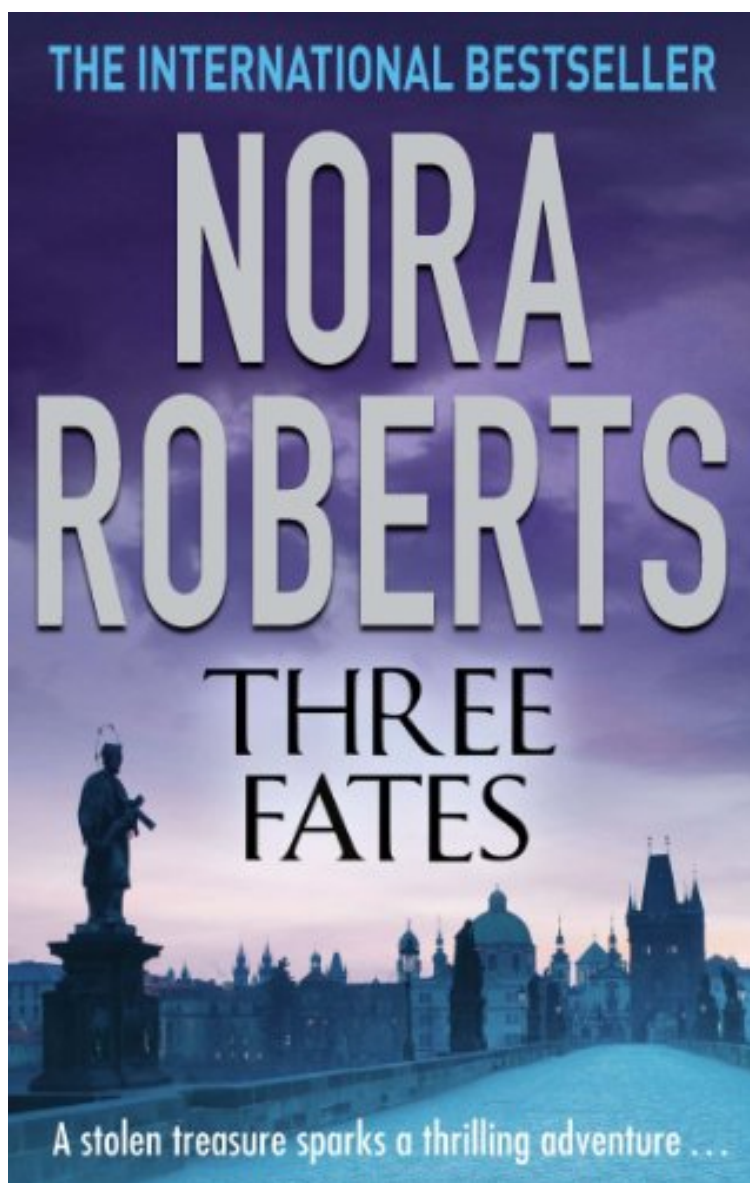


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Three Fates: Three Sisters - One Dark Destiny (English Edition)



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Description : Description du produitWhen the Lusitania sank, more than one thousand people died. One passenger, however, survived to become a changed man, giving up his life as a petty thief but keeping a small silver statue that would become a family heirloom to future generations. Now, nearly a century later, that heirloom, one of a priceless, long-separated set of three, has been snatched away from the Sullivans. And Malachi, Gideon, and Rebecca Sullivan are determined to recover their great-great-grandfather's treasure, reunite the Three Fates, and make their fortune. The quest will take them from their home in Ireland to Helsinki, Prague, and New York and introduce them to a formidable female professor whose knowledge

of Greek mythology will aid them in their quest; to a daring exotic dancer who sees the Fates as her chance at a new life; and to a seductive security expert who knows how to play high-tech cat-and-mouse. And it will pit them in a suspenseful fight against an ambitious woman who will stop at nothing to acquire the Fates. Fast-paced and full of the romance and passion for which she's famous, *Three Fates* is Nora Roberts at her adventurous best—an unforgettable tale of luck, love, and the fateful decisions that shape our lives.

Presentation de l'auteur Nora Roberts - the World's Greatest Storyteller Irish siblings Malachi, Gideon, and Rebecca Sullivan are on a mission. A precious family heirloom has been stolen - a small silver statue that just happens to be one of three priceless, long-separated 'Fates'. They are determined to recover it - no matter the cost. Their quest will take them from Ireland to Helsinki, Prague and New York, where they meet a brilliant formidable female professor; a daring exotic dancer and a seductive security expert. Together they will confront a dangerous and unscrupulous enemy in this passionate and gripping novel from the peerless and brilliant Nora Roberts..com Setting: Ireland, Europe, and New York City Sensuality: 7 Irish siblings

Malachi, Gideon, and Rebecca Sullivan cherish the family legend of their great-great-grandfather's acquisition of one of the Fates, a trio of priceless, long-separated silver statues. When the Sullivans' Fate is stolen by an unscrupulous New York antiques dealer, they vow to retrieve the little silver lady, and thus begins a quest that will send them racing across Europe, traveling through Ireland, and dodging killers in New York City. Most importantly, their search for their Fate and her two sister statues brings them into the world of a brilliant female mythology professor, a free-spirited exotic dancer, and a security expert adept at breaking and entering. This diverse sextet must meld their talents in order to thwart their enemy, retrieve the

stolen statue, and stay alive while administering their particular brand of justice. Prolific author Nora Roberts's latest tale of adventure and romance is a nonstop page-turner with quirky heroines, strong heroes, and a delightfully nefarious villainess. Toss in strong Irish, European, and New York settings, interesting secondary characters, and a plot with intriguing twists and turns and the result is romantic suspense at its best. --Lois Faye Dyer Extrait One May 7, 1915 Happily unaware he'd be dead in twenty-three minutes, Henry W. Wyley imagined pinching the nicely rounded rump of the young blonde who was directly in his line of sight. It was a perfectly harmless fantasy that did nothing to distress the blonde, or Henry's wife, and put Henry himself in the best of moods. With a lap robe tucked around his pudgy knees and a plump belly well satisfied by a late and luxurious lunch, he sat in the bracing sea air with his wife, Edith-whose bum, bless her, was flat as a pancake-enjoying the blonde's derriere along with a fine cup of Earl Grey. Henry, a portly man with a robust laugh and an eye for the ladies, didn't bother to stir himself to join other passengers at the rail for a glimpse of Ireland's shimmering coast. He'd seen it before and assumed he'd have plenty of opportunities to see it again if he cared to. Though what fascinated people about cliffs and grass eluded him.

Henry was an avowed urbanite who preferred the solidity of steel and concrete. And at this particular moment, he was much more interested in the dainty chocolate cookies served with the tea than with the vista. Particularly when the blonde moved on. Though Edith fussed at him not to make a pig of himself, he gobbled up three cookies with cheerful relish. Edith, being Edith, refrained. It was a pity she denied herself that small pleasure in the last moments of her life, but she would die as she'd lived, worrying about her husband's extra tonnage and brushing at the crumbs that scattered carelessly on his shirtfront. Henry, however, was a man who believed in indulgence. What, after all, was the point of being rich if you didn't treat yourself to the finer things? He'd been poor, and he'd been hungry. Rich and well fed was better. He'd never been handsome, but when a man had money he was called substantial rather than fat, interesting rather than homely. Henry appreciated the absurdity of the distinction. At just before three in the afternoon on that sparkling May day, the wind blew at his odd little coal-colored toupee, whipped high, happy color into his pudgy cheeks. He had a gold watch in his pocket, a ruby pin in his tie. His Edith, scrawny as a chicken, was decked out in the best of Parisian couture. He was worth nearly three million. Not as much as Alfred Vanderbilt, who was crossing the Atlantic as well, but enough to content Henry. Enough, he thought with pride as he considered a fourth cookie, to pay for first-class accommodations on this floating palace. Enough to see that his children had received first-class educations and that his grandchildren would as well. He imagined first class was more important to him than it was to Vanderbilt. After all, Alfred had never had to make do with second. He listened with half an ear as his wife chattered on about plans once they reached England. Yes, they would pay calls and receive them. He would not spend all of his time with associates or hunting up stock for his business. He assured her of all this with his usual amiability, and because after nearly forty years of marriage he was deeply fond of his wife, he would see that she was well entertained during

their stay abroad. But he had plans of his own, and that driving force had been the single purpose of this spring crossing. If his information was correct, he would soon acquire the second Fate. The small silver statue was a personal quest, one he'd pursued since he'd chanced to purchase the first of the reputed three. He had a line on the third as well and would tug on it as soon as the second statue was in his possession. When he had the complete set, well, that would be first class indeed. Wyley Antiques would be second to none. Personal and professional satisfaction, he mused. All because of three small silver ladies, worth a pretty penny separately. Worth beyond imagining together. Perhaps he'd loan them to the Met for a time. Yes, he liked the idea.

THE THREE FATES ON LOAN FROM THE PRIVATE COLLECTION OF HENRY W. WYLEY

Edith would have her new hats, he thought, her dinner parties and her afternoon promenades. And he would have the prize of a lifetime. Sighing with satisfaction, Henry sat back to enjoy his last cup of Earl Grey. Felix Greenfield was a thief. He was neither ashamed nor prideful of it. It was simply what he was and had always been. And as Henry Wyley assumed he'd have other opportunities to gaze upon the Irish coast, Felix assumed he'd remain a thief for many years to come. He was good at his work—not brilliant at it, he'd be the first to admit, but good enough to make ends meet. Good enough, he thought as he moved quickly down the corridors of first class in his stolen steward's uniform, to have gathered the means for third-class passage back to England. Things were just a bit hot professionally back in New York, with cops breathing down his neck due to that bungled burglary. Not that it had been his fault, not entirely. His only failing had been to break his own first rule and take on an associate for the job. Bad choice, as his temporary partner had broken another primary rule. Never steal what isn't easily, discreetly fenced. Greed had blinded old Two-Pint Monk, Felix thought with a sigh as he let himself into the Wyley stateroom. What had the man been thinking, laying sticky fingers on a diamond-and-sapphire necklace? Then behaving like a bloody amateur by getting drunk as a sailor on his usual two pints of lager and bragging over it. Well, Two-Pint would do his bragging in jail now, though there'd be no lager to loosen his idiot tongue. But the bastard had chirped like the stool pigeon he was and given Felix's name to the coppers. It had seemed best to take a nice ocean voyage, and what better place to get lost than on a ship as big as a damn city? He'd been a bit concerned about the war in Europe, and the murmurs about the Germans stalking the seas had given him some pause. But they were such vague, distant threats. The New York police and the idea of a long stretch behind bars were much more personal and immediate problems. In any case, he couldn't believe a grand ship like the Lusitania would cross if there was any real danger. Not with all those wealthy people on board. It was a civilian vessel after all, and he was sure the Germans had better things to do than threaten a luxury liner, especially when there was a large complement of American citizens on board. He'd been lucky indeed to have snagged a ticket, to have lost himself among all the passengers with the cops two steps behind him and closing. But he'd had to leave quickly, and had spent nearly all his wherewithal for the ticket. Certainly there were opportunities galore to pluck a bit of this, a bit of that on such a fine, luxurious vessel filled with such fine, luxurious people. Cash would be best, of course, for cash was never the wrong size or the wrong color. Inside the stateroom, he let out a low whistle. Imagine it, he thought, taking a moment to dream. Just imagine traveling in such style. He knew less about the architecture and design of where he was standing than a flea knew about the breed of dog it bit. But he knew it was choice. The sitting room was larger than the whole of his third-class accommodations, and the bedroom beyond a wonder. Those who slept here knew nothing about the cramped space, the dark corners and the smells of third class. He didn't begrudge them their advantages. After all, if there weren't people who lived high, he'd have no one to steal from, would he? Still, he couldn't waste time gawking and dreaming. It was already a few minutes before three, and if the Wyleys were true to form, the woman would wander back before four for her afternoon nap. He had delicate hands and was careful to disturb little as he searched for spare cash. Big bucks, he figured, they'd leave in the purser's keeping. But fine ladies and gentlemen enjoyed having a roll of bills close at hand for flashing. He found an envelope already marked STEWARD and, grinning, ripped it open to find crisp dollar bills in a generous tip. He tucked it in the trouser pocket of his borrowed uniform. Within ten minutes, he'd found and claimed nearly a hundred fifty dollars and a pair of nice garnet earbobs left carelessly in a silk evening purse. He didn't touch the jewelry cases—the man's or the woman's. That was asking for trouble. But as he sifted neatly through socks and drawers, his fingers brushed over a solid lump wrapped in velvet cloth. Lips pursed, Felix gave in to curiosity and spread open the cloth. He didn't know anything about art, but he recognized pure silver when he had his hands on it. The lady—for it was a woman—was small enough to fit in his palm. She held some sort of spindle, he supposed it was, and was garbed in a kind of robe. She had a lovely face and form. Fetching, he would have said, though she looked a bit too cool and calculating for his personal taste in females. He

preferred them a bit slow of wit and cheerful of disposition. Tucked in with her was a paper with a name and address, and the scrawled notation: Contact for second Fate. Felix pondered over it, committed the note to memory out of habit. It could be another chicken for plucking once he was in London. He started to wrap her again, replace her where he'd found her, but he just stood there turning her over and over in his hands.

Throughout his long career as a thief, he'd never once allowed himself to envy, to crave, to want an object for himself. What was taken was always a means to an end, and nothing more. But Felix Greenfield, lately of Hell's Kitchen and bound for the alleyways and tenements of London, stood in the plush cabin on the grand ship with the Irish coast even now in view out the windows, and wanted the small silver woman for his own. She was so . . . pretty. And fit so well in his hand with the metal already warming against his palm. Such a little thing. Who would miss her? "Don't be stupid," he muttered, wrapped her in velvet again. "Take the money, mate, and move along." Before he could replace her, he heard what he thought was a peal of thunder. The floor beneath his feet seemed to shudder. Nearly losing his balance as the ship shook side to side, he stumbled toward the door, the velvet-cloaked statue still in his hand. Without thinking, he jammed it into his trouser pocket, spilled out into the corridor as the floor rose under him. There was a sound now, not like thunder, but like a great hammer flung down from heaven to strike the ship. Felix ran for his life. And running, he raced into madness. The forward part of the ship dipped sharply and had him tumbling down the corridor like dice in a cup. He could hear shouting and the pounding of feet. And he tasted blood in his mouth, seconds before it went dark. His first wild thought was, Iceberg! as he remembered what had befallen the great Titanic. But surely in the broad light of a spring afternoon, so close to the Irish coast, such a thing wasn't possible. He never thought of the Germans. He never thought of war. He scrambled up, slamming into walls in the pitch black of the corridor, stumbling over his own feet and the stairs, and spilled out on deck with a flood of others. Already lifeboats were being launched and there were cries of terror along with shouted orders for women and children to board them. How bad was it? he wondered frantically. How bad could it be when he could see the shimmering green of the coastline? Even as he tried to calm himself, the ship pitched again, and one of the lowering lifeboats upended. Its screaming passengers were hurled into the sea. He saw a mass of faces—some torn, some scalded, all horrified. There were piles of debris on deck, and passengers—bleeding, screaming—trapped under it. Some, he saw with dull shock, were already beyond screams. And there on the listing deck of the great ship, Felix smelled what he'd often smelled in Hell's Kitchen. He smelled death. Women clutched children, babies, and wept or prayed. Men ran in panic, or fought madly to drag the injured clear of debris. Through the chaos stewards and stewardesses hurried, passing out life jackets with a kind of steady calm. They might have been handing out teacups, he thought, until one rushed by him. "Go on, man! Do your job! See to the passengers." It took Felix one blank moment before he remembered he was still wearing the stolen steward's uniform. And another before he understood, truly understood, they were sinking. Fuck me, he thought, standing in the middle of the screams and prayers. We're dying. There were shouts from the water, desperate cries for help. Felix fought his way to the rail and, looking down, saw bodies floating, people floundering in debris-strewn water. People drowning in it. He saw another lifeboat being launched, wondered if he could somehow make the leap into it and save himself. He struggled to pull himself to a higher point, to gain ground was all he could think. To stay on his feet until he could hurl himself into a lifeboat and survive. He saw a well-dressed man take off his own life jacket and put it around a weeping woman. So the rich could be heroes, he thought. They could afford to be. He'd sooner be alive. The deck tilted again, sent him sliding along with countless others toward the mouth of the sea. He shot out a hand, managed to grab the rail with his clever thief's fingers and cling. And his free hand closed, as if by magic, over a life jacket as it went tumbling by. Muttering wild prayers of thanks, he started to strap it on.

It was a sign, he thought with his heart and eyes wheeling wild, a sign from God that he was meant to survive this. As his shaking fingers fumbled with the jacket, he saw the woman wedged between upturned deck chairs. And the child, the small, angelic face of the child she clutched against her. She wasn't weeping.

She wasn't screaming. She simply held and rocked the little boy as if lulling him into his afternoon nap. "Mary, mother of God." And cursing himself for a fool, Felix crawled across the pitched deck. He dragged and heaved at the chairs that pinned her down. "I've hurt my leg." She continued to stroke her child's hair, and the rings on her fingers sparkled in the strong spring sunlight. Though her voice was calm, her eyes were huge, glazed with shock and pain, and the terror Felix felt galloped inside his own chest. "I don't think I can walk. Will you take my baby? Please, take my little boy to a lifeboat. See him safe." He had one moment, one heartbeat to choose. And while the world went to hell around them, the child smiled. "Put this on yourself, missus, and hold tight to the boy." "We'll put it on my son." "It's too big for him. It won't help

him." "I've lost my husband." She spoke in those clear, cultured tones, and though her eyes were glassy, they stayed level on his as Felix pushed her arms through the life jacket. "He fell over the rail. I fear he's dead." "You're not, are you? Neither is the boy." He could smell the child-powder, youth, innocence-through the stench of panic and death. "What's his name?" "Name? He's Steven. Steven Edward Cunningham, the Third." "Let's get you and Steven Edward Cunningham, the Third, to a lifeboat." "We're sinking." "That's the God's truth." He dragged her, trying once more to reach the high side of the ship. He crawled, clawed his way over the wet and rising deck. "Hold on tight to Mama, Steven," he heard her say. Then she crawled and clawed with him while terror raged around them. "Don't be frightened." She crooned it, though her breath was coming fast with the effort. Her heavy skirts sloshed in the water, and blood smeared over the glinting stones on her fingers. "You have to be brave. Don't let go of Mama, no matter what." He could see the boy, no more than three, cling like a monkey to his mother's neck. Watching her face, Felix thought as he strained for another inch of height, as if all the answers in all the world were printed on it. Deck chairs, tables, God knew what, rained down from the deck above. He dragged her another inch, another, a foot. "Just a little farther." He gasped it out, without any idea if it were true. Something struck him hard in the back. And his hold on her slipped. "Missus!" he shouted, grabbed blindly, but caught only the pretty silk sleeve of her dress. As it ripped, he stared at her helplessly. "God bless you," she managed and, wrapping both arms tight around her son, slid over the edge of the world into the water. He barely had time to curse before the deck heaved and he pitched in after her. The cold, the sheer brutality of it, stole his breath. Blind, already going numb with shock, he kicked wildly, clawing for the surface as he'd clawed for the deck. When he broke through, gasped in that first gulp of air, he found he'd plunged into a hell worse than any he'd imagined. Dead were all around him. He was jammed into an island of bobbing, staring white faces, of screams from the drowning. The water was strewn with planks and chairs, wrecked lifeboats and crates. His limbs were already stiff with cold when he struggled to heave as much of his body as possible onto a crate and out of the freezing water. And what he saw was worse. There were hundreds of bodies floating in the still sparkling sunlight. While his stomach heaved out the sea he'd swallowed, he floundered in the direction of a waterlogged lifeboat. The swell, somehow gentle, tore at the island and spread death over the sea, and dragged him, with merciless hands, away from the lifeboat. The great ship, the floating palace, was sinking in front of his eyes. Dangling from it were lifeboats, useless as toys. Somehow it astonished him to see there were still people on the decks. Some were kneeling, others still rushing in panic from a fate that was hurtling toward them. In shock, he watched more tumble like dolls into the sea. And the huge black funnels tipped down toward the water, down to where he clung to a broken crate. When those funnels touched the sea, water gushed into them, sucking in people with it. Not like this, he thought as he kicked weakly. A man wasn't meant to die like this. But the sea dragged him under, pulled him in. Water seemed to boil around him as he struggled. He choked on it, tasted salt and oil and smoke. And realized, as his body bashed into a solid wall, that he was trapped in one of the funnels, would die there like a rat in a blocked chimney. As his lungs began to scream, he thought of the woman and the boy. Since he deemed it useless to pray for himself, he offered what he thought was his last plea to God that they'd survived. Later, he would think it had been as if hands had taken hold of him and yanked him free. As the funnels sank, he was expelled, flying out on a filthy gush of soot. With pain radiating through him, he snagged a floating plank and pulled his upper body onto it. He laid his cheek on the wood, breathed deeply, wept quietly. And saw the Lusitania was gone. The plate of water where she'd been was raging, thrashing and belching smoke. Belching bodies, he saw with a dull horror. He'd been one of them, only moments before. But fate had spared him. While he watched, while he struggled to block out the screams and stay sane, the water went calm as glass. With the last of his strength, he pulled himself onto the plank. He heard the shrill song of sea gulls, the weeping prayers or weeping cries of those who floundered or floated in the water with him. Probably freeze to death, he thought as he drifted in and out of consciousness. But it was better than drowning. It was the cold that brought him out of the faint. His body was racked with it, and every trickling breeze was a new agony. Hardly daring to move, he tugged at his sopping and ruined steward's jacket. Bright pain had nausea rolling greasily in his belly. He ran an unsteady hand over his face and saw the wet wasn't water, but blood. His laugh was wild and shaky. So what would it be, freezing or bleeding to death? Drowning might have been better, after all. It would be over that way. He slowly shed the jacket-something wrong with his shoulder, he thought absently-and used the ruined jacket to wipe the blood from his face. He didn't hear so much shouting now. There were still some thin screams, some moans and prayers, but most of the passengers who'd made it as far as he had were dead. And silent. He watched a body float by. It took him a moment to recognize the face, as it was bone-white and covered with

bloodless gashes. Wyley. Good Christ. For the first time since the nightmare had begun, he felt for the weight in his pocket. He felt the lump of what he'd stolen from the man currently staring up at the sky with blank blue eyes. "You won't need it," Felix said between chattering teeth, "but I swear before God if I had it to do over, I wouldn't have stolen from you in the last moments of your life. Seems like robbing a grave." His long-lapsed religious training had him folding his hands in prayer. "If I end up dying here today, I'll apologize in person if we end up on the same side of the gate. And if I live I take a vow to try to reform. No point in saying I'll do it, but I'll give doing an honest day's work a try." He passed out again, and woke to the sound of an engine. Dazed, numb, he managed to lift his head. Through his wavering vision, he saw a boat, and through the roaring in his ears, heard the shouts and voices of men. He tried to call out, but managed only a hacking cough. "I'm alive." His voice was only a croak, whisked away by the breeze. "I'm still alive." He didn't feel the hands pull him onto the fishing trawler called Dan O'Connell. Was delirious with chills and pain when he was wrapped in a blanket, when hot tea was poured down his throat. He would remember nothing about his actual rescue, nor learn the names of the men whose arms had hauled him to safety.

Nothing came clear to him until he woke, nearly twenty-four hours after the torpedo had struck the liner, in a narrow bed in a small room with sunlight streaming through a window. He would never forget the first sight that greeted him when his vision cleared. She was young and pretty, with eyes of misty blue and a scatter of gold freckles over her small nose and round cheeks. Her hair was fair and piled on top of her head in some sort of knot that seemed to be slipping. Her mouth bowed up when she glanced over at him, and she rose quickly from the chair where she'd been darning socks. "There you are. I wonder if you'll stay with us this time around." He heard Ireland in her voice, felt the strong hand lift his head. And he smelled a drift of lavender. "What . . ." The old, croaking sound of his voice appalled him. His throat felt scorched, his head stuffed with rags of dirty cotton. "Just take this first. It's medicine the doctor left for you. You've pneumonia, he says, and a fair gash on your head that's been stitched. Seems you tore something in your shoulder as well. But you've come through the worst, sir, and you rest easy for we'll see you through." "What . . . happened? The ship . . ." The pretty mouth went flat and hard. "The bloody Germans. 'Twas a U-boat torpedoed you. And they'll writhe in hell for it, for the people they murdered. The babies they slaughtered." Though a tear trickled down her cheek, she managed to slide the medicine into him competently. "You have to rest. Your life's a miracle, for there are more than a thousand dead." "A . . ." He managed to grip her wrist as the horror stabbed through him. "A thousand?" "More than. You're in Queenstown now, and as well as you can be." She tilted her head. "An American, are you?" "Close enough, he decided, as he hadn't seen the shores of his native England in more than twelve years. "Yes. I need-" "Tea," she interrupted. "And broth." She moved to the door to shout: "Ma! He's waked and seems to want to stay that way." She glanced back. "I'll be back with something warm in a minute." "Please. Who are you?" "Me?" She smiled again, wonderfully sunny. "I'd be Meg. Meg O'Reiley, and you're in the home of my parents, Pat and Mary O'Reiley, where you're welcome until you're mended. And your name, sir?" "Greenfield. Felix Greenfield." "God bless you, Mr. Greenfield." "Wait . . . there was a woman, and a little boy. Cunningham." Pity moved over her face. "They're listing names. I'll check on them for you when I'm able. Now you rest, and we'll get you some tea." When she went out, he turned his face toward the window, toward the sun. And saw, sitting on the table under it, the money that had been in his pocket, the garnet earbobs. And the bright silver glint of the little statue. Felix laughed until he cried. He learned the O'Reileys made their living from the sea. Pat and his two sons had been part of the rescue effort. He met them all, and her younger sister as well. For the first day he was unable to keep any of them straight in his mind. But for Meg herself. He clung to her company as he'd clung to the plank, to keep from sliding into the dark again. "Tell me what you know," he begged her. "It'll be hard for you to hear it. It's hard to speak it." She moved to his window, looked out at the village where she'd lived all of her eighteen years. Survivors such as Felix were being tended to in hotel rooms, in the homes of neighbors. And the dead, God rest them, were laid in temporary morgues. Some would be buried, some would be sent home. Others would forever be in the grave of the sea. "When I heard of it," she began, "I almost didn't believe it. How could such a thing be? There were trawlers out, and they went directly to try to rescue survivors. More boats set out from here. Most were too late to do more than bring back the dead. Oh sweet God, I saw myself some of the people as they made land. Women and babies, men barely able to walk and half naked. Some cried, and others just stared. Like you do when you're lost. They say the liner went down in less than twenty minutes. Can that be?" "I don't know," Felix murmured, and shut his eyes. She glanced back at him and hoped he was strong enough for the rest. "More have died since coming here. Exposure and injuries too grievous to heal. Some spent hours in the

water. The lists change so quick. I can't think what terror of heart families are living with, waiting to know. Or what grief those who know their loved ones are lost in this horrible way are feeling. You said there was no one waiting for word of you." "No. No one." She went to him. She'd tended his hurts, suffered with him during the horrors of his delirium. It had been only three days since he'd been brought into her care, but for both of them, it was a lifetime. "There's no shame in staying here," she said quietly. "No shame in not going to the funeral today. You're far from well yet." "I need to go." He looked down at his borrowed clothes. In them he felt scrawny and fragile. And alive. The quiet was almost unearthly. Every shop and store in Queenstown was closed for the day. No children raced along the streets, no neighbors stopped to chat or gossip. Over the silence came the hollow sound of church bells from St. Colman's on the hill, and the mournful notes of the funeral dirge. Felix knew if he lived another hundred years he'd never forget the sounds of that grieving music, the soft and steady beat of drums. He watched the sun strike the brass of the instruments, and remembered how that same sun had struck the brass of the propellers as the stern of the Lusitania had reared up in her final plunge into the sea. He was alive, he thought again. Instead of relief and gratitude, he felt only guilt and despair. He kept his head down as he trudged along behind the priests, the mourners, the dead, through the reverently silent streets. It took more than an hour to reach the graveyard, and left him light-headed. By the time he saw the three mass graves beneath tall elms where choirboys stood with incense burners, he was forced to lean heavily on Meg. Tears stung the backs of his eyes as he looked at the tiny coffins that held dead children. He listened to the quiet weeping, to the words of both the Catholic and the Church of Ireland services. None of it reached him. He could still hear, thought he would forever hear, the way people had called to God as they'd drowned. But God hadn't listened, and had let them die horribly. Then he lifted his head and, across those obscene holes, saw the face of the woman and young boy from the ship. The tears came now, fell down his cheeks like rain as he lurched through the crowd. He reached her as the first notes of "Abide With Me" lifted into the air. Then he fell to his knees in front of her wheelchair. "I feared you were dead." She reached up, touched his face with one hand. The other peeked out of a cast. "I never got your name, so couldn't check the lists." "You're alive." Her face had been cut, he could see that now, and her color was too bright, as if she were feverish. Her leg had been cast as well as her arm. "And the boy." The child slept in the arms of another woman. Like an angel, Felix thought again. Peaceful and unmarked. The fist of despair that gripped him loosened. One prayer, at least one prayer, had been answered. "He never let go." She began to weep then, soundlessly. "He's such a good boy. He never let go. I broke my arm in the fall. If you hadn't given me your life jacket, we would have drowned. My husband . . ." Her voice frayed as she looked over at the graves. "They never found him." "I'm sorry." "He would have thanked you." She reached up to touch a hand to her boy's leg. "He loved his son, very much." She took a deep breath. "In his stead, I thank you, for my son's life and my own. Please tell me your name." "Felix Greenfield, ma'am." "Mr. Greenfield." She leaned over, brushed a kiss on Felix's cheek. "I'll never forget you. Nor will my son." When they wheeled her chair away, she kept her shoulders straight with a quiet dignity that brought a wash of shame over Felix's face. "You're a hero," Meg told him. Shaking his head, he moved as quickly as he could away from the crowds, away from the graves. "No. She is. I'm nothing." "How can you say that? I heard what she said. You saved her life, and the little boy's." Concerned, she hurried up to him, took his arm to steady him. He'd have shaken her off if he'd had the strength. Instead, he simply sat in the high, wild grass of the graveyard and buried his face in his hands. "Ah, there now." Pity for him had her sitting beside him, taking him into her arms. "There now, Felix." He could think of nothing but the strength in the young widow's face, in the innocence of her son's. "She was hurt, so she asked me to take the boy. To save the boy." "You saved them both." "I don't know why I did it. I was only thinking about saving myself. I'm a thief. Those things you took out of my pocket? I stole them. I was stealing them when the ship was hit. All I could think about when it was happening was getting out alive." Meg shifted beside him, folded her hands. "Did you give her your life jacket?" "It wasn't mine. I found it. I don't know why I gave it to her. She was trapped between deck chairs, holding on to the boy. Holding on to her sanity in the middle of all that hell." "You could've turned away from her, saved yourself." He mopped at his eyes. "I wanted to." "But you didn't." "I'll never know why." He only knew that seeing them alive had changed something inside him. "But the point is, I'm a second-rate thief who was on that ship because I was running from the cops. I stole a man's things minutes before he died. A thousand people are dead. I saw some of them die. I'm alive. What kind of world is it that saves a thief and takes children?" "Who can answer? But there's a child who's alive today because you were there. Would you have been, do you think, just where you were, when you were, if you hadn't been stealing?" He let out a derisive sound. "The likes of me wouldn't have been anywhere near the

first-class deck unless I'd been stealing." "There you are." She took a handkerchief from her pocket and dried his tears as she would a child's. "Stealing's wrong. It's a sin and there's no question about it. But if you'd been minding your own, that woman and her son would be dead. If a sin saves innocent lives, I'm thinking it's not so great a sin. And I have to say, you didn't steal so very much if all you had for it were a pair of earbobs, a little statue and some American dollars." For some reason that made him smile. "Well, I was just getting started." The smile she sent him was lovely and sure. "Yes, I'd say you're just getting started." Reprinted from *Three Fates* by Nora Roberts by permission of , G.P. Putnam's Sons, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc. Copyright 2002, Nora Roberts. All rights reserved. This excerpt, or any parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission.