A SHORT BY KELLSIE MOORE

THE WITCH IN THE WALL

THE WITCH IN THE WALL

A Secret Whispers Between the Stones...

Lorna has disappeared, or so the orphans believe. For two years, the 12-year-old has haunted the hidden passageways of an abusive orphanage in the Scottish Highlands, surviving in the shadows and watching over her friends. Her gift for understanding herbs and healing has earned her a reputation as a mysterious protector—the "witch" who leaves remedies for those in need.

But Lorna's gifts come with danger. Her powers are growing stronger, and the walls that have shielded her are beginning to close in. When one of her friends falls ill, Lorna must make a choice: stay hidden and safe, or risk everything to help them escape the orphanage's cruelty.

As whispers of a girl in the walls spread, the orphanage's warden becomes desperate to uncover the truth. Lorna must gather her courage and rally the orphans for one final escape—a daring journey into the wilds in search of a sanctuary, a place of freedom, and safety for those who, like her, don't belong.

In The Witch in the Wall, magic, mystery, and courage collide in a gripping tale of survival. Can Lorna save the ones she loves—or will the walls she calls home become her prison forever?

Escape is only the beginning.

A SHORT BY KELLSTE MOORE

ISBN

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THE WITCH IN THE WALL

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The dampness clung to the cold stone walls of Loch Morra Orphanage like a shroud, seeping through cracks and crevices, chilling you to the bone even in your sleep. Perched on a hill in the rugged Scottish countryside, miles from the nearest town, it felt more like a prison than a home to the dozens of children within its walls, myself included. The towering stones were worn by centuries of rain and wind, and the air inside was thick with the stench of filthy bodies and fear. I had arrived here as an infant, placed outside the front door in a bundle of rags.

Now, twelve years old, I sat huddled in the corner of the girls' dormitory, trying my hardest to be invisible. Survival meant silence, invisibility, and avoiding the Warden's wrath. When Mr. Higgins' voice boomed through the halls, we scattered like startled mice, seeking refuge under beds and in closets. The heavy stomp of his boots echoed down the corridor.

"Lorna!" Mr. Higgins bellowed, shattering the early morning silence.

My heart squeezed like a strawberry squished to jam inside a clamped fist. Bile filled my throat as the panic crawled up my skin. I had been dreading this moment, hoping to remain unnoticed but the Madame's watchful eye had been on me these past few weeks. Mr. Higgins' footsteps grew louder, and the other girls cowered under their thin blankets as if a scrap of fabric could shield them from the storm. Isobel clutched her worn teddy bear, its fur rubbed bare with love, and I pushed her behind me, into the deepest shadows. She had tried to stand beside me, but defiance would only earn her his wrath too. He wasn't just in a bad mood this time, he was here for a purpose – he was here for me.

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The heavy wood door slammed against the stone wall behind it, letting the early morning light flood the darkened room. Mr. Higgins stormed in, a hulking figure with a ruddy face and bloodshot eyes. His breath reeked of ale.

"Ye!” He snarled, his thick brogue cutting through the fear-laden air. His eyes fixed on me.

"Get up, girl. It's time." His hand, like a bear claw, clamped around my wrist, yanking me from my bed. "Ye leave this morning. Pack yer things. Five minutes."

The bile was in my mouth now. I knew what he meant. I had been sold.

I’d heard the whispers of the older girls, the dark tales of the fate that awaited those sent to Madame Mallory's. I remembered the hollowness in their eyes when they returned, the light extinguished, their quiet sobs in the dead of night. I didn't understand what happened there, but I knew it was a sentence worse than anything I had endured.

"No," I cried out as I tried to pull my arm free of his grip. "I’m not going to the Red House!” My voice trembled.

Mr. Higgins' lips curled into a sneer, and a searing pain exploded on my cheek. He had struck me, hard. I stumbled back, tears stinging my eyes, the imprint of his hand burning on my skin. "I did no give you a choice," he sneered. "Ye’re mine until I say otherwise. And I say ye’ll be going with Madame Mallory."

Fear turned to desperation. I pulled with all my might, but he was too strong. He dragged me towards the door.

Then, a quiet voice whispered in my mind, a message from deep within my soul, urging me to act.

'Your wrist… twist it. Twist where he is weakest.'

And so I did.

I brought my free hand up, clasped my trapped wrist, and with a sharp twist, wrenched my entire body weight against his grip, into the wee space where his thumb met his fingers. My arm slipped free. He stumbled, momentarily stunned, and I ducked under his arm, bolting for the open door. It worked!

My bare feet slapped against the cold stone floor as I sprinted down the narrow hallway.

"Get back here!" Mr. Higgins roared, his lumbering footsteps thundered after me.

I lept down the stairs, taking them two or three at a time, and veered left at the bottom, bursting into the kitchen. His boots pounded down the steps, closer now. I flung open a large wooden cupboard and dove inside, pulling the door shut behind me. It wasn't much of a plan, but I had hidden here before. The small, dark space enveloped me, and I curled into a tight ball, pressing my back against the rough wood; holding my breath.

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I heard the Warden stomp into the kitchen, his boots echoing off the walls. "Where are ye, girl?" he growled, opening cupboards and slamming them shut as he searched. “Madame Mallory will be the least of yer worries when I find you.”

I clamped my eyes shut and held my breath, my body trembling. A silent plea repeated in my mind. *Please don’t find me.*

A resounding crash rang through the hallway, the Warden cursed under his breath and stomped off to investigate. “Coming for ye devil child,” He growled as his footsteps faded into the distance.

I let out a shaky breath, my heart still pounding hard. I couldn't believe it, I was safe, for a moment at least. Of course, if the Warden or anyone came back into the kitchen they’d find me, this was just a cupboard after all. I braced myself to leave, but I couldn't compel myself to abandon my dark sanctuary just yet. Maybe I’ll wait until nightfall and then run away, finally flee this place, and never look back. But where would I go? With what money? I’d have nothing. Someone else would throw me in the Red House.

It was then I heard it again. The whisper.

‘Stay’ Was that just my fear talking?

‘Push.’

5

Push?

Push what? Where? I thought as I shifted my weight around in the cramped cabinet. I began to trace the rough edges of the cabinet walls, my fingers exploring the back panel.

Suddenly, my hand brushed against something loose – a shifting board. I blinked, surprised, and traced the outline of the plank.

'*Push.'*

With cautious hands, I pushed against the board. It gave way, revealing a small, dark opening beyond.

My heart raced again as I peered into the narrow passage. It was barely wide enough for me to crawl through, but as I considered it, the familiar sound of heavy footsteps grew louder, heading back in my direction. I had no choice.

Sucking in a deep breath, I squeezed myself through the opening, disappearing into the blackness. I wouldn't have fit had I not been half-starved, my body wee and bony. I used my foot to push the board closed behind me.

The passage was narrow and damp, and the air was thick with the smell of wet earth and ancient stone. It was too low to stand, so I crawled on my hands and knees scraping against the rough ground, the grime and debris clinging to my skin. I crawled for what felt like an eternity, twisting and turning deeper into the bowels of the orphanage.

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Finally, the tunnel opened into a small chamber beneath the floorboards of the orphanage.

It was tall enough for me to sit up, and I collapsed, my muscles aching from the long crawl.

My hands and knees were bleeding, but I had done it. I had escaped.

Exhaustion settled over me like a thick fog. I wrapped my arms tight around me to fight the chill and collapsed against the frigid stone wall. I woke with a jolt, unsure how long I had slept. I looked down at my torn knees, the blood dried and crusty, the pain a constant throb. I had no water, no food, and nowhere to go. I'd wait until nightfall to go back for supplies, but was it already nightfall? I couldn't tell. The only light came in thin slivers between the floorboards above, too faint to distinguish between candlelight and daylight.

A soft scratching sound broke the silence. I blinked, peering into the darkness, and that's when I saw them – a group of mice darting between the cracks in the stone walls.

At first, I recoiled. But they paid me no mind, and I began to watch them with quiet curiosity. They gathered tiny bits of food, weaving in and out of the shadows, their movements purposeful and strangely synchronized. Back and forth, back and forth, they scurried, disappearing into holes in the wall. Their organization, their silent communication, it was almost...human?

Are ye friend?

A wee voice whispered in my mind, startling my thoughts.

My heart raced as I looked around. The voice was different than the one that guided me from time to time, this one was new, tiny, and it came from outside of myself. But there was no one else in the tunnel, just the mice, still flitting about.

Will ye help us? The voice asked again.

My breath caught in my throat. The voice wasn't coming from a person. It was coming from the mice! My heart skipped a beat. I blinked, trying to understand.

The mice scampered closer to me, their tiny feet scurrying quietly against the stone. I knelt low, bringing my face just inches away from them, and reached my hand out towards them.

"Aye, I'm a friend," I whispered, my voice shaky, like I was speaking to a ghost.
"What... what do ye need?"

One of the mice, a wee grey fella with a torn lug, stepped forward, its tiny bright eyes fixed on me.

Our nest is broken, the mouse said, its voice quiet but entirely clear in my mind.
We need a safe place for our young. Please.

My head spun. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. But as I looked at the wee creature, a strange calm came over me. I'd felt a connection to nature plenty of times, a peace when I was amongst the plants and animals, but this... this was something different.

"Yes, of course," I said softly, still unsure of myself. "Show me where yer nest is."

The wee gray mouse twitched its neb, as if acknowledging my words, and turned to lead the way with the pack of mice following swiftly behind.

I squeezed through a crack in the wall and crawled after them, my sore knees and hands protesting with every movement. Finally, they stopped at a wee hollow in the wall. The nest was old and worn, barely enough to shelter them from the bitter Scottish cold, a cold we orphans knew all too well. Bits of straw, stolen from our dormitory beds, were scattered about, offering little warmth.

I frowned, catching sight of two wee mice huddled together next to a larger one, the mother's tail wrapped tightly around her bairns for warmth. My heart ached at the sight.

I reached down to the hem of my ragged dress and ripped a strip off it, wrapping it into a bundle. Carefully, I tucked the fabric into the little hollow, making a wee bed for the mice. It wasn't much, but it would keep them warm for now.

Thank you , the gray mouse said in my mind, its voice filled with gratitude.

The other mice chirped in agreement, their tiny bodies huddling together in their newly repaired nest, snuggling together between the folds of my dress fabric.

A warmth spread through me and I smiled. "Ye're welcome." I sat back on my heels, watching as the mice settled into their new nest, my mind spinning with questions. How was this possible? Why could I hear them? Was I losing my mind? Did the years of fear, beatings, and hunger finally drive me mad?

As if hearing my thoughts, the grey mouse looked up at me, its neb twitching.

Ye helped us. Now we will help you.

I blinked, confused. But before I could ask, the wee creatures scattered, disappearing into the cracks in the walls, leaving me alone with my thoughts of madness to keep me company.

Minutes later, to my astonishment, the mice returned, their tiny paws carrying small leaves and stems, freshly gathered. They laid the herbs gently at my feet, their whiskers twitching as they watched me.

I stared at the offering in confusion. "What is this?"

The grey mouse shook its ears. *Nettles. Bettony. For your wounds. These plants will heal you.*

I recognized the plants and weeds that grew near the orphanage walls, though I didn't know their names. I picked them up, a sudden instinct guiding me.

Slowly, I chewed the leaves, making a thick paste. I spread it over the cuts and scrapes on my hands and knees. The pain eased, and a soothing sensation spread through me.

The mice watched me closely, their wee bright eyes shining with approval. *Ye are one with nature,* the grey mouse said softly. *The earth and its creatures guide ye.*

"Thank ye," I whispered.

Now go behind this plank, you will see.

The mice chirped their response, moving in unison as they returned to their nest.

How was this real? How is this happening?

I stared at the dead end in front of me, the wood boarded up, with nowhere for me to squeeze through. But a wee spark of hope flickered within me, and I started to pull and tear at the boards until one started to give way. I ripped it free, leaned back, and kicked it out with my feet until it burst through another layer of wood.

I gasped.

A whole web of tunnels stretched before me.

I'd heard stories that these old stones had once been home to a Laird's family, long ago. This must be the abandoned servant passages, hidden away from the gentry's own.

Excitement bubbled up inside me. I could stand up now! My bare feet padded softly as I walked through the dark tunnels, nearly three feet wide. There were no windows, but I could hear voices in the distance. I started to run towards the sound.

And there it was – the living room. Through a wee hole in the wall, I could see straight into the orphanage's main room. I'd never noticed the hole from the other side. It was hidden by a tapestry, looking like no more than a crack in the stone. But staring through it now, I could

see Isobel sitting on the floor, braiding her doll's hair, and some of the other bairns playing with marbles on the rug.

I wanted to call out for her, but I couldn't risk others knowing about this place, not yet.

I continued down the tunnel, my fingers tracing the contours of the stone to feel for any hidden doors, but the next viewing hole didn’t reveal itself until I came across the Warden’s study. There he was, sitting in his chair, inhaling ale like it was air.

My body tingled. I had the best secret in the world. I had never experienced the feeling of power before, but now, hidden in the shadows, I had something nobody else did. I was safe.

As the days passed, I discovered three important things.

First, there was a panel on the side of the old built-in bookshelf in the living room that hinged open like a door. I used this in the dead of night to sneak in and gather supplies. I didn't risk going into the dormitory but I explored the cupboards and closets and took blankets, candles, food, and books. I had been learning to read and figured now was a good time as any to practice.

Every time I closed the secret doorway, a thrill surged through me. I wedged a stone behind the panel, a wee lock to protect my newfound sanctuary.

Second, there was a long-forgotten, boarded-up drain that led outside. The rain had washed away the lingering smell, thank goodness. The opening emerged at the roots of a massive oak

tree that hid it from view. I made myself a wee privy behind the tree and carved out a path to gather food before retreating back into my hidden world.

And third, it was not just the mice I could hear.

My connection with them deepened, but soon, I began to notice other voices, feelings; and sensations of *knowing*. I wondered how long these strange abilities had been sleeping inside me. What other secrets the earth might reveal to me?

The plants growing outside had soft voices that carried on the wind. Every night, as I lay in my cozy wee bed tucked in a corner of the tunnel, I looked up through the crack in the ceiling and saw the stars twinkling above.

Listen, the stars seemed to call to me, their light a shimmering song.

I closed my eyes and listened, letting the chilly night air wash over me, feeling the energy of the earth beneath me. It spoke in the creak of wood, the rustle of leaves, the hum of life in the plants growing just beyond the cracks in the walls. They whispered – *sang* – secrets of healing, and I listened, grateful. I was connected to it all, and it all was connected to me.

Weeks turned to months, and I barely noticed time passing until autumn came. I had been stockpiling the best I could and spent every day working on tinctures and salves from the herbs, letting Nature guide me. I cared for the mice, the birds, and other wee beasties that passed through. I had more friends now than ever before, but I missed Isobel, she was the closest thing to family I had ever known and my heart wrenched when she would cry out for

me and ask the Warden where I was. His face would turn red as a beet and growl about the money he had lost.

Nobody had found me, but the bairns noticed strange things happening around the orphanage. They whispered about things moving or disappearing. I even started to rearrange their dolls and toys, giving them something new to wonder at. It wasn’t long before rumors spread of a ghost at Loch Morra.

I hoped my wee games would give Isobel some comfort, but she stayed away from the other bairns, just clinging to her teddy, trying to be invisible. I couldn't keep this gift to myself any longer.

One night, I dared to sneak into the dormitory to talk to her, let her know I was here, and see if she wanted to escape into the walls with me. But when I reached her, I almost cried out in horror. Her skin was pale and clammy, burning with fever. She lay still in her bed, her fingers twitching restlessly.

"Issy," I whispered, brushing her damp hair from her face. Her skin burned under my touch.

"I'm here." I knelt beside her, hands trembling as I reached into the pouch I carried with me. The herbs—Willow bark, Yarrow, Lavender, Elderflower, Peppermint—seemed to pulse in my palm, guiding me. *Help her. She needs you.* I didn't hesitate.

I rushed to the kitchen to make the tea, guiding Isobel to sip it between her fevered whimpers.

"Is this... a dream?" she murmured with squinted eyes.

"Nae," I whispered back, my voice barely audible. "Ye'll be better soon, I promise."

One of the youngest girls in the bed next to Iss, Merissa, looked up from her pillow. I put my finger to my lips asking for silence. She nodded, unconcerned, and laid her head back down.

By morning, Isobel's fever had started to break, and I stayed close. For the next three nights, I snuck back to her bedside and told her all about my secret life in the walls as she regained her strength.

"The plants and animals tell me what to do," I whispered to her. "I can hear them speak. I know it sounds mad, but it's real."

She smiled weakly, her eyes still heavy with fatigue. "I believe ye."

Squeezing her small hand, I pleaded, "Come with me, escape into the dark with me, no one will hurt us there."

She dropped her eyes, "I can't Lor," her chest heaved like she was fighting a sob, "the dark scares me, wee spaces scare me, even mice scare me. I'm sorry, I'm no brave like ye. I can't do it."

I pressed her hand to my cheek. “You *are* brave Issy. It’s the bravest thing to be a light in a world of darkness, and that’s you. It’s alright, ye didn’t have to come with me, I’m just glad ye know I’m here, I’m close and will always be here for ye.”

Her brightness returned and she set to work on knitting us fresh gloves, socks, and hats for the coming winter. We even found a loose floorboard in the dormitory that I could reach from one of my tunnels where Issy and I could pass notes to one another.

But Mr. Higgins’ cruelty was relentless, and the rumors about the ghost in the walls reached him, too. I'd started leaving salves and teas for the bairns, and though they tried to keep quiet, secrets have a way of getting out. Word spread about a hidden healer. I was no longer a ghost; I was a witch.

Each time the Warden’s voice thundered through the house wondering where these things were coming from or accusing the others when something went missing—my stomach twisted. I couldn’t stay hidden forever. The time to leave was coming.

One night, Isobel crouched near one of the cracks, no time for a note, her voice urgent. "Lorna," she breathed, "It’s Hamish. He’s hurt."

My heart sank. Wee Hamish. No more than eight, with bright green eyes that shined with playfulness, even after being dumped at the orphanage as a toddler after his parents had been killed.

"What happened?" I asked, the cold weight of dread creeping over me.

"The Warden lost his temper," Isobel's voice broke. "Caught him stealing food. He... he beat him. Badly. He's feverish, Lorna. If he doesn't get help soon, he won’t make it."

"Take me to him," I said, my voice low, responsibility heavy on my shoulders.

I grabbed my bundle of herbs and followed Isobel through the silent hallways, our steps quick but quiet. I trusted most of the bairns, but it was dangerous for them to lie for me.

He was in the attic—the place the Warden sent children to "reflect" or be forgotten—Hamish lay on a filthy, threadbare blanket, his small body curled in on itself, shaking violently with the fever that reddened his cheeks. His face was swollen and bruised; one eye fully shut.

I knelt beside him, pulling back the blanket to reveal dark, angry bruises blooming across his body and arms, the evidence of the Warden's fists.

"I need to stop the bleeding and treat the bruises," I murmured, forcing my hands to stop shaking as I examined his injuries.

His breath was shallow, each rise and fall of his chest labored and uneven. *Arnica. Calendula. Comfrey. Yarrow.* The plants' voices echoed in my mind, steadying me.

I reached into my bundle, pulling out the herbs and crushing them between my palms, mixing them with water from the pouch we had brought. A thick paste formed under my fingers, ready to soothe Hamish’s broken skin and reduce the swelling.

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"Ye’re going to save him, aren’t ye?" Isobel’s small voice was laced with fear.

I nodded, though my heart was tight with worry. "I’m going to try."

Through the long night, I worked, applying the salves to Hamish's bruises, binding his ribs with strips of cloth Isobel tore from an old sheet. His fever raged, but slowly, as the herbs did their work, his breathing grew more even. The bruises, though still dark and angry, seemed to soften. My heart ached at the cruelty. What kind of monster would do this to a bairn?

As dawn broke, Hamish stirred. His wee hand reached for mine, his eyes fluttering open.

"Lorna?" His voice was a thin rasp of surprise, but hearing it sent a wave of relief over me.

"I’m here, Hamish," I whispered, sitting beside him and taking his hand. "Ye’re going to be alright."

We sat in silence for a while, Hamish drifting back to sleep. The worst seemed to be over, but I knew this place would never be safe. Not for any of us.

"Issy," I said softly, "we need to leave. We can’t stay here. Not after this.”

Isobel looked at me, her face pale and drawn. "Leave?" she whispered. "But... where would we go?"

"A place where we can be free," I said, my mind already soaring. "Where the Warden can’t reach us. We could start over – find a new life, for all of us."

Hope flickered briefly in Isobel’s eyes, but it was quickly swallowed by doubt. "He won’t let us go. He’s still looking for ye, Lorna. He’d hunt us down. We have no money, no family, nowhere would be safe."

She was right. I had been hiding from the Warden ever since I discovered the tunnels, but seeing Hamish broken and bruised under his cruel hands, I knew that we couldn’t stay. I’d find a way, somehow…

But before I knew it, over a year had passed. I experienced time differently now mostly because my body had begun to bleed when the moon changed. Fear gripped me the first time I woke to the deep, aching throb in my belly, the chilling damp of blood soaking through the moss of my bed. I’d seen the older girls endure this, and my wee critters helped me gather the soothing herbs of ginger, chamomile, raspberry leaf, peppermint, cinnamon, and fennel to ease the pain.

I was fourteen now, a young woman, no longer a child. The bigger I grew, the smaller my tunnels became. My haven was starting to feel like a cage of my own making. Iss was twelve now, we were old enough; we could make it on our own out there.

I slipped a scroll through the gap in the floorboards. Scratched on the parchment were the words:

Iss, I think it's time. I have a plan. Meet at our time tonight at the tree.

'Our time' was the hour the Warden succumbed to the drink. That was when we could move freely, dance, and sing without fear of waking the beast.

Her wee figure emerged from behind the oak, and together we crept through the ferns, out into the moonlit field near the standing stones, far from the listening ears of Loch Morra. The soft moss muffled our steps, and though the rain-filled puddles beckoned a pounce, we skirted them to keep the silence. Out here, under the vast expanse of the star-studded sky, enveloped by the misty embrace of the Highlands, it was easier to believe in the whispers of nature and the magic they held.

"I know it's going to sound daft, but I've an idea," I whispered, leaning against the ancient stones.

"Daft is sort our way, aye?" Iss replied with a shrug, handing me the warm mittens she'd finished knitting.

"If we're going to get out of here, we're going to need supplies, and…we need to get rid of the Warden," I said as I slid the mittens on.

I had thought about this for months now, and was certain. She gave me a look that said, *Spit it out lass.*

"We have to weaken him," I said, my voice steady. "Make sure he can't stop us." Isobel frowned. "What d'ye mean?"

I took a slow breath. “Poison.”

Nightshade. Oleander. Hemlock. The names of the deadly plants echoed in my mind, darker than any I'd used for healing. I'd always shunned their power – too dangerous, too final. But now, I saw no other way.

Poison. The word hung heavy between us.

To escape this prison, the Warden had to fall.

"We’ll poison him," I repeated, my voice steadier than I felt. My stomach churned, but I pushed the feeling down. It had to be done. "Just enough to weaken him. To make him doubt himself, to slow him down. If we’re careful, he’ll no’ ken. He’ll think it’s an illness."

Isobel stared at me, her face drained of all color. “Poison? Lorna… no, that’s… that’s wicked. What if it doesn't work? What if he dies?”

I knew it was a grim path we were choosing, but some deeds called for grim measures.

Isobel turned her face toward the stones. “But even if he is out of the way, we still have no money, what would we do?”

"One of the tunnels looks into his study. He locks everything up at night, but I can watch during the day and see when he’s not there. I was thinking ye could slip in and we could take a few coins."

"Steal!" Her mouth gaped open, wider even than when I'd mentioned poison. "Steal from him, Lorna? Ye ken what he'd do if he caught us!"

"I know it's risky," I said, my fingers fidgeting inside the mittens. "We'd have to be careful, but we need to get in there to his drink anyway, and we'll need money to survive on our own. If we just take a wee bit at a time, maybe he'll no' even notice." I wasn't sure if I was trying to convince her– or myself.

The next few days passed in a blur of nerves and preparation. Each day, I brewed a tiny dose of the poisonous herbs, and we added it to the Warden's drink whenever he stepped out of his study. Just enough to sap his strength bit by bit. He didn't seem to notice a change in taste because we always waited until his second glass before contaminating it. It was a slow and meticulous process.

I would peek from the viewing hole and whisper to Iss when it was safe to sneak in. She would only take one coin every few days and I'd tap on the wall if he was returning. She was braver than she knew, my Iss.

The idea had been dark and twisted, but the reality of it was becoming routine. The herbs were working just as I'd hoped. The changes in the Warden were wee at first. Almost unnoticeable. But I saw them, the way he rubbed his temples after meals, the slower, almost unsteady way he moved. His voice, once so thunderous and commanding, was starting to falter. He mumbled his orders now, his usual bellow reduced to growls.

Months passed before the bairns noticed, too. They whispered cautious hope that he was ill, that maybe, just maybe, he was losing his grip. Some even spoke of the “witch in the walls” who had cursed him.

They were closer to the truth than they knew.

Isobel began to sow seeds of curiosity, asking questions in the village when they ran errands. She’d inquire about neighboring towns, the surrounding landscape, and life beyond the orphanage. We noted the comings and goings of the delivery carts, the times, and the space beneath the canvas tarpaulins. Our plan was taking shape.

We were close, I told myself. *So close to freedom*. Each time I slipped out to gather supplies or watch over Isobel, escape felt within reach. The bairns were counting on me. I repeated this like a prayer, trying to quell the gnawing fear.

Just a few more coins. Then we’d have enough…

But one night, the Warden saw me.

It started like any other night. The orphanage was bitter cold, the wind whistling through the cracks in the stone walls, and the rest of the bairns were fast asleep. I’d made my way to the kitchen to take some food, creeping like a shadow. My fingers moved silently, slipping some cured meat into the pouch I kept hidden under my shirt.

And then, I felt it.

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His eyes.

He stood in the hallway, just outside the doorway. I hadn't heard him approach—he was usually so loud. But the poison had slowed him, quieted him. His once puffy face was now gaunt and twisted in confusion as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. He stared at me, his bloodshot eyes wide, his mouth agape.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

My heart pounded in my chest so loudly as I prayed he couldn't see or hear me. I was deep in the shadow, may be he'd think I was the ghost everyone whispered about.

He rubbed his eyes, and I seized the moment.

Ducking low, I moved like the mice, skirting around the table, mirroring his steps as he lurched towards the spot where he'd seen me.

The cupboard was too noisy. I made for the doorway as he neared the pantry, slipping into the darkness just as he stumbled forward.

***

One night, after what felt like an eternity of holding my breath, Isobel leaned against the tapestry in the living room. "Lorna… it's working, aye?" she whispered.

I nodded, though she couldn't see me. "He’s weakenin’. He’ll no’ be able to stop us soon. And we almost have enough."

I didn’t mention the nightmares that plagued me, the visions of Higgins catching me, his hands around my throat. I hadn’t told her about the night he saw me. I buried that fear deep down. There was no room for doubt. Not when we were so close.

But fate, it seemed, had other plans.

The Warden's paranoia festered, growing alongside his *illness*. At first, it was no more than a wee gripe about the dwindling pantry, a scathing glower at the bairns. But his failing strength kept him at bay, for a while. Then, he discovered the missing coins. His suspicion exploded, turning into something ugly and dark.

And then, on a night when the wind howled like a banshee, his roar echoed through the old house, chilling us to the bone.

“Who’s been stealing from me?!”

My blood ran cold. He knew.

The wee ones, their eyes wide with terror, huddled together. Anger made his footsteps heavy, they shook the floorboards as he stormed into the living room, his voice booming once again, though his breath came in ragged gasps. "One of ye wee rats has been pilfering my coins! Own up!"

Higgins grabbed Hamish by the scruff of his shirt, hauling him up like a rag doll.

Hamish whimpered, cowering. "I dinnae ken! I dinnae ken! Please, I didna do it!"

“It’s the witch, sir,” one of the older lads blurted out. His voice shook as he stood, his hands clenched tight. “The witch that lives in the walls. She’s no ghost, she’s real. She’s the one takin’ yer money.”

A flicker of consideration crossed his face. He was remembering the night he'd seen me in the kitchen, doors opening and closing on their own. The very house that seemed to mock him. He was losing control, and the fear in his eyes betrayed him.

The lad stammered, shrinking back at the Warden’s glare. "Sorry, sir… It's just… what we heard…"

Higgins raised his arm, ready to strike. Hamish sobbed; the other bairns cringed.

I had to do something. I couldn't let Hamish, or any of them, suffer for my actions.

Without another thought, I flung open the hidden panel and stepped out from the shadows.

"He's right," I said, my voice trembling but firm. "It was me."

Every head in the room turned to me, including the Warden’s. His bloodshot eyes narrowed as they locked onto mine, filled with disbelief and fury.

“Ye!” he snarled, his grip tightening on Hamish. “It was ye all along!”

“Aye,” I admitted, my heart ready to leap out of my chest. “Let him go. We’re leavin’. Yer reign of terror is over.”

His eyes gleamed with madness as he dropped Hamish and lunged toward me, his fists clenched. “Ye think I’ll just let ye walk away after what you’ve done?”

I stumbled back. This wasn’t the plan. Isobel and I hadn’t told the others of our scheme yet, but we had hoped they would want to come with us when the time came.

“If any of ye wants to leave with me,” I called out to the room, my voice stronger this time, “we go now!”

Isobel was the first to stand, grabbing Hamish’s hand. The other bairns hesitated for only a moment before scrambling to their feet and suddenly, everyone moved all at once.

Higgins’ eyes blazed as he lurched toward me, and I darted back into the hidden passage.

“This way! Quickly!” Isobel urged the others out through the main door.

He'd be after me, I knew it.

I plunged into the darkness, my limbs trembling as I ran as fast as I could through the twists and turns.

“Isobel, get them out!” I yelled towards the dormitory. “Follow the plan!” Behind me, I heard him ripping the boards off the bookshelf.

I scrambled through the narrow passages, my heart pounding like a drum. I couldn't stop, couldn’t think about what would happen if he caught me. I knew the tunnels like the back of my hand, but every corner felt like an eternity. My hands scraped against the cold stone as I gathered the supplies I'd stashed, scattered, and not yet ready.

Panic burned in my lungs. *Faster. Faster. Get out.*

A searing pain exploded in my scalp as he grabbed my hair. The poison had weakened him, thinned him, enough to fit. And now, he'd caught me. Slower, weaker, but still so much bigger.

I gasped; the air knocked from my lungs as he slammed me into the stone wall.

“Ye thought ye could steal from me?!” His voice was a wild snarl, his breath hot and sour against my skin. “Ye’re going to pay for this!”

Fight.

The voice within me roared.

Fight with everything ye have.

I spun, clawing at his face, my nails tearing at his skin. He howled, clutching his eye. I kicked his knee, hard, then slung my pack over my shoulder and scrambled towards the sewer opening.

Suddenly his voice pitched to a high screech. I looked back at him and saw dozens of my wee mice friends scattering, climbing and biting at him from foot to face.

He lunged after me, roaring in pain while trying to shake the mice off, he caught my arm as I lowered myself down, but his bulk was too large to fit through after me. His voice was filled with hate, howling manically as I twisted out of his grasp.

"I'll find ye! Ye can't escape me! I will hunt ye down, ye little rat, no matter where you go!"

I tumbled out of the drain, the cold air hitting me like a slap. But the sight of Isobel, Hamish, and the others waiting behind the great oak filled me with warmth.

Behind us, the Warden's enraged screams echoed through the night. But we didn't stop, our feet pounding the earth as we fled into the darkness.

I had spent years trapped within those walls. Hiding in the shadows, listening, waiting—it had sharpened my instincts. It had shown me how to survive.

But now it was time to do more than just survive.

We weren’t going to live in the shadows any longer, shrinking away in fear. I had promised them a sanctuary, a *haven*, and we would build it—out in the open, where no one could push us back into the darkness ever again.

The fear that had kept me alive for so long was still there, simmering beneath my skin.

But now, it was different. It no longer controlled me. It empowered me.

And so, we ran, until Loch Morra and its horrors were lost far behind us.

THE END

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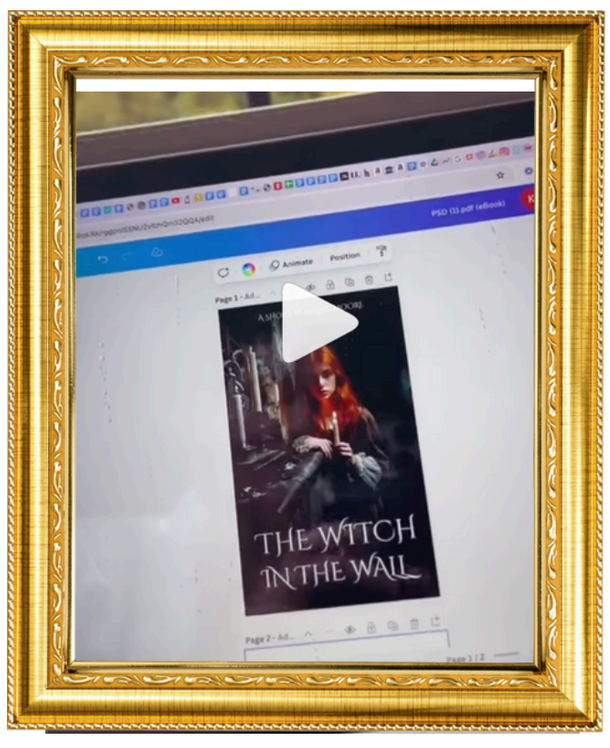

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About The Author

Kellsie Moore, is an American currently leading a nomadic life primarily in Europe and the United Kingdom alongside her charming husband and wonderful pup. She believes in turning everyday life into adventures just as vibrant as those found within the pages of novels. She is an Author, Anthropologist, Fine Arts Painter, Actress, Business Consultant, and fierce believer that women can do damn near anything they put their mind to.

Her journey as a writer was born from her vivid imagination, with inspiration from her favorite creative works, and the locations she explores in reality. She specializes in crafting immersive historical fiction with adventurous romance that beckons readers to play in the captivating journey from cover to cover.
An avid reader herself, Kellsie aims to inspire women of all ages 13+ with her stories.

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