



To
Rescue
a Witch

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Chapter One

ANNALIESE

Virginia Colony, 1734

Rob Birch bought Annaliese as a wedding gift.

Sitting in her shift on the hearth, Annaliese played with her doll as he held the mantle and swayed. Wind whistled eerily through the chinks in the cabin logs as he stabbed the tinder with a fire poker, making sparks fly up the wattle and daub chimney.

“Did you stop at the tavern?” Ma asked softly, wrapping her worn plaid shawl over her thin shoulders. She scratched her belly, big with the new baby.

Flexing his fingers on the poker handle, he spit tobacco juice into the flames before setting the poker against the wall.

Annaliese whispered with her doll and giggled.

A shock of greasy hair fell over his tanned face. “What’d yer doll say?”

Annaliese covered her mouth and looked to Ma, who shook her head ‘no.’ *Stupid Annaliese*. Swallowing hard, she said, “Nuthin’, Pa.”

Pa’s crooked smile faded. “Nuthin’, huh? Don’t lie to me, Red.” His nostrils flared and his breathing got noisy.

Ma moved closer, keeping her voice light. “The wean was just playing, Rob.”

Pa snapped, “Ain’t no one talking to you, Eleanor. You think I’m gonna deal with slave bullshit all day then come home to sass from your five-year-old?” Rolling up his sleeves, his fingers moved to his buckle.

Pa’s belt scared Annaliese. Her mouth went dry, and she wished she could hide under the table, but he was standing over her. Not even heat from the fire could stop her from inching back from his sweaty face. *Look down, be respectful.* Annaliese lowered her eyes to his mud-crusting boots, but he snatched her doll anyway. “No!”

“Whadyer doll say?” His bloodshot eyes narrowed, and she knew what he was gonna say next. “Little bastard.”

Before she could think, Annaliese spat out, “She called you a witch’s tit.”

Pa hurled her baby doll into the fire. She reached for it, but he grabbed her wrist and held it against the chimney, thrusting the poker in the blaze with his other hand.

Ma yelled, “Rob, no!”

Annaliese twisted in terror when she understood what was coming. He pressed the red-tipped iron into the back of her hand, making her writhe and shriek as it hissed and sizzled her skin.

Ma pulled his arm and the poker clanked on the floor, as she yelled, “Why do you torture her?”

Annaliese buried her face in Ma’s blonde hair, sobbing onto her neck, wishing they could run hard and fast away from him forever.

Pa growled, “You always butt in and then wonder why she’s a spoiled brat. My pa beat me and I’m fine. Let me handle your bastard.” He yanked her from Ma’s arms. “You hush your mouth, girl.”

Annaliese gulped back her tears, afraid of what he’d do next, and wiped her runny nose on her arm. He grabbed her shaking hand and smiled at the branding. Already bright red, it throbbed like all Ma’s pins and needles stabbing her at once. Squeezing her eyes shut, she turned from him, wishing him away.

Pa pressed his lips to her ear and whispered, “Now everyone will know how bad you is.”

Later that night, when Pa was passed out on the bed with an empty bottle of corn whiskey next to him, Annaliese watched Ma sneak out her book from its hiding spot, rip out a page and scratch something with her

old quill pen. Blowing on the clumpy ink, Ma quickly folded the paper and hid it in her pocket.

Ma made the sign of the cross and whispered, "Please, God, let Lord Hallewell save us."

Chapter Two

WILLIAM MACLEOD

London, 1739

William MacLeod didna plan on cleaving Viscount Percy's hand off, but he didna regret it, either.

Earlier, MacLeod had strode the harbor, inhaling the salty air. Even though he dressed in the English manner of breeches, coat and tricorne hat, he carried his Scottish Highlander claymore purely for the fear it instilled in the hearts of any of Lord Hallewell's perceived enemies.

Seagulls scattered as he met the petty officer on the bustling dock.

MacLeod said, "This better be important. If I dinna get to the Highlands in time for my son's wedding, Fiona will have my bollocks."

"Aye, sir, it's bad. See that ship, the *Icarus*? Viscount Percy Monroe owns it, stupid blunderbuss. He's registered to sell wine, but we found smuggled slaves instead."

"What's this to do with me?"

"Viscount Percy claimed Lord Hallewell is his silent partner. HM Customs' agent is harassing me, wondering why I haven't arrested anyone; eighty emaciated Africans are rotting in makeshift pens; and the damned reporters from Fleet Street keep asking questions about Lord Hallewell's connection. It's been a right dung pile."

MacLeod pressed cash into the petty officer's palm. "You were right to call. Where's the cargo?"

The stench of suffering hit him before his hulking frame cast a shadow over a wooden barracoon crammed with Africans in loincloths.

"I think Lord Hallelwell's son is the real partner. I've seen Alexander drinking and whoring with Viscount Percy. We've already sold these slaves to the colonies. They're boarding the next floating coffin soon."

A dying child with sores around her mouth wheezed a death rattle in the arms of a man with a deep scar over his left eye.

"Wretched business. Give them water, for God's sake."

"Thank you," the African said. It startled MacLeod that he knew English words and manners. MacLeod nodded.

"Be careful of him," said an old salt, rambling over, the bone buttons of his dark overcoat straining to cover his belly. "I dursen't, but I think he cursed the ship, the double-poxed hound. Now we don't even get to keep our profit."

"You are ...?"

"I'm ship's master, Mr. Grubb. You're MacLeod? You don't look like a barrister. You're even taller than Alexander said. I knew Lord Hallelwell would come to reclaim our cargo. Didn't I say he would protect his investment, Turner? I put half my life savings in this lot."

MacLeod put his bear claw around the squat man's shoulders, leading him away. "I'm going to give you free legal advice. Keep your gob shut around authorities, aye? Why didna you register the cargo properly?"

"Why pay the agent? The crown ain't need it none," Mr. Grubb said, standing at his full five feet two inches. Cheap rum scented his breath.

Bloody edijits. "The viscount's on board?"

"With a lady friend." Mr. Grubb gave an oily grin. "You'll get me my money back, aye?" the old salt called, as MacLeod walked the gangplank and boarded the *Icarus*, its gleaming polished wood masking the rotting enterprise below.

MacLeod descended the narrow steps and hunted for the captain's quarters.

Viscount Percy Monroe, naked save for his double pigtail peruke, was rutting a pretty brunette between candlesticks and peacock quills

on the map table. His yellow silks lay rumpled on the floor between a grandfather clock and a gilded birdcage lodging a parrot.

It was already noon. *Of all days to deal with this jingle brain.* MacLeod had already sent his coachman ahead to collect his younger sons from school and send them to Scotland alone.

MacLeod cleared his throat. “My client isna happy with you.”

Gasping, the woman tugged her petticoats to cover herself, but Viscount Percy pressed his forearm into her back. “What, you’re shy?” Holding MacLeod’s gaze, the noble continued thrusting. “I’ll tell you the same I told everyone else. If you think you’re getting a refund for the confiscated slaves, you can suck my cock. Now bugger off, I’m busy.”

The parrot fluttered its emerald wings. “*Caw. Bugger off. Caw.*”

Viscount Percy thrust harder, as if to make a point by making the woman grunt in obvious pain. MacLeod grimaced at that. He tapped Viscount Percy’s shoulder. The noble spun around in annoyance. MacLeod cracked his forehead against Percy’s nose, dropping the aristocrat to his knees. Percy squealed like a piglet as snot and blood rolled through his fingers.

MacLeod handed the woman her cloak. “All right, lass?”

“All in a day’s work,” she said, lifting a small coin bag on her way out.

MacLeod leaned against the desk, arms crossed. “Did anyone ever teach you how to act like a decent human, you entitled piece of shite?”

Viscount Percy moaned. “You broke my nose. My father’s the fifth Earl of Cheshire. He shall destroy you.” His veins bulged down his thick neck.

“My client is Lord George Hallewell.”

Understanding inched across Viscount Percy’s reddened face. “Oh. You must be Mr. MacLeod? Why didn’t you tell me sooner who you were? I’m friends with his son, Alexander.”

“What are you, twenty-five? You’re friends with a sixteen-year-old boy? More like taking advantage of him with your asinine business ideas. Why on earth would you bring slaves anywhere but the colonies?”

“Alexander said his mother wanted them.”

Damned Lady Margaret. What’s her game? Time to scare the lad. “Ack, liar. You thought you’d traffic and get away with it. I’m sorting this

out for Alexander, but I'm not helping you. Put on your breeches. Time to visit the Old Bailey."

"Prison? It's not my fault the agents raided. Lady Margaret said she'd bribe them." MacLeod frowned at this news.

Viscount Percy became all smiles and courtesy. "Mr. MacLeod, I shall endeavor to make things right. I certainly don't desire to be enemies with Lord Hallewell and his notorious enforcer."

MacLeod's shoulders relaxed. *I might make it to the wedding after all.* "Fine. I'll need a full refund for Alexander's share, and then I'll make this situation disappear."

"Right." Cupping his cods in one hand while pinching his bloody nose in the other, the suddenly modest young aristocrat did his best to negotiate with a straight face. "Here's the trouble. I'm not flush right now, but perhaps a note of terms?"

MacLeod snorted. "Your note's as worthless as a declaration of virginity from a whore."

"Then let me sign over a ten percent stake in my ship to cover the fines and losses, and we'll call it done and done."

"Is it your ship, laddie, or your father's?"

"Mine," Viscount Percy said through gritted teeth.

MacLeod made a quick assessment. Beyond the stench, the *Icarus* was well appointed, and a ship would expand options for future commerce. "Fifty percent. Where's the deed? Dinna bleed where you sign."

Viscount Percy wiped his nose on his arm, extracting the papers from a drawer. He signed with one of the peacock quills scattered on the desk. As MacLeod read it, Viscount Percy bashed his skull with a candlestick.

"Agh." MacLeod clasped the back of his head, blinking in shock as his vision momentarily blurred.

Viscount Percy grabbed his rapier from the wall and pointed it at MacLeod's throat. "Lord Hallewell should talk to his wife before he sends his Scottish bitch after me. Alexander owes *me* money because his mother's too stupid to bribe an agent. I'm going to cut off your head, shove your bollocks in your mouth and send it to the whole damned family as a message."

MacLeod's head throbbed. *Stay calm. Dead nobles cause more headaches than they're worth.* "Lower your sword, lad, or you'll regret it."

Viscount Percy's hand trembled. *The worst kind of opponent*, MacLeod thought. *Scared amateurs do dangerous things.*

"Like you regret leaving your witch wife alone with Colonel Wilkes? I hear she's exceptional at enchanting men." As Viscount Percy laughed, his wavering rapier moved out of range.

In a flash, MacLeod pulled his claymore from its sheath and cleaved off the viscount's hand. The sword clinked as it landed, with Percy's long fingers still wrapped around the handle as blood splattered everywhere. MacLeod put his sword in his sheath, grabbed the severed hand, and the viscount by the neck, and dragged him up the stairs and onto the deck.

Outside, the Africans shuffled in groups of twenty toward the long, pointed boats taking them to the slave ship. Heavy chains linked one person's neck to another's.

"Mercy!" Viscount Percy yelled, as MacLeod lobbed him naked and flailing overboard. Percy's severed hand soon splashed beside him.

"Viscount Percy!" shouted Mr. Grubb, racing to throw him a line of rope.

Ankle chains scraped the boardwalk as the enslaved rushed to the dock's edge for a glimpse. A slow laugh rippled through the crowd as they gawked at their former captor's twist of fortune. MacLeod noted the little girl the African had been holding slumped in the cage corner, unmoving.

Boldness overtook the African with the scar, and he pissed on Viscount Percy's bobbing head to hoots and cheers. MacLeod wiped the blood from his claymore with a nearby rag, revealing the inscription, *Justice*. MacLeod connected eyes with the African. They gave each other a nod of respect.

That didna go as I planned. Viscount Percy's father, the earl, was a prickly old bastard. Would he be angrier about the hand, or his son being made a fool of? There'd be consequences. Still. MacLeod was happy he did it. But why did Viscount Percy mention Colonel Wilkes or call his wife a witch? It had been fifteen years since the salt circle. What had Lady Margaret been saying to this little weasel, and why?



Standing with palm in palm behind his back, the afternoon sun cast an amber glow over Lord Hallewell's eclectically decorated study at Astwick House. *If I leave by coach first thing tomorrow, I'll be able to make it home just before James' wedding. Come on, come on. Where's Lord Hallewell?*

Lady Margaret's narcissus perfume spread like a noxious cloud as she entered with her errant son, Alexander. She couldn't be called beautiful, her features were too strong, but what she lacked in bearing, her first husband's fortune more than made up for. It was the sole reason MacLeod had arranged for Lord Hallewell to marry her. Her signature red gown was like a matador's cape flashing before his raging bull. Something seemed different about her, a subtle fury in her cold eyes. *Hold fast, MacLeod. You've already done one stupid thing today.*

Lord Hallewell sauntered in, impeccably dressed as always, in a black coat with white embroidery. His powdered peruke's ponytail was tied inside a black taffeta bag with a rosette of white ribbon. He sat beneath a giant portrait of a lie—himself appearing young and happy. Perched on a high-backed armchair behind his carved walnut desk, he purposefully kept no chairs for visitors, thus everyone had to stand before him, king on the throne.

What must it be like to sit in his chair? To be of noble blood?

"It's lucky you're still in town, MacLeod," Lord Hallewell said.

Lucky me.

Alexander, Lady Margaret's son from her first marriage, squirmed before his stepfather, knotting the black curls on both sides of his head and tying them together in the back. "How was I to know Viscount Percy's a scoundrel?" Alex carried his mother's dark features, which suited him better. "Can't Mr. MacLeod fix it?"

"The fixer," Lady Margaret sneered, exposing rotten teeth. "Too bad you never *prevent* problems." She massaged her lower jaw.

MacLeod ignored her. "My lord, I bribed the officials and journalists, snuffing the scandal. You ken, preventing things," he said cheerfully.

“You’re now the proud owner of the ship, the *Icarus*. Technically, Viscount Percy has partial ownership, but I took full possession.”

“You stole the ship?” Lord Hallewell smirked.

“Which more than covers Alexander’s losses. To avoid trouble, perhaps young Master Alexander should tell me his plans, not his mistakes.”

Lord Hallewell laughed. “Just like in our Oxford days. I’d think everything was hopeless, and you’d find solutions, old friend. I’m very pleased indeed. But not with you, Alexander. Where did you meet this merchant?”

“He’s not a merchant. His father’s the fifth Earl of Cheshire. We met at the club.”

MacLeod said, “He winnae be playing cards any time soon. His hand’s fish food.”

Alexander whined, “How can I go to the club now?”

Lady Margaret turned as pale as the lace fan she fluttered. “How barbaric.”

“Self-defense. He breathes.” MacLeod twisted the knife. “My lord, Viscount Percy said you should’ve consulted your wife before sending me.”

Her blush betrayed surprise. *Bet you need to fan yourself now, Margaret.*

His lordship’s eyes pierced his wife’s. “It seems you like to keep secrets.” Something in Lord Hallewell’s tone was different, more accusatory. She seemed to notice, too. *What the hell is going on?*

“Forgive me, my lord, but I didn’t want to bother you with insignificant matters. In five years, the trust dissolves and Alexander comes into his inheritance. He needs to learn how to manage it. Slave smuggling’s quite profitable.”

“To the West Indies perhaps, but London?” quipped MacLeod.

“How dare you let him speak to me thus?” she appealed to her husband, ruby earrings dangling like blood drops.

Shite. MacLeod bowed. “Apologies, my lord, my lady.”

Lord Hallewell exhaled through his nose. “Well, why did you smuggle them here?”

Lady Margaret held her head high. “It’s fashionable to have a Negro footman. Why not profit on the trend? Control the market? We had advanced sales to the finest families.”

“Aye, my lady,” MacLeod said, barely containing his annoyance. “Now they’re demanding full refunds or threatening to sue. It’ll take me days to negotiate settlements to avoid court. You never smuggle in London. That’s why God created western Wales.”

Lord Hallewell slammed his fist on the desk, surprising them. “I decide, not you, Margaret. I’m cutting off both your and Alexander’s allowances until further notice.”

Panic swept her features. “My lord, I aimed to be a dutiful mother.”

“Try being a dutiful wife, madam,” Lord Hallewell said.

Freezing momentarily at the rebuke, she gave a dignified nod. “I shall strive to please you better in the future.” Pivoting abruptly, she stabbed MacLeod with an icy glare, massaging her jaw as she left with her son in tow.

Lord Hallewell rang a bell as MacLeod swatted away her lingering perfume. A servant in blue livery arrived with port. “Leave the bottle.” Lord Hallewell raised his glass. “To the king.”

“The king.” MacLeod drank. “You should speak with Viscount Percy’s father, the earl, as a courtesy. They’re estranged apparently, but why tempt a duel?”

“I don’t care about such trifles.”

Then why did I waste my whole day on this?

Lord Hallewell opened his top desk drawer and handed over a well-worn letter, its ink scratched across the page with urgency. “Margaret doesn’t realize I found this in her bedchamber.”

Blast it, what needs fixing now? I’ll never get home in time. His stomach sank at the address. Please dinna be who I think it is.

March 1, 1734

Williamsburg, Virginia Colony

My Dearest George,

I know I’m not supposed to write to you, but I must. You

have a daughter, Annaliese. I fear my husband will kill us.
I beg your mercy and forgiveness. If you ever loved me,
please save our daughter.
Yours,

Eleanor

MacLeod digested its contents. “A daughter? Are they safe? This letter’s nearly five years old.”

“How should I know?” Lord Hallewell paced the room, his heeled shoes echoing on the hardwood floor. “Notice how worn it is? Margaret not only hid it, she clearly draws happiness envisioning my mistress and natural daughter getting bludgeoned.” He tapped the letter to his lips. “All this time I wondered where Eleanor went, what I did so wrong she’d leave me.”

Distract him. “How did Lady Margaret get the letter? Were there any others?”

“You think I’m going to ask my wife anything about a former mistress? Are you mad?”

The din of London pressed outside the window. MacLeod shifted on his feet, itching to leave. “I’ll send inquiries on the way out of town. Dinna fash, I’ll arrange for their safety.”

“How could you have let this happen?”

“Me? Beg pardon, my lord, but I cannae deal with your bastards unless I ken they exist.”

“She’s not supposed to write to me? Says whom?” Lord Hallewell drained his glass, then poured another. “What in heavens is Eleanor doing in the colonies?”

“Eleanor bugged off with an actor, aye?” MacLeod ken this to be a sore spot and pressed. “If she hasn’t written since 1734, matters must have resolved themselves with her man.”

“Happy with a brute? She begged me to save them. You must travel at once.”

MacLeod almost spit out his port. “Me? To Virginia?”

“Leave tomorrow, and they’ll be here by summer’s end.”

“A trip to the colonies takes two months going, six weeks back, assuming good weather and immediate passage, and I’d still have to find them. I’d be gone for months.”

“You should make Fiona happy and pack a kilt. I hear it’s warm there and the fresh air might do your bollocks some good.”

“The last thing I want is to return to Highlander garb.”

“Coat and breeches then. Don’t worry about booking passage. Apparently, I own a ship now.” A boyish smile spread across Lord Hallewell’s face.

“My lord, dinna be impulsive.”

“Why are you fighting me?” Lord Hallewell’s eyes narrowed.

“I have other clients with court cases, and my tenants to collect rent from. Besides, I cannae leave before harvest. Fiona will already be furious I’m late to the wedding. Fiona—”

“Is lucky you haven’t abandoned her, considering.”

MacLeod lowered his drink. “You’re threatening me?”

Lord Hallewell stared up, unflinching. “When the time came, I fixed your problem, despite the risk to my reputation. I expect, no, demand, your loyalty. You are loyal, aren’t you?”

“You have to ask?”

“Do I?”

“She’s just a mistress, George. What good comes from bringing them here? You really want to expose yourself to scandal for some servant you fucked a decade ago? Think on it.”

Lord Hallewell touched his arm. “William, you don’t understand what it’s like to lose someone and then—find them again. I don’t care about our roles in society. Aristocrat. Servant. It’s just a construct, not who we are.”

Only a rich man with noble blood could say something as stupid as that.

“I don’t even mind learning the truth behind why she left. We must face our past, even if it’s uncomfortable, if we want any hope for a better tomorrow.”

“The only way to reach tomorrow at all is to keep our past sins buried.”

Lord Hallewell’s eyes welled. “I love her.”

They locked stares. Rare to see his lordship vulnerable, like when they were truly friends. But now George was his lord to serve. “Yes, my lord.”

Lord Hallewell forced a smile. “Forgive me, William. I’m not myself today. I meant no disrespect to you or Fiona. I adore that lovely sprite.” Lord Hallewell punched MacLeod’s arm playfully. “I know you’re loyal. Other solicitors can fix Alex’s indiscretions. You’re the only one I trust to protect the people most dear to me.”

MacLeod sighed. Yet another thing Fiona would complain about, but considering Lord Hallewell now considered this trip a loyalty test, his wife would need to grin and bear it. “I’ll get my household in order, and set sail by the end of the month, my lord.”

Lord Hallewell beamed, heartily patted MacLeod’s back and poured another glass, giddy with the future. “God save the king. And grant you safe travels.” He drank.

MacLeod skimmed the worn letter. *Why would Lady Margaret keep the evidence? Daft cow.* “I need Eleanor’s letter to prove paternity. What’ll you tell Lady Margaret when she discovers it’s missing?”

“I think she already suspects, but we’ll never broach that subject. We always dance around failures big and small in our marriage.” He sipped. “Why do you think Eleanor named my daughter Annaliese? Was she trying to make the girl sound Dutch? Her name should be Anna or Elizabeth, not a combination. Eleanor’s adorably silly. God, I love her.”

MacLeod grimaced. “Who knows if they’re still in Virginia? Or alive? Disease runs rampant in the colonies.” *Let’s hope. Bloody Eleanor. Even now, she’s a pain in the arse.*

“You can’t ruin my mood, MacLeod. My favorite mistress shall return. God, she must have thought I left her to die.”

“This is a fool’s errand.”

“Lord Hallewell’s no fool. No one keeps secrets from me. I always find out.”

Not always. “Yes, my lord. I’m off to the inn. I’ll sail the *Icarus* from Glasgow.”

“When you find that wife-beating brute ... Rough, MacLeod. Make him hurt.”

TO RESCUE A WITCH - FIRST 3 CHAPTERS

He nodded. *Jesus, Joseph and Mary. It'll take at least three days to finish the preparations. Bloody former mistresses and their spoiled brats. The nerve to name her Annaliese. She's going to pay for that letter.*

Chapter Three

FIONA

Scotland

Fiona pursued the source of the bewitching sound, never quite making out more than a blur of a girl with tangled red curls, until she came upon a dozen waterfalls rumbling from the mountains. An electric current charged the darkening sky. *I shouldnae be here. William forbids it.*

Fiona panted, catching her breath. “What did you want me to see, child?”

The girl stared with eyes blue as the Fairy Pools she stood beside. “Are you a changeling?” Fiona called.

Spinning abruptly, the lass waded into the water. Cold spray from the waterfalls dampened Fiona’s skin. Suddenly, William appeared on the opposite side of the stream, tall and strong by the craggy rocks, his tartan wrapped loosely over his shoulder. How odd—how wonderful—to see him in Highlander plaid again.

Fiona felt separated from her body, like she was watching a play unfold about a forsaken witch, able to predict but never alter the future. Here, in her husband’s clan lands, she felt acutely aware of the distance between them. No matter how close he stood, they were apart—and aching.

Pointing to a magnificent red stag with regal antlers descending the hills, the girl said, "Look." It stopped at the water's edge.

Fiona touched her fingers to her parted lips, staring. The beast held her gaze an instant before dashing through and troubling the water, transforming crystal blue to muddy confusion. Fiona glanced to William, feeling the hairs on her arms stand on end.

Sparks of lightning revealed the fairy girl getting swept away in a white whirlwind. Fiona clapped her hands over her mouth, frozen as she watched the child reach out spindly arms covered in bleeding scratches for help. William dove deep to rescue the girl.

With a growing tingling in her chest, Fiona hunted the surface of the water for signs of their reemergence, but a thick mist rolled in.

"William?"

Fiona's fists clenched and unclenched. *Is he lost for good?*



Fiona opened her eyes back in Kirkhaven, pressing her palm against her chest, rattled by her vision. She never asked for this gift, 'twas more a curse. What good had second sight done for Auntie Matilda but char her bones?

I shouldnae be doing this.

Like a child waiting to be caught, Fiona glanced over her shoulder. Thankfully, the castle ruins shielded her sins. No one would spy on her salt circle here. Mugwort leaves smoldered nearby. Taking deep, controlled breaths, she inhaled the earthly scent mixing with the salt of the sea. Dried seaweed crunched in her fist as she pulled it from her satchel and sprinkled it along with limpet shells in the smoldering leaves to cast the spell.

"Eisd rium a Dbia. Auntie Matilda, hear me. It's been fifteen years since my last vision. Why now? Help me understand the warning you've sent. Bestow enchantments with harm to none."

Her pulse raced as she quickly swept the salt anticlockwise from west to north in a pile, placing it along with the ashes and candle in a burlap sack, and flinging it into the Firth of Clyde. Nothing made her feel

more grounded, more powerful, more alive than magic. Fiona clapped her hands clean, noticing her emerald and diamond bracelet. Like her marriage, its sparkle had dimmed. *Hurry, lest he finds you again.*

Dashing up the pockmarked steps beneath the water gate archway, she found her horse near the collapsed stables in the Upper Bailey and mounted it. They cantered past the hills of blooming redshank, and her thoughts shifted to her son's wedding, mere days away. *James was a wee bairn just a moment ago, how can he be getting married?*

Just beyond the birch and alder trees, her three-story manor rose from the glen. Dismounting, she handed the reins to a stable boy who brought the horse into the large, detached barn. Her husband's coach approached past the stone fence. *Perfect timing.*

Servants stood at attention in a line on the left as she joined James, their eldest, on the right. He draped his arm over the petite shoulders of his blonde fiancée, Nelly. Fiona bounced on tiptoe in anticipation, as her black cat, Pooka, curled around her legs.

Her two youngest bairns emerged, still wearing their school clothes. "My boys, how I've missed you," she said, pulling them into a bear hug.

Hamish, a flame-haired seven-year-old, and the spitting image of William, ran in circles around her like a puppy. "What's stinky, Mam?"

Her eyes popped open. *Mugwort leaves.* "I've been gardening," she said, keeping her tone light. *William willnae recognize the scent's purpose, will he?*

"What's for dinner?" Lachlan called, sauntering inside. A masculine version of Fiona, he shared her honey-tresses and cat-colored eyes. At thirteen, he was a year younger and a head taller than Broderick, still slumped in the post-chaise.

Fiona inspected inside, as though it would make her husband appear. James followed, equally confused. Fiona marked her quiet fourteen-year-old, Broderick. Dark hair, dark eyes, face hidden behind his hand.

"Where's your father?" she asked.

Broderick shrugged. "Where else? Lord Hallewell has an urgent matter he must attend."

James exploded, "The wedding is Wednesday!"

“I’m sure he’s on the way,” Fiona said. *He’d never intentionally miss James’ nuptials.*

Broderick rushed out of the coach with his head bowed, but James stopped him. “What’s wrong with your face?” James pulled Broderick’s hand away, exposing a black eye and a swollen lip.

Broderick said, “You think it’ll heal before Da returns? I dinna want him to ken.”

Oh, no. William will lose his mind when he sees this. “The same lad as before?” Fiona touched Broderick’s cut, and he winced. “Sorry. There’s still salt on my fingers.”

James arched his eyebrow, and she averted her gaze.

Where is my husband?

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During the spring of 2020, both my favorite uncle and father-in-law died during lockdown and the world felt chaotic and dangerous. I remembered my own father, long past, and missed the power of his hug to soothe. Suddenly, this story spilled out of me. While editing, *Roe v. Wade* guaranteeing a woman's bodily autonomy was overturned and Fiona's plight felt visceral in a way it hadn't before. Even though this story is set in the past, it felt immediate.

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The books I read included:

Hudson, Jr., Carson O., *Witchcraft in Colonial Virginia*

Meiklejohn-Free, Barbara, *Scottish Witchcraft, A Complete Guide to Authentic Folklore, Spells, and Magical Tools*

DK London, *A History of Magic, Witchcraft & The Occult*

Dr. Flamstead's and Mr. Patridge's New Fortune-book, Second Edition

Morse Earle, Alice, *Child Life in Colonial Times*

Miley Theobald, Mary, *Death by Petticoat, American History Myths Debunked*

Olsen, Kirstin, *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*, Second Edition

Hagist, Don N., *Wives, Slaves, And Servant Girls, Advertisements for Female Runaways in American Newspapers, 1770-1783*

Gibson, John, Mayor and Fisher, William, Mayor, *Record of Indentures of Individuals Bound Out as Apprentices, Servants, Etc., in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1771-1773*

Eddy, Bill, *5 Types of People Who Can Ruin Your Life, Identifying and Dealing with Narcissists, Sociopaths, and Other High-Conflict Personalities*

Foyster, Elizabeth, *Marital Violence, An English Family History, 1660-1857*

Dana, Richard Henry, *Two Years Before the Mast*

Bowen, Ashley, *The Autobiography of Ashley Bowne 1728-1813*

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Rees, Siân, *The Floating Brothel, The Extraordinary True Story of An Eighteenth-Century Ship and Its Cargo of Female Convicts*

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa A. Traugott is a Mom's Choice Award-winning author. Her memoir, *She's Losing It!* led to her being cast on John Cena's reality TV show *American Grit* and she managed to last five episodes. Who knew?

Other books include *The S.L.I. Method* and *Mind Your Manners Minnie Monster*, which she also illustrated. A World Championship of Public Speaking semi-finalist, she lives in Austin, Texas with her husband, kids and English bulldog, Bruno.

If you're looking for fun content, head over to her websites LisaTraugott.com and ShesLosingIt.com or say hi on Instagram at [@lisa__traugott](https://www.instagram.com/lisa__traugott).