



Once Upon an Enchanted Well (The Enchanted Well #1.5)

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Category: Historical

Description: To venture into the untamed lands between Scotland and England, is to invite being enchanted.

Located on the border between Scotland and England, is a land has always been untamed. To venture into it, is to invite being enchanted. Rhona was born in Sin. As such, she is expected to take the veil. But she is honest and will not take holy vows without having a true calling, hence she is sent to the wild, untamed Welsh mashes so that she can be forgotten by the realities who find her a shameful reminder of their own misdeeds.

Rhona will not break beneath the cold and lonely place where she labors to produce flax linen through the long, bitter winter.

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Lady Wilmiton was displeased.

Rhona knew the pinched look around the lady's face heralded the arrival of the Lady of the House's temper. Normally Rhona would have fled back to the cottage where she lived with her mother, but her father was dead now and Lady Wilmiton was in charge of everything until her son came of age.

So there would be no running away.

Rhona stood alongside her mother while the lawyers waited for Lady Wilmiton to sign the documents they had laid in front of her. But the Lady scowled at the paper, clearly displeased with what was written on it. She'd already signed more than a dozen sheets, a necessity of inheritance but this one seemed to anger her.

She looked at Rhona. The Lady had no love for her, that was something Rhona knew very well even at the age of ten.

"My Lady," one of the lawyers decided to attempt to prod Lady Wilmiton. "It is but a small country house—with all the other holdings you have, it is nothing of significance. The will is very clear, if you do not sign this property over, you will not receive the rest of the estate and holdings."

"As you will!" Lady Wilmiton hissed at Rhona.

She grabbed the quill, jabbed its silver point into the ink well, and put it on the paper. Her son looked down at the document, his eyes moving back and forth while he read.

“There,” Lady Wilmiton declared. She sent Rhona’s mother a scathing look. “Take your whore’s earnings. You will freeze up there on the borderland. I promise you the dowry promised to your daughter will go to the Church! For no man should have to suffer your bastard daughter for a wife! Put them out!”

Put them out...

Rhona had heard the words being whispered in the kitchen and back rooms since the night the Lord took the last sacrament. A hush had fallen over the house in the days that followed, only the whispers growing in volume.

They will be put out...

Rhona knew the whispers were about her mother and herself. And now, the silent footmen behind them came forward. Their gazes were averted, and tight expressions appeared on their faces. They began to herd her and her mother much in the same way that they might deal with geese, with their arms spread out wide.

Rhona’s mother darted around one of the men, dipping low to avoid his outstretched arms. There was a crinkle of paper when she grabbed the newly signed and sealed sheet of parchment. The lawyer’s assistant tossed a large bag to her.

“Put them out at once!” Lady Wilmiton’s voice became shrill. “Go to the border and die there!”

“Mother...Rhona is my sister,” the new Lord Wilmiton spoke up.

“You are never to say such a thing again.” Lady Wilmiton turned on her son. “She is the spawn of lust. A product of adultery. She is to take the veil, lest she follows her mother’s path.”

Whatever else Lady Wilmiton said, Rhona didn't hear it because the footmen pushed them past the doors which were closed tightly behind them.

It was a relief to be out of the room and yet, Rhona shivered because she had known no other home.

“Psst ... psst ...”

Rhona looked over to see one of the kitchen maids hiding in the passageway. She looked fearfully toward the closed doors before waving at them.

Rhona's mother grabbed her wrist and ran toward the woman. The footmen were left behind.

“I had the tinker wait.”

The tinker came around every month or so with items to trade. Rhona had always liked going to see what his wagon had collected on his journeys.

The kitchen maid took them through the storerooms. She stopped and looked behind them to make sure no one was following them.

“Here now,” the maid said. “Take these bundles. It's not much. You understand I can't have the lady notice anything missing, or I might lose my place.”

“I am grateful for your kindness,” Rhona's mother whispered.

The maid nodded. “His Lordship loved you with all his heart. Here...” She pulled a little pouch from her bodice. “His Lordship wanted you to have this.”

There was a jingle of coins when her mother grasped it.

“Hurry...the tinker will be leaving soon.” The maid encouraged Rhona’s mother toward the door.

Rhona’s mother tugged her out into the yard beyond the kitchen. The tinker was there with his wagon. Instead of flashing Rhona a smile and bringing her something he hoped her father might purchase for her, today, the tinker pointed at an open place in his wagon. Her mother climbed up and pulled her along with her.

The tinker took his place at the front of the wagon. He made a clicking sound that the horses recognized. The wagon lumbered forward, Rhona and her mother swaying along with the rest of the cargo. Rhona looked back at the house.

“Look forward Rhona,” her mother advised her. “Always choose life. Never look back at death for it will catch us all soon enough.”

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Lady Wilmiton hadn't lied about the borderland being cold.

Rhona shivered, hugging a tattered length of wool closer against her body. She'd lost count of how many days they had traveled. At times, they had needed to wait for another merchant who was heading north before they could continue their journey. Now, Rhona looked up to see a sky full of black, swollen clouds. The wind was whipping, and the trees had lost their leaves, so the thin branches slapped together making an eerie sound like bones dancing.

"Up that road."

This man who had most recently traded them a spot on his cart for a few bits of silver pointed at what might have once been a road, but it was overgrown now. The plants were as high as Rhona's chest because no cart or wagon had used it all summer. Still, there were ruts in the ground, proving that there was something—or had been something—up ahead of them.

"I can't recall ever seeing any light up there." The merchant dashed any further hopes of finding something welcoming at the end of the path. "For a few more shillings, I could take ye into the village."

"No thank you." Rhona's mother was quick to turn his offer down.

The merchant shrugged. His feet made squishing sounds in the mud on his way back to the front of his cart. A little click of his tongue and his horse started forward.

Overhead there came the ominous rumble of thunder.

It was definitely not a cheery welcome to their new home.

Her mother squared her shoulders and began walking in the direction the merchant had pointed them. Not wanting to be a coward, Rhona lifted her chin and followed. She instantly felt better, like she had achieved something by refusing to give in to her fear. Even if that was her pride talking, it was certainly better than standing on the side of the road just waiting for the rain to begin drenching her.

The reeds which had grown up on the road swayed and danced with the wind. Rhona decided she liked the idea of them dancing, for that was a merry word. They followed the ruts and then went around a bend. The light was fading, and again, the thunder cracked above them.

And then, lightning zigzagged through the mass of black clouds. Rhona blinked, blinded temporarily by the white-hot light. When she could see again, there was a house in front of her.

She gasped.

And she heard her mother sucking in her breath.

The house was blackened by moss and the stone structure was dark and foreboding. The yard was overgrown. Once there had been a road in front of the steps but now there were broken tree limbs and a tangle of vines and brambles for them to weave through before they managed to make it to the bottom step.

As they made it, her mother muttered, “At last.” There was a hint of gratitude in her mother’s tone, but Rhona couldn’t see anything even remotely worthy of about which they should be pleased.

“Oh, Mother...will we freeze here? Did Lady Wilmiton curse us?” Rhona asked in a

thin voice. “Or...is this Divine Retribution because Father was not wed to you?”

Her mother turned to face her. “Listen to me, Rhona. Lady Wilmiton drinks bitterness by choice. She has that entire, fine manor home, a healthy son, and rents to collect. Yet she rises each day to only see the things she does not have.”

Rhona felt her fear dissipating but even as she began to smile, the sky split open with another bolt of lightning. It illuminated the house with its closed shutters and dark stone. The thunder boomed and rumbled as though a demon was clawing its way out of the dark mass of clouds.

“Rhona,” her mother spoke again once the thunder had passed. “We shall be so very happy, for your father is watching us from Heaven.” With that, her mother opened the bag the lawyer had tossed to her during their hurried eviction. Inside there was a ring of at least twenty or more keys. That meant there were things of value inside the house.

“We have a place to call home, Rhona. Each morning we will smile and see all the goodness around us.”

“But it is dark and ominous, Mother.” Rhona was ashamed of how fearful she sounded, but she just couldn’t help it.

“It is strong, and will shelter us from the storm!” Her mother offered another way to see their circumstances.

“But this is the borderland...are there not savages and witches?” Every forbidden thing Rhona had ever heard while hiding near the kitchen door just began to bubble right out of her.

“Listen, my precious daughter.” Rhona’s mother smoothed the hair back from her

face with gentle hands. “This is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies. Our hearts will be brimming full of merriment. And before you know it, you will fall in love with a fine man here on the borderland, far, far away from those nobles who lust to own every last thing that they see. Here, we shall have a full life where there is enough for everyone. We will brighten everything with our determination to live well so that your father need not worry about us.”

After the long trip north with naught but fear chilling her heart, Rhona was happy to see the light of hope shimmering in her mother’s eyes. Her mother shook the keys, so they jingled. It was a happy sound, for the most precious things in every house were always locked away and the ring of keys was always on the belt of the most senior staff member.

Now the keys were in her mother’s hand.

Rhona followed her mother up the steps of the house. The first key would be the one to the front door. Her mother pushed it in and gave the lock a turn. The wind howled behind them, but the door opened. A crack of lightning gave them a brief look at the room beyond the door and a boom of thunder sent them both across the threshold in a hurry to be inside no matter how ominous and thick the blackness was inside the house.

Her mother closed the door against the rain. It pelted the closed shutters, rather like it was frustrated over not being able to soak them.

They would brighten everything with their determination...

Rhona forced a smile onto her lips and followed her mother’s instructions.

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“What will you do now?” Norla asked.

Rhona looked over at her friend. Norla had blue eyes which reminded her of a summer sky.

Brighten your day with cheerful thoughts...

Rhona knew the words for she lived by them, even if some days tested her more than others.

But Norla was waiting for a response to her question. Rhona pulled her gaze away from the newly disturbed earth where her mother had been laid to rest. The men who had come up from the village to help dig the grave had pulled their hats back on now that the prayers were finished. It was hard work, so Rhona filled a small basket with some of the food that the villagers had brought with them and offered it to the men in exchange for their efforts.

“You really don’t have to worry,” Norla said. “You have a fine house which will make a good dowry.”

Norla looked up the way to where Samuel Birkins was standing in front of the house. He was rubbing his hands together like a child anticipating a treat. Rhona wanted to feel something kind toward him, but the truth was, she didn’t want to wed him.

And Samuel appeared more enamored with the house than her.

“I don’t have to get married,” Rhona muttered.

Norla shrugged. “Everyone gets married.” She thought for a moment. “I don’t know anyone who didn’t get married at least one time.”

“Rhona has been promised to the Church.”

Both girls turned to see the priest. He stood near them, his hands tucked beneath his chasuble. There was a satisfied smile on his lips, and he looked at Rhona very much in the same way that Samuel looked at the house.

“Your mother refused to honor your father’s wish that you take the veil.” He glanced over at the new grave, his insinuation clear.

There was a hint of tightness in her throat, but Rhona swallowed it.

“It was Lady Wilmiton who wanted me to take the veil,” Rhona recalled the day they’d been put out of her father’s house.

“I am pleased you remember,” the priest said. “It is time for you to take your place.”

Samuel Birkins had walked toward them. “What’s this?”

The priest turned to look at him. “Rhona has been promised to the Church. This house will pass—along with her—into service of the Church.”

Rhona felt as though she was being strangled. Drawing breath felt nearly impossible. But she had to protest. She had only herself now.

“I am sorry Father, but I have no calling to take the holy veil.” The words came out in a tone that was far from confident. She gulped down some more air in an attempt to steady herself.

The priest still had a smile on his lips but the look in his eyes was cold. “To serve the Church is your path to redemption. Your parents’ sins must be accounted for.”

“Those aren’t her sins,” Norla argued. “Rhona is a kind, good soul.”

“Right,” Samuel added his opinion to the debate. “Rhona can marry me. Become a wife and mother. We will take the Sacrament of Marriage and raise our family with respect for the holy scriptures.”

“Without a dowry or the house and land?” the priest asked Samuel pointedly.

Samuel’s complexion darkened. “The house was her mother’s. I saw the deed myself. It had the seal on it. Right and proper.”

The priest withdrew another document, and he opened it to show another seal. Samuel leaned forward to inspect it. A few other men had joined him.

“The young Lord Wilmiton has reached his maturity. He has decided to honor his mother’s wish to see Rhona take the holy veil as a Bride of Christ.”

“You mean he’s decided to save himself from having to give up any portion of his estate to a half-sister,” Samuel argued.

“He would not be the first to take that path,” Clement, the assistant to the mayor, mumbled. He was a literate man of learning. He leaned to look at the document once more, pursing his lips together while he scrutinized it.

“Come now.” Samuel’s tone changed in an effort to persuade the priest. “This house is all the way up here in the marshes. It was for sale for a decade before Rhona and her mother came. It’s only useful to those of us who live here.”

“Its placement will help the Church to establish a presence here...” The priest looked at the hills behind the stone house. “The bonfires and witchery will at last be tamed with a holy presence, like a beacon of light.”

The priest’s tone was full of zeal. Rhona lost the battle to maintain her composure. Suddenly she was once more a half- grown child being put out into the cold. Only this time, it was far worse, for she was going to be stuffed into a cold cell at a convent.

Samuel gave her a last look before he turned and walked away, his feet clearly heavy. Clement reached to pat him on the shoulder as he followed.

Neither of them looked back at her.

“You will be joined by the other sisters soon,” the priest informed her. “I will return to hear your vows and see you cut your hair.”

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“T his is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies. Our hearts will be brimming full of merriment. And before you know it, you will fall in love with a fine man here on the borderland...”

Rhona awoke to her mother’s voice.

She sat up, looking around the chamber but there was no one there. The small tin lantern hung by the door still had a candle flickering inside of it. The light scattered across the floor in a hundred crescent moons of yellow light, beating back the pitch-blackness of night.

Fall in love?

How was she to accomplish that with the Church coming to claim her?

The window shutters rattled again.

Harder.

Rhona looked toward them before she climbed from the bed. Anything was better than sitting in her rumpled bedding feeling defeated.

Far better to look for a sign of hope, even in the rattling of window shutters.

The floor was cool against her bare feet now. Autumn was in the air. The shutters were being moved by the cooler air that was coming down from the north to push the warm air of summer away. But she liked the idea of the shutters rattling because her

mother was speaking to her.

She lifted the little bar of wood that held the twin sides of shutters closed. They opened wide and a gust of wind blew in. She laughed and leaned out of the window; the moon was almost full. Its brightness was like the smile on a treasured friend's face.

And in the distance, there was a flicker of light.

Rhona gasped.

It wasn't the sort of gasp one made when they were frightened. No, this was the sound of excitement. The dread that had twisted her during her slumber melted beneath the rush of anticipation flooding her as surely as the bank of a river eroded during a spring snowmelt.

Someone was up in the pasture.

The light danced and the wind moved the clouds so that more of the starlight shone down to illuminate the spot.

She saw him.

Cast in the silver light of the stars, there was an unmistakable outline of a man. A man in a kilt. The strangest sensation took over her, as though the man had reached out and touched her, igniting a trail of chaff inside of her. The flame caught in an instant, flaring up like a tinder bowl did after you struck a flint stone above it. For a moment, everything was bright and hot, just waiting for her to hold a wick over the flames. But what caught fire was something inside of her. She'd never realized there was darkness deep inside her, but now, there was a new flame, even if she didn't know what it was intended for.

You are desperate...

Her little inner voice was not wrong.

Rhona sat back on her haunches and tried to rekindle the excitement that had made her open the window shutters, but reality had arrived to extinguish her hopes. The wind blew and the clouds covered the sky, darkening the spot where the man had stood.

Like the light had been pinched out.

Suddenly, the wind blew again, hard, and the shutters slammed shut in her face. Rhona ended up on her backside in the middle of the floor. The room was pitch black and far colder than she'd noticed before. Sitting in her shift, she felt exposed and vulnerable.

Your mother never gave up...

Her inner voice was reprimanding her, but Rhona liked what it said. She thought back to the night they'd arrived at the house and her mother's words: "This is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies."

Rhona felt her self-confidence strengthening. She grabbed her stockings and shoes before reaching for her simple wardrobe, which consisted of two long garments that closed at the waist to make her a dress. And then the last thing she grabbed was a length of wool she used as a shawl. She wrapped it over her head once before crisscrossing it across her chest and using the single button at its tip to close it behind her back.

She was not afraid of the night, especially under a full moon, and she was going to find out who else found it a silvery place of wonder and delight.

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“I told ye that she saw the lantern.”

Hamish glared at Peadair. “Now what are we going to do?”

Peadair offered his friend a shrug. Hamish opened his hands.

“She’s on her way up here!” Hamish exclaimed.

“It is but one wee little lass,” Peadair tried to shame his friend into settling down. “Hardly a threat. Are ye no’ just a bit impressed with the fact that she’s not afraid of the night? I am.”

Hamish grunted. “Are ye daft? We have a well to dig. The Chief made his wishes clear. Dig this well and make sure no one sees us doing it.”

“Aye, I remember what he said,” Peadair muttered. “And we’re here in the dead of night to keep our word.”

Hamish pointed at Rhona. “She is not going to help us keep this project a secret.”

“I am still fascinated by her,” Peadair remarked. “She has courage, that is for certain.”

“The only thing certain is that we will be getting no more work done tonight,” Hamish said with disgust. He snorted before turning and grabbing his shovel from the ground. “Let’s go. We cannot be spreading rumors of this being a magical place if anyone sees us digging the well.”

“I suppose ye are correct.” Peadair picked up his own shovel.

Hamish didn’t wait for Peadair. The other man turned and began hiking back into the forest. Peadair paused at the edge of the meadow, unable to resist the urge to see the girl from a little closer.

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Rhona knew the upper meadow.

She knew it well from early springs spent enjoying the flowers after a long, cold winter. She also knew it from warm summer nights when the moon was bright, and her mother had made good on her promise to frolic and dance so Rhona's father saw them happy.

They had lived a good life. And the meadow was a treasured place. Tears prickled her eyes, but Rhona smiled because the air was so warm. The wind blew and the clouds parted once more. She stopped, staring at something she had never seen before. Illuminated by the silvery light was a hole in the ground. Rhona expected to see the dirt piled nearby, yet there was nothing but the dried-out flowers.

Was it an illusion?

She hunkered down next to the edge of it, reaching out to touch the place where the dried-out stalks of summer's plants were and the dark, exposed earth. She felt the moistness on her fingertips, proving that it wasn't an illusion.

So the man had been real.

Rhona stood. The wind whipped her clothing around, flattening it against her body. She turned in a circle, looking at the edge of the forest.

And there he was.

Watching her.

That same jolt of sensation went through her like a bolt of lightning cracking open the sky during a storm just as it had when she'd first arrived here. And inside, she felt as though she was just as turbulent as that thunderstorm.

She should dismiss it as illogical but returning to reality with its harsh edges wasn't appealing. So she continued to look at him while her heart pounded hard, and the wind pressed the fabric of her clothing against her body again.

He was watching her, and she discovered it felt very different from the way other men had looked at her.

"Are ye not afraid of the darkness, lassie?" His voice was deep and paired well with the night.

"What is to fear?" She replied. "There is nothing here now that was not here in the light of day."

"I am here," he answered seriously. There was a soft crunch as he stepped out from the edge of the forest toward her. "I know ye saw me."

Should she confess that she'd come just to meet him? Rhona pondered doing precisely that.

"You will not harm me." Rhona wasn't sure where her confidence came from, only that she was firm in her thinking.

"Lassie, ye should not take such chances." His voice had turned into a stern sound of warning. "Some men would take advantage of ye."

"Not you." Rhona decided to simply say what she felt.

He tilted his head to one side. “How can ye be certain of that?”

Rhona looked around the meadow. “This is a place I have always come to for merriment and adventure.” When she brought her attention back to him, it was to discover that he’d emerged from the edge of the thicket.

Her heart accelerated.

“My name is Rhona. Why are you digging a well at night?” she asked.

Rhona sounded nervous. No, that wasn’t quite the correct word. She pondered for a moment before she realized that she sounded like she was breathless.

“It would be best for ye not to ask about it.”

Rhona offered him a soft sound of amusement. “You can hardly expect to have a well go unnoticed.”

He smiled in response. “Aye, well, as to that...ye are correct.”

“So why do you dig at night?” Rhona pressed him for an answer.

“My countrymen need the well, for we cross this land, as our ancestors have for centuries, and we need the English to stay away from it,” he answered her.

“What a clever idea,” Rhona remarked.

“Me Chief and the woman who owns that house there.” He pointed back down the meadow. “They have an understanding. She will tell one and all that the well just appeared and is enchanted.”

Rhona felt her joy dissipate. Reality came crashing down on her like a landslide. “My mother has died.”

“Yer mother, lass?”

Rhona nodded. “We buried her today and the Church says my half-brother has promised the house—and me—to them. I am sorry, but you will have to dig your well in another spot.”

It was a terrible ending to her adventure. Reality with its sharp claws shredded the bubble in which she’d been encased. The wind was suddenly too cold to endure, and the sky crowded with clouds so that no moonlight illuminated their encounter. Above her, there was a rumble. Rhona could smell the rain coming.

“Goodbye, lass.”

Whoever he was, he left her without even giving her his name. The first fat drops of rain began to hit her back while she watched him disappear into the thicket, leaving her with nothing to do but return to the house, and the harsh reality her half-brother had planned for her.

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Hamish grunted and grinned. “Well then, we can go home.”

The rest of the men smiled, clearly liking the way Hamish viewed their situation.

“The well is nae finished,” Peadair stated firmly.

Hamish turned a harsh look Peadair’s way. “Ye just said the woman is dead and the house is passing into the holdings of the Church. The priests will not be allowing us to spread rumors of enchantments. Best to just go home.”

“I do not intend to tell our Chief that we failed,” Peadair told them all.

Hamish narrowed his eyes. “Well, I would like to know just how ye are planning to deal with this matter.”

Peadair heard the frustration in Hamish’s tone. But he also recognized the challenge.

“I’ll think of something,” Peadair said.

Hamish mused his lips together. “Ye want to see that lass again.”

The rest of the men looked at Peadair, trying to decide if Hamish was correct.

“She is a fair lass.” Peadair decided not to deny it.

“Ye just said she is promised to the Church,” Hamish grumbled. He shook his head before he pointed at Peadair. “Ye’ll bring a curse upon us if ye trifle with a lass

promised to the Church.”

“Well now...that is one way to get the rumors the Chief wanted going, is it nae?”

Around him, his men’s eyes widened. Peadair had intended to shock them, but what he felt was a lot more like shame. Rhona had trusted him, and it seemed a very poor way to repay her faith in him. In fact, the idea of disappointing her bothered him a great deal.

The problem was, he wanted to see her again. So much so, that he didn’t really care how he managed to do it. Just so long as she wasn’t lost to him forever.

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“You are not the first to feel being given into the keeping of the cloister hard to accept.”

The Mother Superior used a kind tone. What filled Rhona's mouth with bitterness was the knowing look in the woman's eyes.

She was speaking from experience.

“In time, you will be grateful someone thought to make certain you had a place,” the nun continued. “Many in this world do not enjoy such circumstances.”

The nun wore the simplest of clothing. Her wimple was worn and yet, still serviceable. She sent Rhona a kind smile before she joined the line of nuns walking into the house.

Rhona didn't have to leave.

She looked at the house. It was her home. So she walked back up the steps.

The nuns were quiet while they went about their work. Bundles were taken up to the upper floor while someone started working in the kitchen. The scent of warm food began to fill the lower floor, striking Rhona with an unexpected softening toward the idea of living with the nuns as one of their numbers. Even hushed as the nuns were, they drove away the silence that had been lingering since her mother died.

A soft bell chimed. Rhona watched the nuns appear from where they had been, lining up before kneeling before a statue of the Holy Virgin which they had brought with

them. Like them, it was a simple wooden carving. Serviceable and yet artfully crafted.

After making their obedience, they began to sing. The soft tones of worship were lyrical and while not precisely cheerful, they did banish the last of the lingering shadows from the house.

When they finished, they filed past the mother superior on their way to the supper table. Rhona stood still but the mother superior did not forget her.

“Come Child,” she said softly. “Break bread with your sisters. We are your family now.”

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Would the well be further along than it had been?

Rhona opened her eyes with the question on her mind. Even in the dark of night, slumber refused to claim her. Instead, her mind churned. She heard the soft sounds of the other nuns who were in the room with her now.

She couldn't go to the window to open the shutters.

It seemed such a harsh restriction. Every window was shut tight against the night now and Rhona was almost sure that she felt the house being stifled.

There was no rain tonight.

In fact, the moon would be full, with no clouds to cover it.

How could she lie in a dark room while there was bright moonlight to frolic in? One of the nuns began to snore, proving that she was alone in thinking the room was stifling.

If the man was out digging the well, she would not be alone.

Just thinking of him made her heart start thumping harder. A sense of adventure came along with that acceleration of her heart. Her blood went racing through her body, making climbing out from beneath her bedding no trouble at all.

She took her shoes with her to the door and set off down the steps. The kitchen door was the easiest to open and the hinges didn't even squeak.

It was worth the effort.

Outside, as she'd known it would be, the moon was full. Bright light filled the air in a unique way so that the night delighted the senses. There was enough light to see and yet, not enough to overpower her other senses.

She heard the crickets and the sound of an owl. There was the crunch of dried leaves beneath her feet and the crunching of dry stalks. Each season had its own sounds and scents. Now she smelled the musty scent of old leaves and dried-out seed pods. The pinecones were brown, and the oak trees had dropped their acorns.

In another week it would be Samhain, the beginning of the darker half of the year. The hills would be dotted with bonfires to celebrate the end of the harvest.

Will it mark the beginning of your life as a nun?

Rhona walked faster, trying to outrun her own thoughts. The real difficulty was the fact that the nuns had improved the feeling inside of her house and that made it impossible to reject the idea of joining them.

It was a quandary.

One she didn't want to try to solve.

So she climbed up to the meadow, smiling when she found the cover over the spot where the well was being dug. Now there was the scent of water. Kneeling down, Rhona struggled to move the thick logs covering the open hole.

“Are ye going to make me worry about ye falling in, lass?”

Rhona gasped. She started to jump forward, heading right into the hole. A strong arm

caught her around the waist and lifted her up and away from it.

He spun her loose but stood between her and the well.

“You startled me.” Rhona defended herself.

He grunted. “Ye know it is a well.”

She did, and it was beginning to fill with water. She could smell it. Rhona rubbed her waist while she tried to get her mind to start working. It seemed as though the concept of speaking had just become impossible for her.

“Did I hurt ye, lass?” he asked.

Rhona shook her head. But he looked at her, rubbing her waist. She forced herself to stop.

“It...tingles...where we touched,” she muttered.

His lips twitched, and then his lips parted in a wide smile. “Is that so, lass?”

His tone was warm and hinted at something she didn’t quite understand. Some forbidden thing that she was insanely curious to discover more about.

And she liked it. For there was a sensation brewing inside her that made her want to encourage him to continue to smile at her.

“It is,” she confirmed.

She heard him draw in a breath almost as though she’d impressed him. That sensation inside of her heated up some more, approaching the boiling point.

“Ye are toying with me, lass,” he admonished her.

Rhona shook her head. “I am speaking truthfully, sir...Um...What is your name?”

He crossed his arms over his chest indecisively. “It might be best if I do nae tell ye who I am, lass.”

“Oh, did you see the nuns arrive today?” Rhona asked. Her elation vanished as quickly as a bunny darting into the thicket at the sign of a predator, leaving her feeling at the mercy of her circumstances. “Do you also feel I should accept my half-brother’s decree to take the veil?”

Speaking the words out loud made her miserable. “They have claimed the house and every last item inside right down to the grain in the storage,” Rhona continued. “The priest says I must atone for my parents’ sins.”

He snorted. “Ye can live yer own life.” It helped banish the helplessness that had been tightening around her. Rhona looked up at him, but she was frustrated.

“You shouldn’t offer me solace,” she rebuked. “Not when you refuse to tell me your name.” She was being emotional.

Rhona drew in a deep breath. “It’s my fault, coming up here without an invitation from you.” She tipped her head back, looking up at the moon. “My mother and I had happy times here. I wanted to bid them farewell.”

His warning wasn’t misplaced. It had been a long time, but she still recalled the whispers in the kitchens of the Wilmiton house. Tales of girls who had been attacked because they strayed from the protection of their families.

It was time to run back to her burrow before she was plucked from the meadow by a

hungry owl.

Rhona turned then to start back down the meadow.

But he caught her wrist.

This time, she gasped. The connection between their flesh did more than tingle. A ripple of intensity went up her arm and through her body. It was as though she'd only been half-awake for her entire life because now, she was so aware of him that the contact was like the difference between night and day.

Except the darkness around them seemed to suit the strange sensations growing inside of her far better than sunlight would have. There was a whisper in the wind, teasing her with a promise of more delight should she allow him to pull her back toward him.

“My name is Peadair. I should let ye go back to a safe life, but the truth is...I do nae want to.”

The wind gusted.

All around them, the trees swayed, their limbs rustling like some sort of applause.

Was her mother speaking to her? Or was it the evil spirits of the night trying to encourage her to stray into their clutches?

“What do you want to do, Peadair?” Rhona shouldn't have asked the question and yet, she was certain it would torment her for the rest of her days if she didn't find the courage to speak.

“I want to tempt ye to kiss me beneath the moonlight, lass,” he muttered. “But that is a selfish thing since ye are to take the veil.”

The wind blew again. This time it came from behind her. The fabric of her skirts billowed toward him.

Did he tug her towards him?

Or did the wind push her?

Rhona didn't care. He enfolded her in his embrace and lifted her chin so he might press that promised kiss against her lips. There was no thought, only reaction. She couldn't ever have imagined how intense the kiss would be.

Her belly twisted and her head felt light. There in the place where she'd lived her happiest times, Rhona discovered there were in fact greater heights for her to experience. A far deeper form of companionship.

But the wind gusted again. This time a branch in the forest cracked and fell. The sound startled them both. Peadair broke away from her, pushing her behind him while he faced the threat head-on.

When nothing materialized from the edge of the forest, he relaxed.

"I suppose the wind has the right idea...interrupting us," Peadair muttered when he turned back to face her.

Rhona didn't know what came next, only that she'd lost all will to resist. So yes, it was wise that the wind had interceded.

He reached out and smoothed some hair back from her face. "Go back to yer bed, lass."

"But—"

Peadair pressed his thumb over her lips. “Ye tempt me almost beyond me discipline Rhona. And the way ye kissed me back tells me ye feel the same.”

She did.

Even so, Rhona stepped away from him. It felt as though she ripped her skin off in doing it too. The wind blew again, this time full on her front, as if to tell her to go now.

So she went but the moment would live inside her heart for the rest of her life. What bothered her about that was knowing that taking the veil would mean pledging herself to no more adventures. No moonlight dances. No kisses. She wasn't sure she could do it.

But reality wasn't going to allow her to refuse.

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“S he’s a fair lassie...” Hamish was trying to tread lightly with his words.

But Peadair knew his clansman had witnessed him kissing Rhona.

“I should have thought of the lass’s reputation.” Peadair decided to name his own crime.

“Aye, that’s what I was getting at.” Hamish was quick to agree. “She lives in a small village. No man wants a wife who is known to be giving away her kisses to others.” Hamish squirmed. “And seeing as how she’s promised to the Church...ye cannae be wedding her yerself.”

Hamish shook his head. He reached out and patted Peadair on the shoulder. Clearly, his friend thought the matter finished.

He just wished he could resign himself to never seeing Rhona again.

But he could not.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

Father Issac returned in the morning.

He was clearly pleased with the changes the nuns had made in the house. He took a long time inspecting the tiny chapel they had made of the front sitting room.

“Excellent.” The priest spoke after a silent prayer. “Here, you shall do the work of the Church. So close to the border, fleece can be gathered easily. Your sisters will card, spin, and knit during the winter, and work the land in the spring and summer.”

The mother superior had her hands tucked beneath the long tabard which was worn over her underrobe. She stood silently, listening attentively.

Father Issac finished. He paused for a moment before he caught sight of Rhona. There was a look of satisfaction in his gaze that made Rhona slightly guilty about resenting him. There were a full dozen nuns in the house now, and there was plenty of room for twice that number. Wasn't it selfish of her to want to keep it all for herself?

“Your name will be Sister Rebekah, in remembrance of the fact that you honor the call to service that was sent to you.”

Father Issac looked at the floor in front of him. When Rhona continued to stand, he cleared his throat and looked at the floor once more.

“Kneel,” Mother Superior whispered.

“I cannot take a vow I do not feel a passion for,” Rhona objected. She tried to temper

her tone but there was still a hint of rebellion edging her words.

“Just as with marriage, passion grows after the ceremony,” Father Issac instructed her. He locked gazes with her and this time he pointed at the floor in front of him.

“As you serve, your devotion will yield contentment,” Mother Superior added.

Such an act would benefit more than just herself. Rhona tried to think of the supper she’d shared with the other nuns and the feeling of family she had noticed.

Family was so great a blessing, one she longed for.

But there was a price...

She would never be free to feel Peadair’s kiss again.

Rhona shook her head, earning a frown from the priest. “If that is your choice, you should not share in the warmth of this house. You shall be put out.”

“The girl should be granted time to adjust,” Mother Superior suggested.

Father Issac didn’t agree. His eyes narrowed and a pinched look appeared around his mouth. “She shall not join in Communion with the members of this house who have all pledged their lives to the service of the Church. To sit at the table with them would be to belittle the faith they have in taking their own vows.”

Several of the nuns had gathered. They began to point at the spot in front of the priest, silently urging her to bend to his demand.

Yet her knees felt as solid as the oak trees surrounding the meadow.

“There is a small work shed at the top of the meadow.” Mother Superior’s voice was compassionate. “There is no hearth for warmth or light. The structure will afford her a view of the house and all that might be hers once she bends. We shall have the comfort of knowing we have followed our Lord’s example of not forgetting to bring the straying sheep back into the fold.”

Father Issac wasn’t content with the idea. But he swallowed his response and nodded. “Send her to the shed. Nothing in this house is to be spared for her comfort. If she is to have bread, she must trade linen fiber or carded wool for it. There shall be neither conversation nor kind expressions, for those things are reserved for the members of this house.” Father Issac sent Rhona a stern look of disapproval. “Only after you bend shall you earn mercy.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

The night had always held such magic before.

Rhona longed to folio beneath the stars but by each day's end, she fell into an exhausted slumber. In keeping with the decree of Father Issac, she had to produce something of value or suffer starvation.

She'd never realized how long a week could last.

The weather didn't offer her any cheer either. Dark clouds crowded the sky, peppering the little shed with cold rain. Beyond the threshold of her shelter was a sea of mud that swallowed up the summer meadow, transforming it into a bog.

A second week crawled by, and Rhona found herself looking toward the house with a hunger she feared would transform into a longing. Being alone suited her not at all.

Does taking the veil suit you?

Her inner voice wanted to help her persevere, but the truth was, she was bending. It wasn't the endless work that made her think of kneeling before Father Issac; it was the solitude.

"I did not want to be a nun either."

Rhona looked up from carding wool. The Mother Superior was standing in the doorway of the little shed. She smiled warmly at Rhona.

"You think it a harsh life," Mother Superior continued. She withdrew a bundle from

beneath her tabard. “Yet there are others which offer fewer comforts or dignity.”

She placed a bundle on the window ledge.

“Come back to the house, Child. I do not wish to know our newfound comfort comes from your suffering.”

Rhona tightened her grip on the handles of the carding paddles. Mother Superior was watching her.

“Is there a man in your heart?” Mother asked. “If so...where is he?”

Rhona longed to know where Peadair was as well.

She’d tested him. Was that the reason for his absence?

He owed her nothing.

“So that is what stands between you and taking vows.” Mother Superior read the expression on Rhona’s face correctly. She tucked her hands back beneath her tabard while she contemplated Rhona. “I will see you next week, Child, if you do not come to me first.”

The nun was gone as silently as she had appeared. It wasn’t until Rhona noticed the sound of the rain hitting the thatch on the roof that she realized how solitary her life was now.

But she still didn’t want to take vows she wasn’t sincere in taking.

You won’t be the first to make do with what you can get...

Her inner voice was correct, but it frustrated her. So she began to pull the paddles again to straighten out the fibers of wool. Swish-swish. Back and forth. Simple, repetitive work. She didn't loathe it, but she wasn't ready to give up on there being some moments of excitement in her life as well.

Like Peadair's kiss.

Two weeks really wasn't all that long.

Not when she was thinking about doing something that would last for the rest of her life.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

S amhain was the day when the veil between the living and the dead was at its thinnest.

Such was a pagan belief and Father Issac would disapprove for certain. Well, he already found little about her to praise.

Rhona awoke in the middle of the night. It was a sudden ending of her slumber, like an interruption. She blinked, trying to decide if she'd heard something, or if it was just her longing for company.

Whatever the cause, she was wide awake. So much so, that she felt like something was waiting for her outside the little shed. Wishful thinking or not, Rhona crawled out from beneath the bed she'd made of her surcoat. She listened for a moment but couldn't detect any sound of rain. So she opened the door, just a tiny amount.

She gasped at the sight in front of her. The sky, which had been covered in dark clouds, was suddenly free of them. It was nearly magical, for the stars were bright and the crescent moon looked like a smile waiting to greet anyone willing to venture out into the night.

And there in the middle of the meadow, was the well.

Its smooth stone exterior stood there where it had not been the last time Rhona looked out of the door. A thick branch had grown over it with a rope was wound onto it.

And there were candles. At least a dozen of them were set around the new well. Their wicks were lit, and the yellow flames danced in the night breeze.

Peadair was there too.

He stood tall and perfect, just the way she remembered him. Tonight, the candles illuminated his face, showing her that he was looking at her.

The wind blew from behind her like it was urging her up the hill to where the well was and where Peadair stood.

Rhona didn't intend to argue. She'd never felt so confident, never wanted to walk somewhere more in her life. Never really understood the word destiny until that very moment for she felt as though things beyond the mortal world were urging her along.

She didn't know what awaited her, but she knew it was the only path to walk. By the time she made it to him, she was breathless, but she knew it wasn't the walk that had taxed her. Her heart was hammering because somehow, Peadair was her future.

"We have finished the well, lass," he muttered when she'd reached him. "It is time for us to go home."

Her breath caught. The idea of him leaving made it feel like her heart was being torn in half.

He lifted his hand, offering it palm up. "Will ye wed me, lass? Come away with me with no more than my promise that ye shall have a good life."

Rhona was already placing her hand into his before he finished asking. She blinked in surprise when she heard him, though. "Wed?"

Peadair tilted his head to one side. "Aye. I would not care to curse this well by behaving dishonorably and stealing ye away without marrying."

“You have stolen my heart,” Rhona declared.

There was a chuckle from behind Peadair.

Or maybe it was Peadair who rumbled with amusement. From the darkness beyond the circle of light the lanterns cast, men moved forward. They made a half circle behind Peadair.

“Do ye mind, lass?” Peadair asked. “Will it bother ye that ye will not respect yer father’s wishes for ye to take the veil?”

Rhona shook her head. “My mother promised me that someday I would fall in love. My father gave us this house to live in, happily. It was his widow who decreed I should take the veil, and later my half-brother out of spite and greed.”

Rhona discovered she was holding her breath by the time she finished. There was a tension in the air, even if she didn’t quite know the cause of it. Peadair smiled at her before he turned his head to look across the new well at something still concealed within the darkness.

A shadow shifted and formed into a man. He moved forward, his hands tucked into the wide sleeves of his religious robe. He looked for a long time at Rhona. She stared straight back, for she’d spoken truthfully.

“I will wed you,” the priest stated firmly.

The men behind Peadair nodded and made sounds of approval.

But Rhona made a small sound of protest. Peadair’s grip tightened around her fingers. As long as she lived, she knew she would recall that little squeeze, for it was an impulse and something that couldn’t be faked.

He longed for her, just as much as she wanted their union.

Like they were two parts of a whole.

“Speak, Child,” the priest urged. “Is there guilt stirring inside of you? If so, you cannot take a holy sacrament.”

“I do not have a dowry,” Rhona muttered, fighting back the urge to cry. “My house has been given to the Church. Even this clothing I wear has been given to them.”

“If the dowry has been given, you should take the veil,” Father Isaac declared.

The pain Rhona had felt before was nothing compared to the agony that stabbed through her at that moment. She clasped Peadair’s hand tightly, earning a reassuring squeeze in return.

“As to that, Father, what has value to me is this well,” Peadair said. “If we can keep the English away from it, that is dowry enough. I have the blessing from me Chief.”

“You do?” Rhona asked.

Peadair returned his gaze to hers. “Aye, lass. I would not dishonor ye with anything less. I half-feared ye’d not be waiting for me, but I needed to return home to speak directly to me Chief before returning with a bride.”

Rhona felt her cheeks warming. Even in the dim light, Peadair’s gaze shifted to her face, making it clear that he saw the blush.

“Is there a witness to this agreement?” the priest asked.

Hamish cleared his throat. “Aye.”

The priest nodded. He turned back to Rhona and Peadair and lifted his hands out from beneath his chasuble to begin the ceremony.

The wind blew around them, teasing her ankles while the priest intoned the words that would bind them together. The concept of unity suddenly blossomed into something altogether more encompassing than Rhona had ever understood before. It was beyond her imagination, and she happily gave herself completely to it.

Now and forever.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

Father Issac huffed and puffed on his way up from the house. The little circle of nuns heard him groan before he managed to meet them.

“Yes?” Father Issac muttered in an irritated tone. “Has the girl bent at last? Bring her down to take her vows.”

“Look at the well, Father.”

The voice was so meek that Father Issac wasn’t certain which one of the nuns spoke. Not that it mattered. He cleared his throat and took a few steps toward the well.

“I do not recall a well being here,” Father Issac muttered.

“It was not there yesterday,” a nun insisted with wide eyes.

The rest of the sisters shook their heads to confirm that they had not seen the well before.

Father Issac cleared his throat. “A well...does not appear overnight.”

“Unless it’s enchanted.”

Father Issac turned his head to see Norla standing at the edge of the thicket. Samuel and Clement had come with her. All three of them were on the edge of the forest, not even a toe in the meadow.

“There are stories Father,” Samuel began. “Tales of this meadow being enchanted.”

“Aye,” Clement added. “That’s why the house could never be sold. No one wanted to risk their little ones being lured away by the Fae folk.”

“This is why the Church needs to have a presence here,” Father Issac declared. “It is time for these tales to stop being repeated.”

“They have taken the girl,” Clement said. His old voice crackled with too many years to count, lending credence to his words. He pointed a gnarled finger at the well.

Father Issac turned and squinted.

There on the edge of the well sat Rhona’s clothing. On top of them lay a head wreath of autumn leaves. all scarlet and gold, along with a barley stalk bridal crown, the stems carefully crafted into a headpiece that dated further back in time than anyone recalled. It was the traditional—although pagan—adornment for an autumn bride.

“Do you think she drank from the well at midnight?” Norla asked in a husked tone. “She must have seen the face of her groom.”

“If she drank the water, the Fae would think it a binding commitment,” Clement answered.

“Such a sweet, tender lass,” Samuel muttered. “Little wonder she was enchanted by the well...left in a cold, dark shed by herself.”

Father Issac made the sign of the cross over his chest. His complexion had turned pasty.

“I only intended to have the girl see the blessing of joining the cloister,” the priest defended himself. “I wouldn’t have left her there much longer.”

“Do nae be too hard on yourself, Father,” Clement spoke up. “The girl’s mother often danced upon the green beneath the moonlight.”

“The cloister’s life would have saved her,” Father Issac muttered with a shake of his head. “It is too late now.”

Everyone was silent for a long moment. A gust of wind howled down from the north, bringing the bite of winter.

“Return to your prayers,” Father Issac instructed the nuns.

One of their numbers started toward the clothing. Norla drew a huge gasp. Her eyes were wide with alarm when the nun and Father Issac looked toward her.

“Are you not worried the enchantment will spread to you?” Norla asked in a hushed tone.

The nun jumped back and hid her hands beneath her tabard.

“Leave the clothing,” Father Issac decreed. “It is like the thirty pieces of silver paid to betray Christ...it will only bring a curse to anyone foolish enough to use it.”

He muttered a soft prayer and made another sign of the cross before he headed back for the house.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

“D id ye dance upon the green in the moonlight lass?” Peadair asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

Rhona was busy dressing, but she flashed him a smile that was full of joy. She was nearly bursting because she was so happy.

“The night we arrived here, it was cold and dark. I was a child and frightened. This is what my mother said to me...” Rhona reached out to take his hands in hers.

“This is a land of enchantment. We will dance beneath the moon and listen to the song of fairies. Our hearts will be brimming full of merriment. And before you know it, you will fall in love with a fine man here on the borderland.”

Peadair threw his head back and laughed. When he lowered his chin, his eyes were sparkling. She wanted to remember that look, for it was her future there in his eyes. One she was eager to begin.

“Come lass, it’s time to go home where I shall remain happily enchanted by ye forever.”

Peadair clasped her hand and turned so that he was facing north. He began to walk, and Rhona followed him without looking back.

Do you see me, Mother? I shall be so very happy...so you do not need to worry.

The End