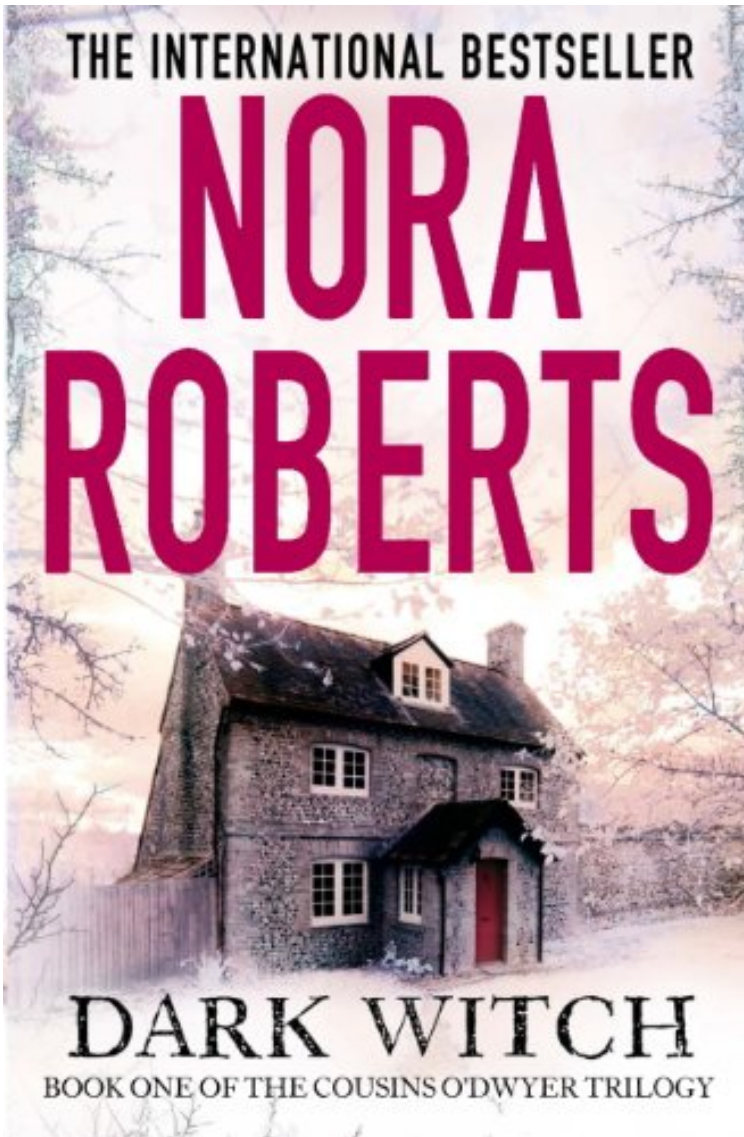


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# Dark Witch



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIona Sheehan has always felt a powerful connection to Ireland. So when her beloved grandmother confesses an extraordinary family secret, she can't resist visiting County Mayo to discover the truth for herself. Arriving at the atmospheric Castle Ashford, Iona is excited to meet her enigmatic cousins, Connor and Branna O'Dwyer. And when she lands a job at the local riding school she is soon drawn to its owner - the charismatic, fiercely independent Boyle McGrath. Perhaps she has found her true home at last... But Iona's arrival is no accident. The three cousins have each inherited a dangerous gift from an ancestor known as the Dark Witch. And they are about to discover that some old legends can return to haunt the present.The first in a magical new trilogy, Dark Witch is a captivating story of love, family and destiny.ExtraitChapter ThreeCounty Mayo, 2013The cold carved bone deep, fueled by the lash of the wind,

iced by the drowning rain gushing from a bruised, bloated sky. Such was Iona Sheehans welcome to Ireland. She loved it. How could she not? she asked herself as she hugged her arms to her chest and drank in the wild, soggy view from her window. She was standing in a castle. She slept in a castle that night. An honest-to-God Irish castle in the heart of the west. Some of her ancestors had worked there, probably slept there. Everything she knew verified that her people, on her mothers side in any case, had sprung from this gorgeous part of the world, this magical part of this magical country. She gambled, well, pretty much everything to come here, to find her roots, to she hoped connect with them. And most of all, to finally understand them. Burnt bridges, left them smoldering behind her in the hopes of building new ones, stronger ones. Ones that led somewhere she wanted to go. She left her mother mildly annoyed. But then her mother never rose to serious anger, or sorrow, or joy or passion. How difficult had it been to find herself saddled with a daughter who rode emotions like a wild stallion? Her father had just patted her head in his absent way, and wished her luck as casually as he might some passing acquaintance. She suspected she'd never been any more than that to him. Her paternal grandparents considered the trip a grand adventure, and had given her the very welcome gift of a check. She was grateful, even knowing they belonged to the out-of-sight-out-of-mind school and probably wouldn't give her another thought. But her maternal grandmother, her treasured Nan, had given her a gift with so many questions. She was here in this lovely corner of Mayo, ringed by water, shadowed by ancient trees, to find the answers. She should wait until tomorrow, settle in, take a nap as she'd barely slept on the flight from Baltimore. At least she should unpack. She had a week in Ashford Castle, a foolish expense on the practical scale. But she wanted, so wanted that connection, that once-in-a-lifetime treat. She opened her bags, began to take out clothes. She was a woman who'd once wished she'd grow taller than her scant five three, and curvier than the slim, teenage boy body the fates had granted her. Then she'd stopped wishing and compensated by using bright colors in her wardrobe, and wearing high, high heels whenever she could manage it. Illusion, Nan would say, was as good as reality. She'd once wished she could be beautiful, like her mother, but worked with what she had. Cute. The only time she'd seen her mother close to genuinely horrified had been just the week before when Iona had chopped off her long blond hair to a pixie cap. Far from used to it herself, she raked her fingers through it. It suited her, didn't it? Didn't it bring out her cheekbones a little? It didn't matter if she regretted the impulse; she'd regretted others. Trying new things, taking new risks those were her current goals. No more wait-and-see, the mantra of her parents as long as she could remember. Now was now. And with that in mind she thought, the hell with unpacking, the hell with waiting until tomorrow. What if she died in her sleep? She dug out boots, a scarf, the new raincoat candy pink she'd bought for Ireland. She dragged a pink-and-white-striped cap over her hair, slung her oversized purse on cross-body. Don't think, just do, she told herself, and left her warm, pretty room. She made a wrong turn almost immediately, but it only gave her time to wander the corridors. She'd asked for a room in the oldest section when she'd booked, and liked to imagine servants scurrying with fresh rushes, or ladies sitting at their spindles. Or warriors in bloody mail returning from battle. She had days to explore the castle, the grounds, the nearby village of Cong, and she meant to make use of all of it. But her primary goal remained to seek out and make contact with the Dark Witch. When she stepped outside into the whistling wind and drenching rain she told herself it was a perfect day for witches. The little map Nan had drawn was in her bag, but she'd etched it on her memory. She turned away from the great stone walls, took the path toward the deep woods. Passed winter-quiet gardens, spreads of soaked green. Belatedly she remembered the umbrella in her bag, dragged it out, pushing her way forward into the evocative gloom of the rain-struck woods. She hadn't imagined the trees so big, with their wide, wide trunks, crazily gnarled branches. A storybook wood, she thought, thrilled with it even as the rain splashed over her boots. Through its drumming she heard the wind sigh and moan, then the rumble of what must be the river. Paths speared, forked, but she kept the map in her head. She thought she heard something cry overhead, and for a moment imagined she saw the sweep of wings. Then despite the drumming, the rumbling, the sighs and the moans, everything suddenly seemed still. As the path narrowed, roughened, her heartbeat pounded in her ears, too quick, too loud. To the right an upended tree exposed a base taller than a man, wider than her arm span. Vines thick as her wrist tangled together like a wall. She found herself drawn toward them, struck by the urge to pull at them, to fight her way through them to see what lay beyond. The concept of getting lost flitted through her mind, then out again. She just wanted to see. She took a step forward, then another. She smelled smoke and horses, and both pulled her closer to that tangled wall. Even as she reached out, something burst through. The massive black blur had her stumbling back. She thought, instinctively: Bear! Since the umbrella had flown out of her hand, she looked around frantically for a weapon a stick, a rock then saw as it eyed her, the biggest dog ever to

stand on four massive paws. Not a bear, she thought, but as potentially deadly if he wasn't somebody's cheerful pet. Hello . . . doggie. He continued to watch her out of eyes more gold than brown. He stepped forward to sniff her, which she hoped wasn't the prelude to taking a good, hard bite. Then let out two cannon-shot barks before loping away. Okay. She bent over from the waist until she caught her breath. All right. Exploring would definitely wait for a bright, sunny day. Or at least a brighter, dryer one. She picked up her soaked and muddy umbrella and pressed on. She should've waited on the whole thing, she told herself.

Now she was wet and flustered and, she realized, more travel weary than she'd expected. She should be napping in her warm hotel bed, snuggled in listening to the rain instead of trudging through it. And now perfect fog rolled in, surfing over the ground like waves on the shore. Mists thickened like those vines, and the rain sounded like voices muttering. Or there were voices muttering, she thought. In a language she shouldn't understand, but almost did. She quickened her pace, as anxious to get out of the woods as she'd been to get into them. The cold turned brutal until she saw her breath hazing out. Now the voices sounded in her head: Turn back. Turn back. It was stubbornness as much as anxiety that had her pushing ahead until she nearly ran along the slippery path. And like the dog, burst into the clear. The rain was just the rain, the wind just the wind. The path opened into a road, with a few houses, smoke puffing out of chimneys. And beyond the beauty of the mist-shrouded hills. Too much imagination, not enough sleep, she told herself. She saw dooryard gardens resting their bright blooms for spring, cars parked on the roadside or in short drives. Not far now, according to Nans map, so she walked along the road, counting houses. It sat farther off the road than the others, farther apart as if it needed breathing room. The pretty thatched-roofed cottage with its deep blue walls and bright red door transmitted that same storybook vibe yet a shiny silver Mini sat in the little driveway. The cottage itself jogged into an L, fronted by curved glass. Even in the winter, pots of bright pansies sat on the stoops, their exotic faces turned upward to drink in the rain. A sign of aged wood hung above the curve of glass. Its deeply carved letters said: The Dark Witch I found her. For a moment Iona just stood in the rain, closed her eyes. Every decision she'd made in the last six weeks perhaps every one she'd made in her life had led to this. She wasn't sure whether to go to the L the workshop, Nan had told her or the cottage entrance. But as she walked closer she saw the gleam of light on the glass. And closer still, the shelves holding bottles full of color bright or soft thanks of hanging herbs. Mortars and pestles, bowls and . . . cauldrons? Steam puffed from one on a stove top, and a woman stood at a work counter, grinding something. Iona's first thought was how unfair it seemed that some women could look like that even without fussing. The dark hair bundled up, sexily messy, the rosy flush from the work and the steam. The fine bones that said beauty from birth to death, and the deeply sculpted mouth just slightly curved in a contented smile. Was it genes or magic? she wondered. But then, for some, one was the same as the other. She gathered her courage and, setting her umbrella aside, reached for the door handle. She barely touched it when the woman looked up, over. The smile deepened, polite welcome, so Iona opened the door, stepped in. And the smile faded. Eyes of smoke gray held so intensely on her face that Iona stopped where she was, just over the threshold. Can I come in? Its in you are. I . . . I guess I am. I should've knocked. Im sorry, I . . . God, it smells amazing in here. Rosemary and basil and lavender, and . . . everything. Im sorry, she said again. Are you Branna ODwyer? I am, yes. As she answered, she took a towel from under the counter, crossed to Iona. You're soaked through. Oh, sorry. Im dripping on the floor. I walked over from the castle. From the hotel. Im staying at Ashford Castle. Lucky you, its a grand place. Its like a dream, at least what Ive seen of it. I just got here. I mean, a couple hours ago, and I wanted to come to see you right away. I came to meet you. Why? Oh, Im sorry, I Youre sorry for a lot it seems, in such a short time. Ha. Iona twisted the towel in her hands. Yeah, it sounds like it. Im Iona. Iona Sheehan. Were cousins. I mean, my grandmother Mary Kate OConnor is cousins with your grandmother Ailish, um . . . Ailish Flannery. So that makes us . . . I get confused if its fourth or third or whatever. A cousins a cousin for all that. Well then, take off those muddy boots, and well have some tea. Thanks. I know I should've written or called or something. But I was afraid you'd tell me not to come. Were you? Branna murmured as she set the kettle on. Its just once Id decided to come, I needed to push through with it. She left her muddy boots by the door, hung her coat on the peg. I always wanted to visit Ireland that roots thing but it was always eventually. Then . . . well, it was now. Right now. Go have a seat at the table back there, by the fire. Its a cold wind today. God, tell me! I swear it got colder the deeper I went into the woods, then . . . Oh Jesus, its the bear! She stopped as the massive dog lifted his head from his place at the little hearth, and gave her the same steady stare he had in the woods. I mean the dog. I thought he was a bear for a minute when he came bursting through the woods. But hes a really big dog. Hes your dog. Hes mine, yes, and Im his. Hes Kathel, and he wont harm you. Have you a fear of dogs, cousin? No. But hes

huge. What is he? Breeding, you mean. His father is an Irish wolfhound, and his mother a mix of Irish Dane and Scottish deerhound. He looks fierce and dignified at the same time. Can I pet him? That would be up to you and him, Branna said as she brought tea and sugar biscuits to the table. She said nothing more as Iona crouched, held out the back of her hand for the dog to sniff, then stroked it gently over his head. Hello, Kathel. I didnt have time to introduce myself before. You scared the crap out of me. She rose, smiled at Branna. Im so happy to meet you, to be here. Everythings been so crazy, and its all running around in my head. I can hardly believe Im standing here. Sit then, and have your tea. I barely knew about you, Iona began as she sat, warmed her chilled hands on the cup. I mean, Nan had told me about the cousins. You and your brother. Connor. Yes, Connor, and the others who live in Galway or Clare. She wanted to bring me over years ago, but it didnt work out. My parents well, mostly my mother didnt really want it, and she and my father split up, and then, well, youre just bouncing around between them. Then they both remarried, and that was weird because my mother insisted on an annulment. They say how that doesnt really make you a bastard, but it sure feels like it. Branna barely lifted her eyebrows. I imagine it does, yes. Then there was school and work, and I was involved with someone for a while. One day I looked at him and thought, why? I mean we didnt have anything for each other but habit and convenience, and people need more, dont they? Id say they do. I want more, sometime anyway. Mostly, I never felt like I fit. Where I was, something always felt a little skewed, not quite right. Then I started having the dreams or I started remembering them, and I went to visit Nan. Everything she told me shouldve sounded crazy. It shouldnt have made sense, but it did. It made everything make sense. Im babbling. Im so nervous. She picked up a cookie, stuffed it in her mouth. These are good. Im Dont be saying youre sorry again. Its coming on pitiful. Tell me about the dreams. He wants to kill me. Who? I dont know. Or I didnt. Nan says his name is wais Cabhan, and hes a sorcerer. Evil. Centuries ago our ancestor, the first dark witch, destroyed him. Except some part of him survived it. He still wants to kill me. Us. I know that sounds insane. Placidly, Branna sipped her tea. Do I look shocked by all this? No. You look really calm. I wish I could be really calm. And youre beautiful. I always wanted to be beautiful, too. And taller. Youre taller. Babbling. Cant stop it. Rising, Branna opened a cupboard, took out a bottle of whiskey. Its a good day for a little whiskey in your tea. So you heard this story about Cabhan and Sorcha, the first dark witch, and decided to come to Ireland to meet me. Basically. I quit my job, I sold my stuff. You . . . For the first time Branna looked genuinely surprised. You sold your things? Including twenty-eight pairs of designer shoes bought at discount, but still. That stung some, but I wanted the break clean. And I needed the money to come here. To stay here. I have a work visa. Ill get a job, find a place to live. She picked up another cookie, hoping it would stop the flood of words, but they just kept pouring out. I know its crazy spending so much to stay at Ashford, but I just wanted it. Ive got nothing back there but Nan, not really. And shell come if I ask her. I feel like I might fit here. Like things might balance here. Im tired of not knowing why I dont belong. What was your work? I was a riding instructor. Trail guide, stable hand. Id hoped to be a jockey once, but I love them too much, and didnt have the passion for racing and training. Watching her, Branna only nodded. Its horses, of course. Yeah, Im good with them. Ive no doubt of that. I know one of the owners of the stables here, the hotel uses them for guests. They do trail rides, and riding lessons and the like. I think Boyle might find a place for you. Youre kidding? I never figured to get stable work right off. I figured waitress, shop clerk. It would be fabulous if I could work there. Some would say too good to be true, but Iona had never believed that. Good should be true. Look, Ill muck out stalls, groom. Whatever he needs or wants. Ill have a word with him. I cant thank you enough, Iona said, reaching for Brannas hand. As they touched, gripped, heat and light flashed. Though Ionas hand trembled, she didnt pull away, didnt look away. What does it mean? It means it may be time at last. Did cousin Mary Kate give you a gift? Yes. When I went to see her, when she told me. With her free hand, Iona reached for the chain under her sweater, took out the copper amulet with the sign of the horse. It was made by Sorcha for her youngest child, her daughter Teagan, Iona supplied. To shield her from Cabhan. For Brannaugh it was the hound I should have realized that when I saw the dog. And for Eamon, the hawk. She told me the stories as long as I can remember, but I thought they were stories. My mother insisted they were. And she didnt like Nan telling them to me. So I stopped telling her my mother about them. My mother prefers to just sort of glide along. Thats why it is the amulet wasnt passed to her, but to you. She wasnt the one. You are. Cousin Mary Kate would come, but we knew she wasnt the one, but like a guardian for the amulet, for the legacy. It was passed to her by others who guarded and waited. Now it comes to you. And you, Branna thought, have come to me. Did she tell you what you are? Branna asked. She said . . . Iona let out a long breath. She said Im the Dark Witch. But you There are three. Three is good magick. So now were three. You and I, and Connor. But

each must accept the whole, and themselves, and the legacy. Do you? Hoping for calm, Iona took a gulp of whiskey-laced tea. Im working on it. What can you do? She wouldnt have passed this to you unless she was sure. Show me what you can do. What? Iona wiped suddenly damp palms on her jeans. Like an audition? Ive practiced all my life; you havent. But you are the blood. Branna tilted her head, her beautiful face skeptical. Have you no skills as yet? Ive got some skills. Its just Ive never . . . except with Nan. Annoyed, uneasy, Iona, drew the candle on the table closer. Now Im nervous, she muttered. I feel like Im trying out for the school play. I bombed that one. Clear your mind. Let it come. She breathed again, slow and steady, put her focus, her energy on the candlewick. Felt the warmth rise in her, and light seep through. And she blew gently. The flame flickered, swayed, then burned true. Its so cool, Iona whispered. Ill never get used to it. Im just . . . magick. Its power. It must be trained, disciplined, and respected. And honored. You sound like Nan. She showed me when I was little, and I believed. Then I thought they were just magick tricks, because my parents said they were. And I think I know my mother told her to stop or she wouldnt let her see me. Your mothers mind is closed. Shes like a lot of others. You shouldnt be angry with her. She kept me from this. From what I am. Now you know. Can you do more? A few things. I can levitate things not big things, and its fifty-fifty. Horses. I understand what theyre feeling. I always have. I tried a glamour, but that was a terrible bust. My eyes went purple even the whites, and my teeth glowed like neon. I had to call in sick for two days before it wore off. Amused, Branna added more tea and whiskey to the cups. What can you do? Iona demanded. I showed mine. You show yours. Fair enough then. Branna flicked out a hand, and held a ball of white fire in her palm. Holy shit. Thats . . . Warily Iona reached out, brought her fingertips close enough to feel the heat. I want to do that. Then youll practice, and youll learn. Youll teach me? Ill guide you. Its already in you, but needs the route, the signs, the . . . finesse. Ill give you some books to read and study. Take your week at the castle, and think about what you want, Iona Sheehan. Think carefully, for once it begins, you cant go back. I dont want to go back. I dont mean to America, or your life there. I mean from the path well walk. She flicked her hand again and, with it empty, picked up her tea. Cabhan, what is left of him, may be worse than what was. And what is left wants what you have, what we have. And he wants our blood. Your power and your life, youll risk both, so think carefully, for its not a game wed be playing. Nan said it had to be a choice, my choice. She told me he Cabhan would want what I have, what I am, and do whatever he could to get it. She cried when I said I was going to come, but she was proud, too. As soon as I got here, I knew it was the right choice. I dont want to ignore what I am. I just want to understand it. Staying is still a choice. And if you decide to stay, youll stay here, with me and Connor. Here? Its best we stay together. Theres room enough. Nothing had prepared her for this. Nothing in her life measured as amazing a gift. Youd let me live here, with you? Were cousins, after all. Take your week. Connor and I have committed, have taken an oath if the third came, wed accept. But you havent had a lifetime, so think it through, and be sure. The decision has to be yours. Whatever it was, Branna thought, would change all. *Revue de presse* Roberts works her own brand of literary magic as she begins a new trilogy featuring the cousins ODwyer. *Booklist* Magical, romantic, compelling and appealing Roberts at her best. *Kirkus s* Roberts spins a mesmerizing tale of good vs. evil. *Library Journal*