closed the door behind her. Reprinted from *Dance Upon the Air* by Nora Roberts by permission of Jove, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc. Copyright 2001. All rights reserved. This excerpt, or any parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission.