


From the #1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

 **NORA
ROBERTS**



Choice

THE DRAGON HEART LEGACY
BOOK 3





THE
Choice

NORA ROBERTS



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For Griffin,
our magickal child



PART I

LOSS

*Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.*

—William Shakespeare

*Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat
Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe,
That all was lost.*

—John Milton

PROLOGUE

Throughout the span of time, the worlds of man often believe themselves singular. Those who believe and accept they aren't alone in the vastness tend to consider themselves superior to those who share the vastness.

They are wrong, of course, as the worlds of man are neither singular nor superior. They simply are.

In the worlds upon worlds that spin, some proclaim for peace even as they beat the drums of war. That they beat the drums with an insatiable greed for power over others, for land, for resources and riches in the name of their favored deity rarely strikes as wrong, or even ironic.

It simply is.

In some worlds, war is the deity, and the worship of it bloody and fierce.

There are worlds where great cities rise from golden sands, others where palaces glitter under the depths of deep blue seas. And those that struggle to life from hardly more than a spark in the dark.

Whether the denizens of a world climb the high mountains or swim the oceans, whether they live in great cities or huddle over a fire in a forest, whether they beat the drums or rock the cradle, all share one common goal.

To be.

In one such world, in the long ago, Man and Fey and gods existed. In this world grew cities and palaces, lakes and forests. Mountains rose high; oceans ran deep. For a time out of time, magicks shined under sun and under moon.

Wars came as wars will. In some, greed prospered. And in some, the thirst for power could never be slaked, even with the blood of the conquered hot in its throat. One dark god, crazed with power, drank deep of man and Fey and more, and was cast out of the world.

But this was not an ending.

As the wheel of time turned, as it must, snakes of suspicion and fear slithered into the harmony of man and gods and Fey. For some, progress at all and any cost replaced the bond between magicks and man, and the worship of the more took over the reverence once given to the gods.

And so there came a time of choice, to step away from the magicks or to preserve them, to abandon the old gods or respect them. Making this choice, the Fey broke away from the worlds of man and the suspicions and fears that burned them at stakes, hunted them in forests, condemned them to the axe.

So Talamh, a world from a world, was born.

Those wise enough, with vision enough, created portals for passage between worlds, as by law of Talamh, all and any had the choice to stay or go. There, in a land of green hills, high mountains, deep forests and seas, magicks thrived, and under the leader—chosen and choosing—peace held.

But this was not an ending.

The dark god plotted in his dark world and gathered his army of the demons and the damned. With time, with blood, he harnessed enough power to pass through the portal and into Talamh. There he courted a young witch, one chosen and choosing as taoiseach, and blinded her with love and lies. She gave him a son, and in secret, while the mother lay in enchanted sleep, he drank power from the babe, night after night.

But a mother's love holds great magick, so she woke from this forced sleep. And awakening, led an army against the god to cast him back and seal the portal. When it was done, she deemed herself unworthy to lead as taoiseach, so cast the sword back into Lough na Fírinne and gave the staff to the one who lifted the sword from the water.

So once again, peace held, and in the peace of the green hills and deep forests of Talamh, her son grew. One day, with pride and sorrow, she watched him lift the sword from the lake and take his place as taoiseach.

Under him, peace held; justice was served with wisdom and compassion. The crops grew and magicks thrived.

Fate deemed he would meet and love a woman, a child of man. Through his choice and hers, he brought her through the portal to his world, and there, out of love and joy, they made a child, a daughter.

The magicks in her beamed bright, and for three years she knew only love.

But the dark god's thirst was not slaked, and his rage only grew. Once again, he amassed his powers through blood sacrifices and dark magicks, aided by a witch who turned from the bright to the dark.

He stole the child, imprisoned her in a glass cage beneath the waters near the portal. While her father, her grandmother, while all the warriors of Talamh rode or flew on wing or dragon to save her, she who had only known love knew fear.

And that fear in one so bright bloomed into a rage as wild as the god's. So her power bloomed with it and struck out at the god who was her own blood, her own kin.

She broke her cage even as the Fey attacked the god and his forces. Once again, the god was cast out and left beneath the ruins of his black castle.

Her mother, human in her fear and with a fear that turned to bias and a bias that tainted love, demanded to take the child to the world of man, to have the child's memory of magicks and Talamh and all who dwelled there erased.

Out of love for the child, and for the mother, the father granted this and took them through the portal, lived with them in the world of man, returning to Talamh for love, for duty as often as he could.

But though the love for the child never dimmed for the father, the love between the child of man and the child of Fey couldn't survive, and his efforts to live in both worlds carved pieces from his heart.

Yet again the god threatened Talamh, and the worlds beyond it. And once again the Fey, led by the taoiseach, defended. The Fey drove him back, but with his dark magicks, with his black sword, the god killed the son he'd made.

So another time for mourning, and another time of choosing.

A young boy, mourning the taoiseach as he had mourned his own father, lifted the sword from the lake, took up the staff.

While the boy grew into a man, one who sat in the Chair of Justice in the Capital or helped his brother and sister with their farm in the valley, while he flew over Talamh on his dragon and trained for the battle all knew would come, the daughter lived in the world of man.

There, with her mother's fear and resentment, she was taught to step back and never forward, to look down rather than up, to fold her hands instead of reach. She lived a quiet life that brought little joy, and there

knew nothing of magicks. Her bright came from a friend who was a brother in all but blood and in a man who stood as a mother of her heart.

She dreamed, sometimes of more and different, but too often her dreams came blurred and dark. And in her heart lived a sorrow for the father she believed had left her.

One day a door opened for her. She made a choice, this woman who'd been taught so rigidly not to risk, not to step forward, not to reach. She traveled across the ocean to Ireland in hopes of finding her father and finding herself. In her travels she found a love for the place, for the green and the mists and the hills.

In a cottage by a bay, she explored those dreams of more, and reached out for those even as she reached in to find herself. One day, she came upon a tree deep in the forest that seemed to grow from a stand of rock. She climbed onto the long, thick branches.

And stepped out of the world she knew and into the world of her birth.

Her magicks stirred awake, as did her memories, aided by the grandmother who loved and had longed for her, by the faerie who'd been her friend in childhood, and by the boy—now a man—who had lifted the sword from the lake.

She learned of her father's death, and mourned him. Of her grandmother's sacrifice, and loved her. She discovered her powers and the joy in them. And though she feared, she learned of her place in Talamh, the threat of the dark god who was her blood, so she trained to fight with magicks, with sword, with fist.

As weeks turned to months, she, like her father, lived in two worlds. In the cottage she pursued her dreams; in Talamh, she honed her powers and trained for battle.

She allowed herself to love the one duty bound to Talamh, found the courage she wore as a symbol on her wrist. She embraced the wonders of the Fey, the winged faeries, the blurring speed of elves, the transformation of Weres, and more.

When evil came to Talamh, threatening it and all, she wielded fist and sword and magicks against it. She killed what came to destroy the light, faced down the darkest of magicks with that light.

So she became what she had been born to become.

But this was not an ending.

CHAPTER ONE

After what came to be known as the Battle of the Dark Portal, Breen stayed in the Capital for three weeks. The first days were as painful as any she'd known as she helped treat the wounded, helped bring in the dead from blood- and ash-soaked battlegrounds.

She held Morena as her oldest friend wept and wept and wept over the loss of her brother. She did her best to comfort Phelin's parents, his pregnant wife, his brother and his brother's family, his grandparents even as her own grief cut like a blade.

She'd only just remembered him, only just seen him again after so many years, and now he was lost, killed defending Talamh against the forces unleashed by her grandfather.

She stood with the family at the Leaving, clutching Morena's left hand while Harken held her right.

Her friend's grief rolled through her like a tidal wave as Phelin's ashes, and so many others, flew back over the sea to the urns held by loved ones.

She held Morena close before her friend and Harken flew back to the valley. And knowing their sorrow, watched Finola and Seamus, hands linked, spread their wings before following.

With Keegan busy with council meetings and patrols, she visited the grieving until she was so full of their sorrow, she wondered she didn't drown in tears.

After the first week, she pushed Marco to go back to Fey Cottage.

Under his trim goatee, his jaw set. "I'm staying with my girl."

Since she'd expected that response, she'd prepared for it. While they stood on the bridge below the castle, watching her Irish water spaniel, Bollocks, swim and splash in the water, she hooked an arm with Marco's—her closest friend, she thought, one who had always, would always stand by her. And who'd proven it by leaping into another world with her.

“Your girl’s fine.”

“Not nearly. You’re worn out, Breen, taking on so much.”

“Everyone’s taking on, Marco. You—”

“I helped, sure.” He looked across to a field where people trained with sword and fist and bow. And remembered the blood and the bodies strewn over it.

He’d never forget.

“I helped,” he repeated, “but you take on more than anybody, and you take it on here.” He tapped his heart.

“Odran did this, all this, to get to me. Not my fault,” she said before he could speak. “Not mine, not my father’s, my mother’s, Nan’s. It’s all his. But that doesn’t change the fact so many are dead because Odran wants me, what I am, what I have. So if I can lessen a little of the pain even for a little while by taking it in, that’s what I need to do.”

He unhooked their arms and used both of his to draw her in. “And that’s why I’m staying.”

“That’s why I’m asking you to go back.” Lifting a hand, she stroked his cheek, looked into his warm, worried brown eyes. “I want to go back myself, but I feel I need to stay awhile longer. But that means I’m not there for Morena, for Finola and Seamus. They’re family to me, Marco, and I’m not there for them.”

“You were, and they know you’re here now for Phelin’s mom and dad, for his wife, his brother.”

“That’s a big part of why I need to stay. Go, be there for Morena and the rest for me, Marco. For the valley. We lost too many. Go back with Brian.”

“First, Brian’s leaving tomorrow at freaking dawn, and he’s heading west on his dragon. No way in hell, girl, I’m flying on a damn dragon again in this lifetime.”

He made her smile. “I could make you a calming potion.”

“Hey, there’s an idea!” His big brown eyes rolled. “I fly on a dragon but get high first. How about no?”

“How about you ride on a horse? Keegan’s sending Brian and some troops west, and some will be on horseback. You like riding. Hell, you ride better than me, which sort of pisses me off. It would take a worry off, Marco. I swear to God that’s the truth.”

“Let me see that face.” He cupped it, looked into her eyes, then sighed.

“Damn it, it’s the truth. I don’t like leaving you.”

“I know, so I know I’m asking you to do the hard. But I’ve got Keegan and my fierce dog.”

Bollocks leaped onto the bridge, shook joyfully. Water flew; his eyes danced. But she remembered how he’d leaped into battle; she remembered the blood on his muzzle and the warrior gleam in those happy eyes.

“And,” she added, “I just happen to be a pretty powerful witch.”

“*Pretty powerful* doesn’t cover it. I’ll go, but you have to promise you’ll send a message. Every day, Breen—that’s deal-breaker time. Send, you know, a falcon or whatever.”

“I went to Ninia Colconnan’s shop yesterday and got you a scrying mirror.”

“A what now?”

“It’s a way to talk to you. Plus, it’s pretty. Consider it a kind of Zoom call. I’ll show you how it works.” She pushed her hands through her mass of curling red hair. “This takes a load off, seriously. Plus, the practicalities. If Sally or Derrick try to get in touch, they can’t reach us. They’ll worry.”

It was a good lever, she’d calculated, using Sally, the mom of the heart for both of them, to nudge Marco along.

“Yeah.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that.”

“So you can head that off, do a little FaceTime with Philadelphia when you get back. And”—she drilled a finger into his belly—“get the hell back to work, for me.”

Crouching down, she ran her hands over Bollocks to dry him, had his purple-hued curls springing.

“What about you? I know you can’t be writing much.”

“A little.” She gave Bollocks’s doggy beard a gentle tug before she rose. “I haven’t been able to work on Bollocks’s next adventure, just can’t write the happy right now. But I’m working some on the second draft of the adult novel. I’ve got more insight into battle scenes now.”

“Ah, Breen.”

She leaned against him. She could always lean against him.

“It’s okay, Marco. We covered that already. We fought and killed evil things.” She looked back at him, her gray eyes hard, her shoulders set. “When the time comes, I’ll do it again. And again and again, until this is finished.”

Then the hard softened, and she took his hands. “Come on, I’ll help you pack and give you a lesson in scrying mirrors.”

★ ★ ★

She stood in the dawn mists to watch him go. Her Marco, the born-and-bred urbanite, sat in the saddle as if he’d been born in one. The frisky mare danced under him, and she heard him laugh as he set off in a trot with the warriors, heading west.

Overhead, a trio of dragons, bright as jewels in the dawn light, flew over a gray November sky with their riders. A pair of faeries winged behind them.

Battle and blood would come again, spilled and waged by the fallen god Odran. Her grandfather.

But Marco would be safe, she thought, as safe as anyone could be in a land devoted to peace and threatened by a god determined to bring war.

And he, the best human being ever born, would be with the man he loved. For now, it was all she could hope for.

“He’ll be more than fine.” Beside her, Keegan watched those he’d sent west slide into the mists. “And you were right to push him to go.”

“I know. And I know he’ll bring comfort to the valley. It’s important.”

“Aye, it’s important. You’d bring it as well. I want you here for ... reasons, but I know you’d serve a purpose there, and find comfort yourself.”

“I’m not ready for comfort.” She studied him, this man, this witch, this warrior she’d come to love, to want, to need almost more than she could stand. Strong, and strongly built, his dark hair with its warrior braid disordered. And she saw both fatigue and anger in the deep, deep green of his eyes.

“Neither are you.”

“I’m not, no, I’m bloody well not.”

“And with Odran sealed up again, there’s no one to fight right here, right now.”

He gave her a long, cool look. “To wish for war is to wish for death. That’s not our way.”

“That’s not what I’m saying, Keegan. You train for war because Talamh and all the worlds need protection and defense. You taught me

that, the hard way, by knocking me on my ass countless painful times in training.”

Shrugging, he glanced over to one of the training fields. “You’re not as easy to knock down these days.”

“You hold back. I hate to admit you always did. I’m never going to be a brilliant swordsman—woman—or a Robin Hood with a bow.”

“Those are good stories. The Robin Hood stories. And no, you won’t.”

“You sure don’t hold back there.”

He smiled a little and wound one of her curls around his finger. “Why lie when the truth’s right there? You’re better than you were.”

“Which isn’t saying much.”

“You’re better than you were after you were better than you were. Your magicks are ... formidable. They are, and will always be, your keenest weapon. And this?” He lifted her hand, turned her wrist to run a finger over her tattoo.

“*Misneach*. Courage, and yours is as keen as your magicks.”

“Not always.”

“Often enough. You sent Marco away, denied yourself his comfort for the comfort of others. That’s courage. You’d go with him, but you stay because I need you to stay.”

“For reasons.”

“For reasons.”

The young ones trooped into the training field, some on wing, some with elf speed, some still yawning the sleep away.

Not a school day, she realized, as Talamh stood strong for education. She glanced down at Bollocks and his pleading eyes.

“Go ahead.”

He darted off, barking with joy.

“You don’t ask what they are,” Keegan noted. “The reasons.”

“You feel I’m safer here, with you here. Shana tried to kill me, twice, and she’s his now. She’s Odran’s now.”

“All the portals are guarded. She can’t come through. She can’t harm you.”

“She won’t kill me.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’ve foreseen?”

She shook her head. “I know I won’t give her the satisfaction. Then there’s Yseult. She’s tried for me twice, not to kill—because unlike Shana,

she's not, in Marco's terms, crazy as fuck—but to disable me enough to get me to Odran. The first time, she'd have succeeded if not for you. The second time, right back there.”

She turned, pointed. “I dealt with her. But I let my emotions, my anger, my need to hurt and punish her rather than just end her get in the way. I won't make that mistake again.”

“You've grown fierce, *mo bandia*.”

Fierce? She didn't know about that. But resolute. She had become resolute.

“I believed myself ordinary—less than even that—for a very long time. I know what I am now, what I have, and I'll use it. You worrying about me takes your mind off what you need to do. You should stop.”

Like her, Keegan watched the littles line up for training. Young, he thought, with a mixture of pride and regret. And, laying a hand on the hilt of his sword, remembered he'd been the same, done the same.

“Do you think the only reason I want you here is worry for you?”

“It's a factor, but I'm also useful here, and you know it.”

“Aye, you are. You helped with healing wounded and brought comfort—bring it still with your visits to those in mourning. And you take too much there. It shows.”

“Thank you very much. I'm going to start using glamours.”

“You're beautiful.”

The way he said it so casually, as if it simply was, brought her a ridiculous thrill.

“Even when you're tired,” he continued, “and too pale and I see their grief all over you.”

“You do the same. Yes, you're taoiseach, yes, it's duty, but it's more than that. You grieve, too, Keegan.”

“Don't take that from me.” He gripped her hand before she could lay it on his heart. “Even a shadow of it. I need it, just as I need the anger, as I need the cold blood. I know you helped with the dead, and I wouldn't have wished that for you.”

“They're my people, too. I'm as much Talamhish as American. Probably more when it comes down to it.”

“And still, I wouldn't have wished it. You sent Marco back, and I can't offer you, not now, the same kind of companionship here, in a place that's not home to you, like Ireland or the valley. I've hardly had time with you

other than sex and sleep—and more sleep than sex, I’m sorry to be saying. This, here and now, is I think the longest we’ve spoken alone since after the battle.”

“You’re taoiseach, and you’ve had council meetings, Judgments. I know you’ve spoken to all the wounded, all those who lost someone. I know because they tell me. There are repairs and training and I can’t even imagine what else. Do you think I expect you to spend time with me when you have so much else to do and think about?”

He looked at her in that way he had, so intense. Then looked away again, to the training fields and the village.

“No, you don’t expect, and maybe that’s why I wish I could give it to you. You’re a mystery to me still, Breen Siobhan. And all I feel in me for you, another mystery. I don’t always like it.”

He made her smile again. “That’s often abundantly clear.”

“I need you here, for all the reasons you said yourself. All of those, aye, but I need you here for myself. I don’t have to like that either, but ... I’m explaining, as best I can.”

It touched her, in the deep, that he’d bother to try.

“You’re getting better at it. The explaining. You’re never going to be brilliant at it, but I think, with practice, you could be competent enough.”

A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. “That’s a bit of a poke, and well done.”

“I thought so. I like being needed.” She skimmed fingers down the warrior braid on the side of his head. “I went so long without being needed. Marco, yes, and Sally and Derrick. But that’s different. So right now, the sleep and sex and whatever else we can fit in, it’s enough.”

“I haven’t any more right now. Bloody council meeting.”

“That’s fine. I’m due in the training field soon. Bloody archery.”

“I’m told you’re not as pathetic as you were.”

“Shut up. Go be the leader of the world.”

He cupped his hands under her elbows, lifted her to her toes. Kissed her, and kissed her while the mists thinned away and the sun showered through.

“Keep Bollocks with you, would you? And someone—Kiara or Brigid or whoever you like—along if you go off to the village or visiting.”

“Stop worrying.”

“I’ll worry less if you do those things.”

“All right. Worry less. I’m going to get my bow and be less pathetic. I also think I’ll have a better time than you will.”

“No doubt of that. Keep the dog close,” he repeated, then strode back over the bridge toward the castle, where the banner flew at half staff.



She stayed busy, day after day, training, helping with repairs—both magickally and practically—and spent as much time as she could with Phelin’s family.

Her family, too, she thought as more and more memories of her first three years shimmered back. Flynn’s big hands tossing her high in the air so she squealed, Sinead frosting cookies, running in the fields with Morena, with Seamus and Phelin always plotting an adventure.

She’d been as at home with them as she’d been on the farm where she’d been born.

But it was Flynn, warrior, council member, father, who finally snapped the tight rope she’d kept binding her own grieving.

She wanted the air, and she wanted the quiet. After giving herself two early-morning hours to work on her book—and hoping for another two in the evening—she took Bollocks out for a walk and a wander.

Just a little time, stolen time as she thought of it, to do nothing. Then she’d work with Rowan—council member and of the Wise—along with a few young witches on potions and charms. They’d continue to rebuild the supplies used during the aftermath of the battle.

Magicks weren’t an abracadabra thing, but effort, skill, practice, and intent.

She’d fit in some gardening work to help replenish crops destroyed during the battle. She hoped to persuade Sinead and Noreen to work with her there, to get them out in the air and the sun for even an hour.

Field training after that, her least favorite part of any day. Sword work and hand-to-hand made up today’s torture, and she already anticipated the bruises.

It amazed her how full her days here were, how one tumbled right into the next. Though she found the castle endlessly fascinating, the wild roll of the sea exhilarating, she missed her pretty cottage on the other side, missed the farm in Talamh’s west, her friends there, her grandmother. And, she

could admit privately, the self-satisfying routine she'd developed since she'd left Philadelphia so many months before.

But she was needed here, for now, and had come to understand that simply seeing her go about the daily tasks gave people in the Capital hope after so much loss.

She let Bollocks play in the water under the bridge, and through her bond with him knew that while it made him happy, he missed their bay, missed running the fields with Aisling's boys and playing with Mab, the Irish wolfhound that minded them.

When he scrambled out to shake, she dried him with a stroke of her hands. The November wind came brisk, smelled of the sea and the turned earth. She saw some busy in the gardens on the rising hills and fields, bringing winter crops back to life.

She'd worked with others of the Wise to heal the charred and bloody ground, and now saw the fruits of the work in the orange pumpkins and butter-yellow squash, the greens of kale and cabbage.

Flowers and herbs thrived again. She saw fresh thatch on the roofs of cottages, children playing in dooryards, people in the village browsing stalls and shops, smoke puffing from chimneys.

Life and light, she thought, were stubborn things. They must, and they would, bloom and shine against the dark. They would not be snuffed out like a candle, but flame on and on and on.

She had a part in that, and she'd do whatever she needed to do to keep that fire burning.

Bollocks pranced ahead, then under the dripping branches of a willow. She followed him through and found Flynn sitting on a stone bench with Bollocks's head on his knee.

She didn't have to see the man's grief when she felt it like an anchor on her heart.

Still, he smiled at her as he patted Bollocks's curly topknot. "Here's a joy of a dog."

"He really is."

"And soon to be far-famed in song and story. You can see much from this spot. The village and its bustle, the fields and the hills, the shadow of the mountains, all the while if you listen, there's the drumbeat of the sea behind you. Your nan had this bench placed here before I was born. Many's the time I sat here with your dad, thinking thoughts and finding the