



# Rohaise the Red

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** A Highlander, a lass, and a ghost – oh my!

Fleeing in the night to a small Scottish town, Abigail realizes she's being followed and takes refuge in an abandoned castle. But the castle is not empty. It's home to a lady ghost with long red hair, an affinity for handsome men, and the power to protect Abigail.

Kerrick Hay has suffered too much disrespect at home for having joined Cromwell's rebellion against the crown and a monarch's absolute rule. As the second son, his only chance of making a comfortable life for himself is by renovating and making the old family property of Delgatie Castle profitable.

When he arrives to find a lass burying a dead man in the castle courtyard, his surprise turns into absolute disbelief when he battles an invisible foe bent on protecting her.

The troubled spirit's name is Rohaise, and her yearning to live once again is fierce, fierce enough to kill for love and freedom.

**Total Pages (Source):** 9

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:05 am*

Aberdeenshire, Scotland

27 October The Year of Our Lord 1663

“N o, no, no, no, no...” Abigail Lindsey whispered as she ran through the pelting rain across the road and onto the moor. Was the man in the tavern behind her William? She wasn’t going back inside to find out.

Abigail squinted into the darkness that stretched like a blanket over the hill leading toward the hulking castle ruins at the top.

You are mine, Abigail, to do with as I please.

“No bloody chance,” she whispered, hurrying forward. She had already paid for the entire coach ride to Inverness, but she would end her journey here in the tiny town of Turriff. Her alias, Grace Winfield, would simply disappear. Hopefully, without anyone taking note.

Unless someone inside the tavern said, “Aye, a lass with red hair has been here.”

Who had seen her? The bar maid? The coachman? Her fellow passengers she’d endured all day as she fled from Aberdeen?

The autumn rains had made the peat spongy, and thunder rumbled in the distance as if God argued with her hasty plan to abandon her journey to Inverness. She trudged on toward the castle. “’Tis vacant,” she responded to His almighty question about her sanity. “And sound.” At least she hoped so.

Petticoat in hand, Abigail marched across the moor, her thighs aching as she climbed, hoping the stormy twilight hid her flight. She glanced over her shoulder, her heart thumping so hard, her hand flew to her chest. Holy God! A man stood at the edge of the moor, watching her. Damn the light blue cloak William had given her. It was her warmest, but it stood out in the darkness.

“I am but a phantom roaming the moors,” she said between her rapid breaths, the pains in her legs forgotten as she broke into a run. Lightning splintered across the sky. “Assistance would be appreciated,” she said, raising her gaze to heaven.

Looking back again, she gasped. The man was following her onto the moor. “No.” William or not, he was after her. Abigail charged forward toward the looming shadow of the castle, her satchel banging between her shoulder blades. She ran for long minutes, not looking behind her.

Rain tapped sporadically against the hood pulled over her head. Crack! Lightning shot across the black skyscape again. Its careless light revealed the hairy vines growing like tentacles up the front of the sand-colored stone facade of the three-story tower house before her. With walls thick and solid, if she could get inside, she might survive the night. As she leaped off the moor, her boots crunched the pebbles of the overgrown road before it.

Running up to the front double doors, Abigail grabbed the cold iron latch, working it with desperation. It didn’t release, though she shook it frantically. “Oh God, please open!”

The man must be closing in with his longer strides and trousers instead of skirts. Abigail tilted her face to the dark windows just as another flash of light cut across the sky. A woman stood at the window on the second floor. Her hair long, her face pale, and her eyes turned down toward Abigail.

“Please help me!” Abigail cried. She looked over her shoulder toward the moor. It was dark, but there was movement, the shadow of a monster. Breathing so hard her words were weak, she looked up at the woman again. “He will kill me. Please! Let me in!” A sob came out, born of panic. She pounded on the door, her fists tight. “Please let me in! He is coming!”

In the silence of the receding thunder, Abigail heard the scrape of iron in the lock. Thumbs pressing on top of each other in their haste, she squashed the iron latch, and the door swung inwards. She dashed into darkness, her heels loud on the wooden floor, and spun to slam the door. Fingers desperately seeking, she found the iron key in the lock and used both hands to turn it, snatching it back out. Pivoting, her eyes wide in the inky darkness, she dropped her bag and pressed her back against the door. Little sparks appeared in her periphery like popping embers rising from a bonfire.

Rain pelted the house, and thunder rolled like the deep rumble of a mythical beast. Something wooden banged in the back of the castle, making her jump. “Are there other ways he could get inside?” she whispered into the darkness.

The only answer was a lashing of wind that shrieked around the eaves. At the end of a loud clap of thunder, she thought she heard a deep voice yell. Her breath blew out in gusts, and she slapped her hood off her head so she could better listen.

Ye are safe . In the darkness, she could not tell from which direction it had come. A woman’s voice, soft but strong. It felt like truth and not just hope. He cannot hurt you now .

Abigail sank to the floor, her damp and dirty dress belled out around her. She clutched her bent knees, bowing her head as if to curl into a tiny ball. “I am safe,” she whispered. Please God, let it be true.

\*

Drip... Drip... Drip...

The sound teased, pressing against Abigail's bladder, and she shifted, the aches in her limbs making her groan as she stretched. The sourness in her mouth reminded her how thirsty she was. The castle. William. The woman in the window .

She blinked and pushed up slowly from the floor. "Holy God," she yelped as she saw the woman. She stood in the center of the long room, staring at Abigail. Her eyes were dark in a pale face, her hair striking in contrast. Red and straight, it fell unadorned down to her waist. She wore a green gown without a crinoline to hold it out.

Abigail straightened. "Pardon me, milady." Her breath caught as she turned to see the lady had moved closer without a sound, and Abigail forced an uneasy smile. "Thank you for letting me take refuge in your home last night. A man from the village was chasing me across the moor."

The woman's head tilted to the side, her face blank.

"I am Abigail," she said. "Well, actually it is Grace, now," she added quickly. Lord help her. If she was going to live a life of duplicity, she had better improve her lying skills. "Forgive me for intruding, but is there a privy closet? I am in need."

Abigail bent to pick up her bag and straightened to find the room empty. "Milady?" But she had vanished. Abigail huffed softly. "I will find it myself."

The great hall was long with wooden beams running the length of the ceiling. Dust-covered tapestries lay bunched on the floor against the walls, as if they'd fallen there and were left to mold. A dusty table sat in the middle of the room, a cold and blackened hearth at the end with a tarnished shield over it. Fuzzy lines of cobweb hung in patterns amongst gutted candles in two chandeliers overhead. Although dry,

the castle had fallen into complete disrepair. Was the woman alone?

Abigail found a pot behind a privacy screen in an alcove. “Thank the blessed lord,” she murmured, ducking behind. Her boots clipped on the wooden floor as she returned to the great hall, staring up at the cobwebs that shifted with a draft moving unseen about the ceiling.

“Milady?” she called at the bottom of the turning staircase. More cobwebs ran across the wide expanse of the steps as if no one ever used them. But Abigail had seen the woman staring down at her from the window above.

She found an iron poker, caked with rust, and brandished it like a sword, swiping the cobweb strings out of her way. “Are you here alone?” she called, but there was no answer. The place felt... hollow.

The corridor above was dry, the chilled air smelling heavily of dust. Abigail’s boots clipped softly on the floorboards, her senses alert. She opened each door, poking her head into bedchambers, their scant furniture covered with draped sheets. The only room without dust covers was the one whose windows faced the front of the castle.

“Good morn,” she called. Sheets lay in discarded piles, but no footprints marred the fine coating of dust. A four-poster bed was covered with a silk coverlet and pillows. The wardrobe doors squeaked as she opened them to find a green gown hanging there, identical to the one the red-haired lady wore. Abigail plucked at her own stained petticoat. Maybe she could buy the green gown from the lady if she had others.

The third floor was much the same, with smaller rooms and no furnishings. Abigail returned to the wide, twisting staircase and trailed a hand down the curved wall as she descended. She looked through a broken window, the jagged glass framing the isolated landscape.

Hurrying down and across the great hall, Abigail entered the kitchens in the rear. “Milady?” Light filtered in from several windows high up, two of them broken. The rustle and chirp of a startled bird made her start as a sparrow fluttered up from a cold hearth, shooting out a window.

“Do you have any food and drink I could buy?” Abigail called. Thirst made her tongue stick in her mouth. Walking over, she caught a drop of rainwater from the sill and put her finger in her mouth, turning toward the broken door.

Abigail gasped, nearly choking on her own finger, and shoved backwards until she climbed halfway onto the workbench. An arm, stiff and unmoving, lay on the floor, peeking out from the far table. She leaned out until she could see the rest of the prone body. Blood, black and thick, pooled out under a man’s head. “Holy Lord,” she whispered. His skull was crushed, an iron skillet on the ground beside him.

Pulling her tattered skirts close, Abigail crept toward him and crouched, touching his jacket. “Damp,” she whispered. He’d been in last night’s rain. Abigail’s heart jumped about inside her chest, and she drew in a full breath. She picked open his jacket pocket, pulling forth a few shillings and a folded missive. She held it up to the light.

Abigail Lindsey

5 feet 6 inches

Slight of build

Long, curling red-gold hair

?100 upon receipt, must be alive

Abigail stared numbly at the paper, her stomach tight. “William,” she breathed out.

“He’s hired men to hunt me.”

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Kerrick Hay took a swig of the honey ale he’d just purchased at the Turriff Tavern. The middle-aged barmaid gave him a coquettish smile, and he dropped a shilling on the table. “I will return when my wagon arrives.”

“If ye get lonely up at Delgatie, just let a lass know,” the woman said, her smile inviting.

“Appreciated,” he said, his gaze already on the door.

“Ye best be careful crossing the moors,” she said. “A man went missing three nights ago.”

He frowned. “At Delgatie?”

“On the moor somewhere between here and there. The coachman said he saw him headed that way, and he never returned for his horse.” She leaned over the bar. “Since I was a wee lass, folks have talked of a lady in red haunting Delgatie Castle. Her name is Rohaise.”

He placed his leather hat back on his head. “’Tis good I don’t believe in spirits, except for the whisky variety.” He picked up the sack of apples he’d purchased and strode from the tavern to retrieve Leum, his large, black horse who waited patiently near the post. Leum’s head tossed as he eyed the sack.

Kerrick pulled out two of the apples, presenting one to his horse. Leum lipped it from his hand, crunching it as Kerrick took a bite of his own and spotted a few golden-colored trees in the distance next to his castle. He imagined a field of barley to the



west and a herd of sheep spread out around his property.

One year to make a profit, or ye lose everything. His father's bitter terms battered against Kerrick's determination.

And don't sully the Hay name any more than ye have , his older brother had added.

Dammit . He'd been a hero in Cromwell's army, but at home he was just a lowly traitor.

Kerrick guided Leum over the spongy moor, made more treacherous after the rains. Careful progress took nearly an hour, bringing him before the three-story fortress. At least all four walls seemed to be standing. The wind blew the limbs of two large oak trees, their yellow leaves flitting down like colored rain as he led Leum around the eastern side where a stone wall enclosed what he remembered was a back garden. There was little hope it had survived decades of neglect. He stopped Leum near the barn.

"Serves you right. Working for William."

He pivoted at the sound of the voice. A lass?

Rocks clanked together as if she were dropping them. Kerrick walked silently to the closed gate.

"I suppose I must say some words," the voice floated over the wall. "Dearest God. As a good Christian woman, I must ask for you to forgive this man who no doubt meant to do me harm, and to forgive whoever hit him, because she saved me."

Saved her? Kerrick pressed the gate where the lock had been smashed. The lass stood alone amongst the weeds. She had the most beautiful fall of golden red hair. Curls

cascaded down the back of her green gown.

She stared down at a pile of rocks. “So blessings on your soul, you horrid bastard.” She dropped another rock onto the heap. The wind shifted, and the familiar, tangy smell of death rolled into Kerrick.

“What the hell?” He pushed through the gate. “Who are ye?” The woman gasped, twirling toward him. “And what are ye doing in my castle?” He looked down at the rock pile where two boots stuck out from the end. “With a dead man?”

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Before Abigail could form any type of response, a pail flew across the yard as if the wind had picked it up, hurling it toward the mountainous man standing at the broken gate. His arm, which held a sinister sword, came across, knocking the pail away.

“I didn’t kill him,” Abigail yelled, “but if you come closer, you might join him.”

The stubborn man took another step but stopped as smaller rocks from the pile shot toward him. “Stad!” he roared. He dove, rolling over the ground on his back, to leap up, grabbing a discarded wooden wheelbarrow to hold before his face. “I am Kerrick Hay,” he yelled. “Owner of this property and castle. Cease your throwing, woman!”

“I’m not the one throwing things,” she yelled. Abigail ran through the back door, slamming it shut. Her hand scrambled to turn the heavy key in the lock.

Bam!

Abigail jumped back as the man slammed against the door.

Hide . The woman’s voice called loud and clear like the few times she’d spoken to her before. Abigail ran through the kitchen into the great hall. Hiding in a corner, she tried to slow her breath.

Crash!

“Holy God,” she whispered. He was inside.

Bam! Bam! Bam! A series of things hit the walls in the kitchen.

“Stad, ye witch. This is my home, my home as a Hay. Cease your torment!”

Clang! That sounded like the iron poker.

“Who are ye? Rohaise the Red? Is that who ye bloody are?” he called out.

The specter had a name?

“’Tis my castle ye haunt, banshee,” he yelled.

The sounds of attack ceased. If he were a Hay and owner of the castle, it wasn’t likely that he would just leave. He also probably hadn’t been sent by William. Abigail let out a long breath. But she wasn’t in the clear, not if he were bent on rape or murder. She had little defense apart from her fingernails, which were chipped and pointy from all the scrubbing she’d done over the last few days.

Heart pounding, Abigail listened to the man’s boots coming closer. Hands clenched, she held her chin steady. Confidence is your best defense . Her father’s words helped her stand strong.

The man’s gaze snapped around the hall, halting when he saw her. “Fuck,” he said, and raised his arms to block his face. After a moment, he lowered them, eyeing her suspiciously. “Are ye flesh and blood, lass?”

“Yes, but she will come back if you try to hurt me.”

He muttered something. “Who are ye? And why are ye in my castle?”

“I am Grace Winfield. I... have nowhere else to live. Your castle was vacant and a mess, so I have been scrubbing it. I fixed the door you just ripped apart.”

“What the bloody hell is that... thing?”

“I don’t know anything about the spirit except that this was her gown. She protected me from that man after I arrived.”

“The spirit killed the man?” he asked, watching her closely.

She nodded. “With an iron skillet to the head after he kicked in the kitchen door, which will need to be repaired a second time.”

The man rubbed a hand against his own head. “I have no doubt she could kill,” he murmured, annoyance darkening his words. “Even though I bloody hell don’t believe in the nonsense of spirits,” he said loudly and looked around the room as if Rohaise would suddenly appear. He strode to the mantel to tug free the ornamental shield from the wall.

“You are... Kerrick Hay, owner of this property?” she asked.

“Aye.” He set the metal shield against his leg but within easy reach. With the bright light shining in from the narrow windowpanes, she could see that his eyes were a deep blue, almost gray. He was broad through his shoulders and narrow at the waist and hips, and he was obviously strong from the show of muscles pressed against his sleeves when he raised his hands to cup his head.

“Did she hit your head?”

“Aye, but the ache has more to do with the fact that my castle has come with an angry spirit, a lass without a home, and a dead man half-buried in the garden.”

He dropped his hands and stared at her. “Ye’ve been here for three days?”

She nodded.

He glanced around the great hall. “And ye’ve cleaned?”

“Yes, and two rooms above,” she said. “I can be your maid.”

“And your name is Grace Winfield?”

She forced a smile and nodded quickly. “From Edinburgh.”

“And why did ye travel here?”

“I... I was taking the coach to Inverness when a man showed too much interest. I decided to end my journey, and he followed me. Rohaise attacked him when he broke into your home.”

He frowned, rubbing his head. “Ye don’t know how to get a spirit out of a castle, do ye?”

“No.”

Kerrick crossed his arms and exhaled, his legs spread in a battle stance. “I could use help setting this place working, and if the banshee saved ye maybe ye can reason with her.” He shook his head. “Damn ghost.” He looked toward the kitchen. “First though, I need to get that body off my land.”

“I didn’t dare go beyond the wall,” she said. “I tried to dig, but the ground was so hard and full of rocks.”

“So ye built a cairn over him,” he said, as if her plan had been ridiculous.

Abigail narrowed her eyes. “Show me how to dispose of his body properly, so when Rohaise takes her fury out on you, I’ll know what to do when you start to stink up the castle.”

Kerrick murmured something else in Gaelic, picked up the shield, and strode back to the kitchen.

Abigail let out a long breath. She wasn’t going to be raped and murdered today, or even dragged back to William. She placed her hands on her cheeks. “Thank you, Lord.”

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“Good bloody Lord,” Kerrick swore as he backed up to view the corpse propped against the boulder and rubbed his nose. The man had turned sallow, his skin loose, and the exposed brain matter dry and dark with old blood. And he stank. Kerrick had carried the decaying body half a mile from Delgatie and set him to look like he’d sat to rest against a tall boulder.

“And the rock,” Grace, said, pointing to the one he’d bloodied with a bit of the man’s wound. She stood upwind, an arm over her nose.

Kerrick pushed the rock by the man so it looked to have rolled off the top of the boulder and hit him on the head, killing him with the blow.

“Wouldn’t he have fallen over?” Grace asked.

Kerrick raised his foot and shoved the man’s shoulder, making him fall over. “Better?” he asked.

Grace dropped her arm and smiled. “Yes.”

“Ye have a devious mind, lass.”

“Not normally,” she answered, following him as he began to traipse back toward Delgatie Castle.

He heard her boots tapping across the rocks and onto the frozen peat. It was best he didn’t look at her and her lush beauty. She was a distraction, one he certainly did not need. “The lasses I know would have gone into town to find someone to help them if they’d witnessed a murder,” he said.

“A murder by a ghost?” she asked. “Who would have believed me? I would have been thrown into the jail or be already on my way to be hanged.”

She was right. If he hadn’t been assaulted by the red-haired spirit, he’d have assumed she’d done the deed. “Ye were defending yourself.”

“In a home I had broken into,” she pointed out.

He glanced back at her. “Ye aren’t the spirit’s relation are ye? Ye both have red hair.” Grace’s hair was gold and coppery red, full of curl as it moved about her shoulders down her back. In truth, nothing like the spirit’s.

“No,” she said, frowning.

“Where is your family?” he asked. “Why aren’t ye home protected by a fiery haired father or a fiery tempered brother?” He stepped up and over a flat boulder that sat like an island amongst the fading heather scattered in clumps across the damp, autumn moor. “Ye shouldn’t be traveling alone.”

“My parents are both dead, and I have no siblings.”



“And your da left ye destitute?” Anger welled up inside Kerrick, his eyes still turned outward. Had the man made no provisions for his only child, left alone in a depraved world?

“I was provided for,” she said quickly. “But there are unscrupulous villains everywhere, one of which has taken what was left to me.”

He stopped, and she ran into his back, making him turn. “Pardon,” she mumbled. It was a quick contact, her softness that he’d seen in her form proving all too real.

The muted sun shone on her face, the pale blue of her cape making the blue in her eyes even more noticeable. “Someone stole your inheritance?” Kerrick asked.

She nodded. “I have only what I brought with me and a ticket to take me all the way to Inverness if I wish.”

Kerrick rubbed his mouth, his gut tight. He had a sister who was fortunate to live in Megginch Castle in Perth with his father and their oldest brother. The idea of someone making Dorcas run from her home, with barely anything, cast fury through Kerrick like a rock hitting the center of a pond, rippling out until his hands fisted. “I can help ye, Grace.”

You are a fool with your causes, boy, when you should be looking to Hay interests . Kerrick exhaled long, pushing his father’s condemnation away. “I can help ye get what is your due.” Grace shook her head, and a small part of him relaxed in relief at not having to prove his father right again.

“I need to put it all behind me.” She looked outward but rapidly returned to his gaze. “But I do wish to stay. I can cook and clean.”

He began to walk again, Grace beside him. “The wage is low,” he said, “but ye would

have a roof over your head, food that I can provide, and..." He glanced her way, meeting her blue eyes, "no harm will come to ye in my care, from me or any man. I cannot predict what that banshee can do yet."

"She definitely likes me better than you," Grace said, some of the heaviness in her voice lifted. A small smile turned up the corners of her lush mouth. "Thank you."

He nodded and looked away. They walked in silence, the two of them side by side as they traipsed back to his stony ruin. The first day at Delgatie was coming to an end and all he had done was hire a maid and evict a dead man. There was so much to do to get the fields ready for a spring planting, and yet he couldn't stop thinking about the woman walking next to him.

Who is the bastard who took her inheritance? If it had been the man the ghost knocked dead with a skillet, Grace would have said so.

"Will you get chickens soon?" she asked.

It took him a moment to focus on her question. "Aye."

They continued to walk. She smells of flowers . The subtle fragrance had cleared away the last scent of death from his nose when she'd fallen against him.

"And perhaps a cow?" she said.

"Aye."

She was probably a virgin. And she will stay one . Damn his brother for betting he wouldn't go a fortnight without finding a willing woman in his bed. The lasses didn't seem to care that Kerrick was the second son of the wealthy George Hay. Dorcas said it was because he was brawny and handsome. Brawny, handsome, and poor except

for this falling-down castle, and even that was forfeit if he couldn't make a profit from it. The odds of success were not high, but he'd beaten the odds more than once, and damn it, he would again.

## Page 3

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A bigail watched Kerrick remove his horse's bit and harness. Lord help her, the man was handsome. With a straight nose and a nicely formed mouth over a cropped beard, he would catch any woman's attention. His wavy brown hair fell almost to his strong jawline. He was broad and as tall as William, maybe taller. He wore a leather doublet over a white linen tunic and tall leather boots that reached just below the edge of his great kilt. Kerrick Hay's strength was quite obvious.

She smiled, their gazes connecting. Kerrick frowned as he studied her and looked away. Maybe he was hungry. "I can put together something for us to eat with your supplies," she said.

"That would be much appreciated," Kerrick said. "The bag with some food is on the table in the kitchen. I'll take care of Leum and wash out here."

She walked through the gate into the back courtyard. Certainly, she could be of use here. I will not be a show piece for you to bring out to entertain your friends and then lock me back away. Her fist clenched against her chest as she remembered the last words she'd shouted at William.

You will come to heel, Abigail, once I have you in my bed. William's reply made her shiver as she walked through the splintered kitchen door. With a deep inhale, she pushed the nightmare aside. Yanking the cords open on Kerrick's satchel, she pulled out a wrapped wedge of cheese, along with apples and milled flour.

A slight breeze tickled her cheek, and Abigail jumped, her hand going to her chest. The woman with red hair stood opposite her at the table. "Rohaise," Abigail whispered. The spirit looked hazy and stared down at the food. "You can have some,"

Abigail said, holding out a plump apple.

Rohaise met her gaze. Sorrow filled her eyes, along with hunger. Could she not eat or taste? “I am sorry,” Abigail whispered, and the woman vanished.

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“Surprisingly good,” Kerrick said. He took another bite of the apple and cheese tart Grace had fashioned for their dinner.

“I melted the cheese to use with the flour to form the crust. The apples were sweet, and I found chestnuts in the side yard to crumble on top.” She smiled, pride filling her lovely eyes. Her skin was smooth and her nose and chin perfectly matched. And her lips begged to be kissed.

Damn fool . He dropped his gaze back to his plate. “I’ll get supplies from town in a few days and ask about chickens and a milk cow.”

“Eggs will help,” she said. “And this one will like pouncing after the chickens.” She set her new kitten on the floor.

Kerrick had found the sweet ball of fluff with its mother and siblings in the barn. It had been the runt, and the other kittens didn’t like to share the mother cat’s teats. Luckily it had survived long enough to be able to eat mashed apples and bits of dried meat.

The kitten rolled, leaped up, and pounced on a dry leaf that had come in on his boot. Grace laughed. The sound matched the flowery smell that emanated from her. Grace smelled like summer, sunshine, and joy. Bloody hell.

Tap, tap, tap, creak , creak... creak . Kerrick lifted his gaze overhead. “Footsteps?”

Grace lifted her gaze also, exposing the slender column of her throat. "I spent the first day chasing them around, but Rohaise will not be seen unless she wishes it."

"A damn unwanted guest," he said.

"At least she doesn't require food and warmth."

"That is looking at the positive," he grumbled and set his cup back on the table. "'Tis been a long day. I'm heading up to bed."

"Which bed?" she asked.

"The largest one."

She tipped her head. "I cleaned the master bedchamber first, but Rohaise seems partial to it, so I cleaned the one next door for me to use."

"I will take the master since I am the master of Delgatie," he said.

"You might end up with a bed partner."

He looked at the ceiling. "I will send her on her way."

"Shall I lock the skillet in the brick oven tonight, just in case?"

His chair scraped as he pushed back, making the kitten leap onto Grace's lap. "I'll lock my bedchamber door. If she can float inside, the bloody skillet cannot make it through the wood."

Kerrick never thought to utter such ludicrous words. He shook his head. When waging to win his place in the family after returning from Cromwell's war, he

thought the only ghosts plaguing him would be from his time on the battlefield.

His gaze rested on Grace as she held the kitten against her cheek. Such a soft cheek. “Good eve,” he said and traipsed away before his gaze could linger.

Kerrick carried his satchel upstairs and quickly started a fire in the master bedchamber hearth. He went next door to build one for Grace. She had done an excellent job cleaning both chambers. His gaze strayed to the medium-sized bed that she had been sleeping in. It was probably filled with her sweet flowery scent.

“Will you sleep with me?” The faint voice came from the hallway, and for an instant Kerrick’s heart pumped blood hard through his body as he turned on the toes of his boots, still in his crouch. “I think I will call you Boo for Boudica, the powerful warrior queen of the Celts.”

He straightened, exhaling as he realized Grace was inviting her cat into bed with her, not him. Good . He certainly didn’t need an entanglement with a lass right now.

“Oh,” she said, walking in to find him there.

“I was starting your fire,” he said. “’Tis a cold night.”

The flickers of light cast gold across her, and the curve of a smile relaxed her mouth. “That was most kind.” The kitten jumped from her arms, making her look down, breaking the tether.

He nodded. “Let us hope for a peaceful night.” Striding past her, he made it to his room and shut the door. Nay. He wouldn’t let her flowery scent distract him from his need to get Delgatie running.

Kerrick scanned the corners of his room as he undressed. No red-haired spirit. He

stalked over to the bed, yanking back the covers. “’Tis my room,” he said and climbed in. “’Tis my castle.” He leaned over and blew out the taper he’d brought up with him, leaving the room lit only by the hearth fire.

“Dammit,” he murmured, and got out to pad across the room to turn the iron key in the lock. He’d escaped death by sword and artillery in Cromwell’s army. He would not be killed by a spirit brandishing a flying skillet.

On the other side of the wall Grace was probably washing her face and combing through all that silky hair of hers. Did she sprinkle lavender on her pillow to make her hair smell more enticing? “Fool,” he murmured and climbed back in bed, turning his thoughts to the sheep he needed to house. But as the exhaustion from the day of mucking the ancient stable, fixing the back door he’d splintered, fighting off a vengeful ghost, and hauling a body half a mile away caught up to him, Kerrick fell into a dream. But it wasn’t of sheep. It was of red hair that smelled of flowers.

Grace. She smiled at him, turning in a circle of falling flower petals. They stood in a hazy field outside Delgatie’s walls. He tried to walk to her, but his feet felt stuck. When he looked down, they were caught in a peat bog, trapping him.

“Kerrick,” she said, and he saw that her smile had fled. She pointed behind him, and he twisted his body to see. Suddenly he was inside the wall, and Rohaise stood directly before him, only inches away. He yelled, raising his sword ... and jerked awake.

Flat on his back, his eyes snapped open to darkness and a pale ghostly face, with floating red hair, leaned over him.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:05 am*

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap . The sound came from the wall behind Abigail's headboard. Abigail pushed up onto her knees in the firelit room, staring at it. Little Boo lifted her black and white head, tilting it.

"You heard it too," Abigail whispered.

"Fucking hell!" Kerrick yelled from next door.

Abigail threw her legs over the side of the bed and ran out into the hall. She pounded on his door. "Kerrick! What's wrong?"

The key scraped in the lock, and the door flew open. Kerrick stood there, completely naked. His chest was broad with a sprinkling of hair across it, and the finely sculpted muscles in his shoulders and arms showed blatant power. He turned, and the hearth fire revealed his perfectly toned arse as he traipsed away.

She snapped her gaze to the ceiling. "You are naked," she said.

"She was bloody hell staring at me while I slept." His voice boomed in the quiet night. "Hovering right over me."

"You are upset because she woke you?"

He stopped, turning to stare at her like she was daft. "I am angry because she was bloody staring at me while I slept, and there is nothing I can God damn do about it." His hair stood out from his head as if he'd been raking his fingers through it, but it was the thick muscles of his back and chest, toned legs, and obvious maleness that

made it hard to breathe evenly.

“You could change rooms,” she said, and he stopped pacing to glare at her. Lord, he was big. Everywhere.

She flapped a hand in his direction. “Can you put something on?”

“A man can stomp around naked in his own bed chamber,” he yelled, looking at the ceiling as if Rohaise still hovered above him.

A breeze tickled Abigail’s hair, and the spirit appeared beside her, dressed in a white smock. Kerrick stared at both of them, his eyes wide, his frown fierce. “Like bloody twins.”

“Maybe she wouldn’t be staring at you if you put some clothes on,” Abigail snapped, her heart pounding with the nearness of the ghost and the mix of feelings coursing through her.

Rohaise glided across the room. She rapped her knuckles on the wall separating their rooms. Tap. Tap. Tap . Then she disappeared into it. “Lovely,” Abigail said. “Now she’s in my room.”

“Worse than a family of rats,” Kerrick said, and yanked the quilt off the bed to wrap around his hips.

Even with a flowery quilt, probably stitched by some sweet grandmother, pressed up against his parts, he was magnificently masculine.

“Shall we sleep downstairs?” she asked.

“With perfectly good beds up here?” he yelled.

Hiss. Meow .

Abigail gasped. “Boo.” The kitten ran into the room from the hallway as if chased from hers. Abigail scooped her up. “Boo doesn’t like Rohaise either.”

Kerrick murmured curses under his breath. He grabbed his pillow, his sheathed sword, and another blanket from his bed, holding them before him so that Abigail could only see his eyes and forehead above them. “Get your pillow and blankets. If the other rooms aren’t clean, we can hope they will at least be quiet.”

Abigail ran back to her room. It looked empty, but Boo prickled her nails against her arm to get down. She let her jump and grabbed her own blankets. Kerrick stood in her doorway, his gaze searching the shadows.

He gave her a quick nod, balancing everything in his arms. “This way.” She and Boo followed him in the inky darkness. Kerrick pushed through a door into one of the smaller rooms. The moon had risen on that side of the tower house, shining through the windows, casting a silverish glow. The bed was made for two people but was still narrower than either of the ones they’d left behind.

Kerrick threw his pillow and blanket over a wooden chair and yanked the dusty covers off the bed. “Ye can have the left side, away from the door, although the banshee could just float through the damn wall, I suppose.”

Abigail stood there, watching as he took up his blanket to wrap around himself and sat on his side of the bed.

“Sleep next to you?” she asked. “While you are naked?”

He grabbed the back of his head. “Lass, I have no evil intentions toward ye, and I’d rather have ye close so I can be sure ye are safe.”

“You are the one she wants to hit with a skillet,” she said.

“Return to your own room, then.” He leaned back on his elbows. Boo jumped into the center of the bed.

“I think it best I stay to keep you safe.” Abigail sat on her side of the bed.

He snorted but didn’t argue her point. She pulled her legs up and settled the blankets around her. Boo curled up in the narrow space between their pillows, serving as chaperone. Abigail breathed in the dry smell of dust and pulled her hand out to rub her itchy nose. “Perhaps we should say a prayer,” she whispered.

“Go right ahead,” Kerrick said. He lay on his back as if ready to spring up in defense.

“Dearest God,” Abigail began. “Please keep Rohaise away from us tonight and help her move on to your realm. And please keep Kerrick from being bludgeoned by a skillet.”

Kerrick murmured a curse.

“And help us to get a good night’s rest. Amen,” she finished.

“Nothing about preventing me from taking liberties?” Kerrick asked.

“And please God, do not let Kerrick take liberties with Rohaise or else she will surely dent his head with a skillet.”

Kerrick’s chuckle broke the tension. “Amen,” he said, and Abigail laughed quietly. Even though she wanted to turn inward to face him, Abigail made herself turn toward the outside of the bed. After several minutes, Kerrick did the same. She released a long breath and closed her eyes. Boo purred softly between them, and Abigail slowly

succumbed to sleep.

\*

“Ye are a laborer then,” Kerrick’s father pronounced. “No longer a warrior, fooled by Cromwell.”

“I will not fight for Charles Stuart’s absolute rule over us, no matter that he gave ye back your lands. I will build Delgatie into a working estate.”

“Ye have one year,” his father intoned. “Else ye lose it all. All ye will have are your books and your sword and any stray sheep that happens to survive your blundering shepherding.”

George Hay III strode out of his study at Megginch Castle in Perth, his boots clipping with disappointment and little faith for the abilities of his second son.

Kerrick turned and reared backward, away from the lady with floating red hair.

His eyes opened, and he was staring at the mold-stained ceiling. He glanced to the side and jerked upright. “Bloody damn!” he yelled at the woman staring at him.

She held her hands up. “’Tis just me,” Grace said. “Flesh and bones.”

He huffed, leaning on his elbow. “Your hair.”

“I know, I look like a specter,” she said, her face grim in the light filtering in from the dirty window beyond her.

“Nay, just the red caught at me. Your eyes are full of life and blue. Hers are blank and brown.”

She tipped her head slightly. "Thank you."

Grace was also lushly curved and sweet smelling and he guessed, soft and perfect beneath her clothes. He covered his exposed leg with the quilt. Had she seen the nasty scar along his thigh?

"Does it pain you?" she asked.

"Not anymore," he murmured.

"So you were a warrior then? A royalist?"

"My father is, and my brother. Much to my father's disappointment, I am not." Kerrick let his gaze wander across the spill of her red hair over the pillows. Somehow it made talking about his sins easier.

"That must be awkward," she said.

He snorted softly. "Cromwell had good ideas about a republic until power began to taint them. A sin of all mankind, I suppose. I fought against those who wished to be ruled by one man, a king to decide the fate of England and our own country." He shook his head. "By the time my leg healed after my last battle, Cromwell had died, and the populace, like a bunch of ignorant sheep, begged Charles Stuart to return from exile."

"Were your family's lands returned?" she asked, sitting against the headboard. Her hair fell around her shoulders across the white of her smock and robe.

"Aye," he said, and looked away.

"And you would not fight for him."

Kerrick stretched his arms overhead. “Even if I wanted to, I’m too well known as loyal to the roundheads to be anything but a foot soldier in Charles’ army.”

“So you came to Delgatie to start an estate as a private man,” she said.

“My father would call me a laborer, with a sneer in his voice.”

Her hand slid out of the blankets to rest on his arm. The pressure of her touch made his gut tighten. He did not need pity.

He slid off his side of the bed, careful to keep the quilt around his lower half. He cleared his voice. “I am to get Delgatie up and running within the year, making it a profitable estate.”

Her brows rose. “A single year? The property has been left to the wild for decades, maybe centuries. You are just one person.”

“’Tis my father’s terms. Delgatie is profitable by this time next year, or I lose it and any place within the Hay family.”

Her lips parted, and her hand stilled on the cat. “That is unreasonable,” she said, a twist of outrage in her words as her brows pinched.

“The other option he gave me was to join the clergy, which I would not.” He looked around the dusty room. “And I had a fondness for Delgatie, having visited it when I was a boy. However, I never stayed the night and didn’t believe the tales of Rohaise.”

Grace pushed out of bed, looking like a rumpled angel. “I will help you. And next year this place will be so successful that your father will be amazed.” She looked ready to run out onto the peat field and start tilling.

Meow. Boo stood at the closed door.

“I think your kitten is about to piss in the dust,” he said.

“Oh no,” Grace said, dropping her blanket to scoop up the kitten. Kerrick heard her feet slapping against the wooden stairs on her way down.

He exhaled long, rubbing his face with one hand, and looked around the room. Despite the dream, he’d slept well in this dusty nest. It was now day two, which had to be better than day one.

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Abigail held Boo to her chest while turning the iron key in the front door lock. This was why her mother hadn’t wanted her to have a cat indoors. They use the privy wherever they want .

Abigail yanked the door open. “God’s bones!” she cursed as she stared into the flushed face of a woman on the doorstep, her hand poised to knock.

“Pardon me,” the woman said and lowered her fist. She stepped back, squinting her eyes as she gazed up at the second-floor window and then back at Abigail. “Ye were just in that window. I saw ye.”

The familiar woman had brown hair swept up into a tidy bun. Her cheeks were pink from the brisk morning air, and she held a basket with a cloth over it. “How did ye get downstairs so fast?”

Abigail set Boo down, and the kitten tore off toward the barn. “I... I saw you coming,” she said, hoping the woman wouldn’t counter with the fact Abigail had been completely surprised by her presence on her doorstep. “Can I be of assistance?”



“Aye.” She stepped forward in a way that made it obvious she was coming inside. “I am looking for the master of the house,” she said. “I am Fiona Campbell. I’ve come to tell Kerrick Hay that his wagon from Perth has arrived.” Fiona inspected the great hall with wide eyes.

Abigail’s heart thumped. Fiona was the barmaid from the tavern. “I will let him know. Thank you,” she said going to the door as if to usher her out.

Fiona frowned. “I wish to say good day to him. I brought him some apple scones.” She eyed Abigail up and down, obviously noting that she wore bedclothes.

Footsteps sounded on the steps, rapid and light. Fiona turned, thrusting her large bosom out before her, but Kerrick didn’t emerge. She peered at the stairs. “I heard someone coming down.” The floor squeaked as if someone were walking above. “Are there others living here?” Her face lit up, and she lowered her voice. “Maybe the lady in red?” She walked along the table, not waiting for a reply.

“When I was a young lass,” Fiona said, “I remember everyone talking about the lady in red here in the old castle. Poor woman who died of a broken heart when her man did not come to wed her? I think he was a Hay also.”

Suddenly Rohaise appeared behind Fiona.

“Uh...” Abigail started, but Fiona kept talking.

“Because people would pay a fine shilling to see her.”

Could Kerrick earn coin from the visits, proving to his father that he could make the place profitable? “Well, we—”

“People would come as far away as Aberdeen or even Edinburgh,” Fiona continued.

“We get coaches in every day. I am sure people would come up and pay to see a ghostly lady on their journey to Inverness.”

Aberdeen? William was in Aberdeen, sending people to hunt for her, a girl with red hair. Fiona would send them right up to Kerrick’s castle. Abigail shook her head. “I am afraid not. The castle is exceedingly quiet and boring.”

Fiona’s mouth pinched in dismay. “Too bad, that.”

Rohaise disappeared, but a slight wind made the tiny hairs at Abigail’s temple tickle against her cheek. Tap. Tap. Tap . The sound came from the wall behind her that extended up into the room Rohaise had claimed. Tap. Tap. Tap . It grew louder until Abigail had to raise her voice to be heard. “We have rats. ’Tis why I had a cat inside.”

Fiona snorted. “That wee kit will get itself eaten by rats big enough to make all that racket.”

Crash . Both of them gasped, turning toward the kitchen in unison. “Lord,” Fiona said and hurried forward as if Delgatie were her own home. “The rats be taking over.”

Abigail followed, dodging past her to reach the kitchen first. The last thing she needed was a skillet floating in the air, but the kitchen was empty.

“It sounded like glass,” Fiona said. “Watch your bare feet.” She set her basket on the table.

Had Rohaise smashed a drinking glass in anger?

“God...” Fiona cursed and pointed at the floor near the hearth. Abigail rushed up beside her, her toes curling off the cold stone floor. But there were no glass slivers to

avoid. There was, however, a fully whole drinking glass sitting upright on the stone floor half filled with wine. As if someone had set it down gently.

The barmaid looked to Abigail, her eyes wide.

Abigail swallowed, forcing a smile. “Our rats are quite odd.”

“But the glass—”

“I set it there earlier.”

“I heard something shatter,” Kerrick said, striding into the kitchen as he tied his tunic.

Fiona’s gaze slid between the two of them in obvious undress. “Ye did not say ye had a woman up here when ye were in town.” Her tone was accusing.

“I... I did not know she had arrived,” he answered.

Fiona frowned at Abigail, squinting her eyes. “Ye came on the coach last week, didn’t ye? Supposed to go on to Inverness, but ye never showed up for it. A man was asking about a lass with red hair and went looking for ye, but he’s disappeared too.”

“I was visiting my family in Edinburgh, and I bought the full ticket to Inverness by mistake,” Abigail said, pushing her lips into a smile. “I meant to get off here to meet...” She swallowed and exhaled. “Meet my husband.”

Both Kerrick and Fiona stared at her with frowns, but Abigail continued. “I came first to air the castle and take inventory. Lord Hay was to meet me.”

Fiona bobbed her head, her lips pinched. She looked at Kerrick. “I brought ye these scones,” she said, setting them down on the table. “Ye can bring the basket back

when ye come get your wagon.”

“It has arrived?” Kerrick asked, excitement lighting his words.

“’Tis why I’m here, I suppose,” Fiona grumbled and turned to trudge back through the house, Abigail following.

“Thank you for coming,” Abigail called as she shut the door behind her. She turned to lean against it and let a big puff of air out of her cheeks.

Kerrick walked in, eating a scone. “As a lord’s wife, ye really should be dressed when entertaining visitors.”

Abigail crossed her arms over her chest. “It was the fastest way to get her out of the house before Rohaise tossed something else across the room or tapped a hole through the wall.” Abigail clenched her teeth. “When I leave, you can say I traveled to see a sister and died.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “’Tis a sad story.”

“I am sure Fiona will comfort you,” she said, irritation in her tone.

A hint of a grin returned to his handsome face. “Ho now, do I detect jealousy?”

“Kerrick Hay,” she said, her voice rising, “I can wield a skillet as well as Rohaise.”

He laughed and turned to walk back through the great hall toward the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“To saddle Leum.”

He swung back around, making her stop short right before him. “And ye should put on some proper clothing, Lady Hay.”

“Are we going somewhere?”

“To town,” he said, his smile broadening.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:05 am*

Kerrick flipped back the canvas from the wagon. “Hurrah.” Three crates sat in the middle of the bed, along with a trunk of his clothes and linens, bags of grain and seed, a box of tea, and ground-breaking tools. He smiled at Grace, who stood beside him. “All a man needs to repair an estate and get it producing.”

“Are you planning to plow up the peat by hand?” she asked.

“Nay. I have a plow head coming, and I will rent a pair of oxen,” he said, leaping onto the bed with the pry bar to open the first crate of books. “And these are all a man needs to keep from going insane.”

“Insanity? Is that a concern of yours?” she asked. “Because a wife ought to know such things.”

He yanked out a copy of Voltaire’s *Optimism* that had become his companion in the darkest of days. “Do ye like to read?”

She threw a knee up onto the wagon bed, and he helped her climb. “Yes actually,” she said, raising her voice above the sound of rain that had just started tapping on the slate roof. “I spent most of my life reading in my father’s study.”

Kerrick’s gaze rested on the deep gold cast to her red hair as she bent over his collection, the light from his lamp adding to the soft glow. “And ye could bring none with ye.”

She didn’t look up, but her fingers paused on one of the spines as she shook her head. “’Twas like leaving behind the best of friends.”

“Ye are welcome to read mine. Plays by Shakespeare and Marlow. Poems by Milton and Voltaire. The novel Don Quixote. Paradise Lost. And books on farming and estate running.”

“You collect them?”

“Aye,” he said, smiling when she looked up from her crouched position. Lord help him, she was bonny.

“That seems a rather strange hobby for a soldier.”

He grasped his copy of Optimism . “A learned person is a powerful person. I credit my strategic abilities to books.” He helped her stand, his hand under her arm. She was warm against the coolness of his fingers. “The rest of the wagon is full of things that will make our lives easier up at the castle.”

“Is there a priest hidden in there who can chase out a spirit?”

He snorted. “Perhaps we can do it ourselves. My mother used to walk around the outside of our estate in Perth with burning wood sage to capture unhealthy and bad air in the smoke, which would then rise into the heavens.” As if to accent the reference to God’s abode, thunder rumbled outside.

“I add wood sage to our list of necessities,” she said.

He smiled. This was easy, this banter between them. He’d never just talked with a woman. Either they were admonishing him, his sister in particular, or trying to entice him into a tryst.

Kerrick jumped to the ground. Turning, he grasped Grace’s waist, lifting her down. She was perfect in his hands and made no move to pull away, but the wagon blocked

her from behind. He cleared his throat and dropped his hands, turning. “Let’s find a meal and decide if we can make it back to Delgatie this eve.”

With Grace on his arm, they pushed out into the weather. Wind, cold and wet, gusted so hard against them that for a moment, Grace seemed to be swept away in it, her hair flying out like flames from a bonfire.

“Good lord,” she yelled. Kerrick caught her hand, and the two of them ran for the tavern door, pushing inside. The rain had soaked him, and Grace’s hair lay in damp locks around her shoulders, but she laughed and shook the water from her hands.

“Good eve, Lord and Lady Hay,” Fiona called from the bar. “Been out in the wet and wind I see.”

“Good eve, Mistress Fiona,” Grace called, picking at her sodden petticoats. “I am afraid it has ruined us.”

“Dry yerself by the hearth, and I’ll bring ye two servings of my cottage pie. It just came out of the bricks.”

“And two ales please,” Kerrick said, laying a shilling on the counter. He followed Grace to a small table near the hearth.

“’Tis a right blustery day,” Fiona said, bringing the ales. “There’s no one in the room above if ye’d care to rent it.” A gust of wind rattled the panes in the windows facing the road.

Grace held out one of her dripping curls. “The books should not get wet.”

Kerrick dropped another shilling on the table. “Aye, we will take the room.”



“’Tis a small bed,” Fiona said, “but I don’t think your lady will mind sharing with ye.” She winked and walked away.

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The bed was made for two people, but those two people were undoubtedly lovers. Abigail stared at it as she listened to Kerrick trudge back down the stairs to secure Leum and the wagon. She had asked for a bath, and Fiona had two stout boys carry up water and a wooden tub hardly bigger than a bucket. She wrestled the water from the fire. Even wrapped, the handle was hot, and she sloshed some water over.

“Saint Bart’s bones,” she whispered her father’s favorite curse and felt the pressure of tears in her eyes. She let them run out, the thickness of them making the room look as if underwater. She hadn’t grieved enough for the man who had cared for her alone after her mother died. Now that John Lindsey was in Heaven, he must see the darkness in William’s heart and know that he should never have struck a bargain for him to wed Abigail once he died.

Abigail stripped the rest of her clothing off, careful to stay away from the window without a curtain, and stepped into the bucket of warm water. It barely reached her knees, but it was clean. She used the jasmine soap she’d bought from Fiona to quickly scrub herself while she stood, sinking in to rinse the dirt away. Everything but her hair was rosy and clean by the time she was done, and she stepped out, grabbing the drying sheet.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and she hurried to wrap the sheet around her just as a knock came. “Grace? Are ye out of the bath?”

“Yes,” she said. “But—”

“I bathed too,” Kerrick said and opened the door. His gaze fell on her, and he

stopped. His hair was wet, his shirt removed and held casually in his hand. "I did not mean to intrude," he said and backed out, closing the door behind him.

Abigail looked down at her hard nipples poking through the thin, wet bathing sheet. "I might as well have been naked," she whispered, frowning as she wiped the sheet over her arms and shoulders.

Smock in place even though it stuck to her damp skin, she climbed into the bed. "You can come in now."

Kerrick opened the door, spotted her under the covers, and walked inside. "Wagon and horse are secure."

"Good." She lay on her back, eyes to the ceiling. The bed dipped as he sat and pulled off one boot and then the second. The covers rose as he slid underneath. She turned toward the wall, grazing him slightly with her backside.

"I put my tunic back on," he said.

"Also good." She was so stiff lying next to him with only the thin linen of their undergarments between them that she doubted she'd sleep.

He shifted. "I can sleep on the floor. I've slept on the hard ground plenty of times on marches."

She exhaled, forcing herself to relax. Kerrick Hay had lain next to her all the previous night without touching her. "You are honorable," she said. "We can share."

Outside, the storm buffeted the tavern. With an obvious gap around the crooked window, the floor would surely be wet by morning. She inhaled and caught the fresh scent of Kerrick behind her, and his warmth filled the space under the blanket.

“I wonder if Rohaise is wandering around Delgatie looking for us,” Kerrick said, his voice softer, as if he worried that he was disturbing her.

Abigail smiled, watching the firelight from the hearth dance upon the wall she faced. “She can tap all night without us being cross.”

She listened to his deep chuckle. “I just hope nothing is smashed when we return,” he said.

“Thank goodness Boo is safe in the barn.”

Lightning flashed, and a crack of thunder shattered the night. Abigail startled, bumping her backside against him. The sensation shot through her, making her heart race.

She rolled over to face him. His eyes were open as he stared up at the ceiling. “You are thinking something very hard,” she whispered. Laying there facing him in the dark as she whispered felt so intimate. Like they were trading secrets. Could she trust him with hers?

His brows pinched. “Do ye always smell of flowers? Like ye have a stash of flowers ye roll in all the time?” he asked, turning his head to meet her gaze.

“What does that...?” Her face scrunched to match his brow. “What?”

“Ye smell like flowers, always. In the rain, walking on the moors with a dead body, in a barn that needs to be mucked out, in a dusty room that hasn’t been touched for a century. Every room ye inhabit smells like a blooming garden.”

She closed her open mouth. He made it sound bad that she smelled good. Abigail poked him in the thick muscle of his upper arm. “Well, do you always have to be

so... hard, like you're chiseled out of granite?"

His other hand came up to rub the spot she'd poked. "'Tis my training. I had to be strong and agile to survive."

"Well, 'tis my soap," she answered with the same inflections. "I have to be smelling like flowers because..." She made a little frustrated growl. "Because I like flowers."

"'Tis damn distracting," he mumbled, his voice surly.

"So are your muscles," she said and turned back toward the wall. Her backside grazed his. Her stomach fluttered, and she squeezed her eyes shut. What a ridiculous argument to have.

The rain continued to beat like a drum, and thunder rumbled. As the rain slowed, so did Abigail's breathing until the comfortable darkness and warmth relaxed her.

The rain ceased, and she stood before Delgatie Castle. Kerrick stood outside the wall, his shirt off, his kilt sitting low on his narrow hips. His skin was damp, making it glisten. He motioned toward a plot of fresh grass with jasmine. She bent to smell the flowers and laid down on the soft green.

"Ye do roll in flowers." Kerrick sat next to her, his gaze intense. Just his nearness caused the ache deep inside her to spread warmth. "Abigail."

"You know my name," she said.

"I know all about ye, lass." Kerrick bent down, his lips pressing against hers. Heat spiraled down through Abigail, pooling in her abdomen and the crux of her legs. She shifted against him, her body rubbing his.

Boom!

Abigail jerked awake, the sound of the thunder ebbing away. She had turned toward the center of the bed. Rain poured outside, and wind rattled the individual windowpanes.

Another strike of lightning flashed. Kerrick's eyes were open, staring at her. Walls of rain, darkness, and wind blocked out the rest of the world. It was as if it had all washed away, leaving them alone, the warmth of their bodies and their combined clean smell mixing under the single blanket.

Lightning flickered wildly. His gaze hadn't left hers. "I like the way ye smell of flowers, lass," he whispered, the words just loud enough to be heard over the press of the wind on the eaves.

A succession of flashing and thunder rattled the room, the drama of it mimicking the rush Abigail felt inside. Through it all, Kerrick's intense gaze never left her. With another crack of thunder, she pressed forward.

Kerrick's arms wrapped around her, pulling her halfway onto his muscular body. His mouth slanted across hers, and she opened against him, her foot sliding up the taut muscles in his leg. Her heart beat frantically, and her fingers found the edge of his tunic, lifting it up so her palms could slide against his warm skin. He had muscles all the way up his torso and chest where a light sprinkling of hair reminded her just how different their bodies were.

With a low growl that sent a shiver of desire through Abigail, Kerrick tore his tunic off over his head. He was completely naked next to her, but the thought only made her want him more as he caught her up in another kiss. Wave after wave of rain hit the window like wave after wave of heat battered any maidenly resistance she might have felt.

Abigail pressed her body against his hard frame, feeling the rise of his jack between them.

“Grace,” he said, pulling back, sliding her to the side. “We should not.”

“I ache, Kerrick,” she whispered.

His hand glided over her smock that encased her restless, naked body. She stroked up and down his chest.

“Lass,” he said, his voice a whispered rasp. “I would not have ye regretting this.”

She knew what happened in the marriage bed. Her mother had informed her with a book. A part of her argued that if she was not a virgin, maybe William wouldn’t want her. Maybe if she became Kerrick’s wife, she’d be safe. There was no guarantee that Kerrick would wed her, but at the moment everything felt so right, making none of that matter.

“I’m sure I’ll have regrets in life,” she breathed against his lips. “But this will not be one of them.”

Kerrick growled low, turning her so that he was over top of her, his face displaying torture and want. He bent to kiss her neck. Her smock slid off her shoulders, and he stroked the outside of her bare hip, making sensation swell within Abigail, and the moan of the wind outside swallowed her own.

Lightning flashed, showing his beautifully chiseled muscle. She slipped her smock down, allowing her full breasts to spill out. Lust and desire played across Kerrick’s face, and he pulled her to him again, kissing her. Abigail’s sensitive nipples rubbed against his bare chest. Her fingers roamed the thick muscles of his arms and shoulders, exploring every scar and smoothness of his hot skin.

The sound of horses in the rain made Kerrick glance toward the window. "'Tis the Aberdeen coach," Kerrick said, taking a deep breath. "Delayed by the storm."

She pressed back into him to capture another kiss, thankful that she hadn't continued on her journey or she'd never have met this powerful, honorable man.

"Abigail Lindsey," a man said outside the window. "She would have ridden on this coach."

The deep voice cut like frozen steel through Abigail, and she stiffened, her breath freezing to ice in the center of her chest. Oh God, no. She rolled across Kerrick's body, her feet hitting the floor. By the time she got to the window, the man who'd known her true name was inside the tavern below. But she didn't need to see him. The voice was enough. William Gordon had found her.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:05 am*

Kerrick had slept fitfully the rest of the night. Bloody rogue. He had almost taken Grace right there in the bed where she now sat, her face turned toward the window. He rubbed a hand down the side of his face.

“Grace, I am sorry,” he said. “Tell me how to make things right between us.”

Dawn was just a hint on the horizon, but the rekindled fire cast a glow over her. She met his gaze, her eyes strained. “Would you marry me?”

He paused, staring. “We have only known each—”

She waved her hand. “I jest.” She didn’t smile at all. In fact, she looked ready to explode if anyone came near her.

He shook his head. “Last night, I did not mean to...”

“Let me ravish you?” she asked, her voice lighter.

“Ravish me?” he asked.

Worry sat in her eyes, as it had since last night. “I kissed you first, and I am sorry I put your restraint to the test. It was not my intention to tease.”

Before he could reply, she stood and grabbed her pale blue cape. “The rain has stopped, and I would like to return to Delgatie before everyone is awake.”

Her comments were like a whirlwind throwing his gut this way and that. “We would



need to leave the wagon until the mud dries.”

She sighed. “Your books.” She shook her head. “I am just... I am worried about Boo. I may not have set her outside the castle before we left.”

“I doubt a kitten could do more harm than Rohaise,” he said, but since they were obviously not getting more sleep, they may as well be off. He’d leave word with the stable boy that he’d return in a day or two for the wagon. Right now, his guilt tugged at him, and he’d do just about anything Grace asked of him. How about wedding her? Her jest festered in his mind as he escorted her out the door.

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Abigail rode before Kerrick on Leum, his arms wrapped around her. Dawn was fully up now, and she’d seen several people go in and out of the tavern the few times she’d glanced back over her shoulder. Where was William?

Kerrick stopped Leum before the castle where Rohaise stared out of her second-floor window. “She doesn’t look happy to see us,” Abigail said, momentarily distracted by the other huge problem before her.

“I’m not happy to see her either.” Kerrick guided Leum around to the barn.

Abigail dismounted and picked Boo up out of a rolling battle with her siblings to cuddle against her face. “You are outside,” she said for Kerrick’s benefit. Boo batted at one of her curls.

“Ye stay here until I make sure Rohaise isn’t throwing things about,” Kerrick said.

Abigail nodded, trying to give him a smile she knew must look forced. Kerrick was so strong and kind. Surely, she could trust him with her identity. If she wanted

anything more to grow between them, she must be truthful.

“Kerrick,” she called as he started to walk away.

“Aye?”

I am not who you think . The words were on her tongue but would not come. “Be careful,” she said.

“I will brandish my shield.”

Abigail set Boo down, and the kitten jumped and rolled on her way back to play. Away from the tavern with the moors around them, she could almost feel safe, even knowing William was close. “Let him take the coach west,” she whispered and sat down with the kittens. If she could just hide away here until William forgot about her, she might be safe enough to use her name.

The wind blew against the barn, making the tree above shed more golden leaves that blew in through the open doors. Long minutes passed as she waited, her thoughts turning away from William to Kerrick. She hadn’t heard any yelling or things hitting the back wall. “Maybe I should check,” she said, standing and brushing off her skirts. She walked to the back gate.

“Abigail. Abigail Lindsey.”

She gasped at the sound of her name.

\*

Kerrick waved the singed missive that Rohaise had led him to when he’d entered the castle. “Abigail Lindsey. Five feet, six inches. Slight of build. Long, curling red-gold

hair. One hundred pounds upon receipt.” Must be alive .

Grace, or rather Abigail, stood just inside the back garden gate, eyes wide and mouth open. “Where did you find that?”

“Ye are Abigail Lindsey? Not Grace Winfield.” He didn’t wait for her nod. “Is there anything else ye are hiding?”

Her face pinched, and for a moment he thought she might cry. “William would have found me by my real name.”

Must be alive. “William? Is he the man who stole your inheritance?”

She nodded.

If he were simply after her money, and had already won it, why would he follow her? “Are ye married to him?” The thought of Grace, or rather Abigail, in another man’s arms twisted his gut.

“No,” she said. “Betrothed, even though I never agreed to it.”

He breathed past the tightness in his chest, trying to rid himself of the familiar feel of betrayal. Everyone will fool you, son, and you are stupid enough to believe them. Once again, his father was right.

Her gaze shifted to the note. “Did Rohaise give you that?”

“She showed me where ye tried to burn it.”

“Why would she do that?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Are your parents really dead?"

"Yes," she said, her lips tight. "Everything else I have told you is true."

"If I'd said I would marry ye, would ye have wed me as Grace Winfield or would ye have confessed before the kirk?"

"I would have told you." She swallowed. "Before."

"'Tis good to know ye draw the line at lying before God." He let the missive float to the ground and strode out the gate.

\*

Abigail watched him walk away, a hollow feeling in her middle. Turning, she ran into the kitchen. "Rohaise," she yelled.

A slight wind filtered through the room, and the spirit grew into being. A guilty smile played about her lips.

"Why did you show him that missive?"

He should know. He should choose .

"Choose? What should Kerrick choose?"

Steps behind Abigail made her turn, a scream lodging in her throat.

"Perhaps he should choose to carry you back to your rightful husband." William Gordon stood in the doorway. The cheeks above his clipped beard were red, and a light sheen of sweat was on his brow from hiking the moor.

Abigail's knees almost buckled under the weight of her nightmare come to life. William was there with no one to witness his threatened atrocities against her. He stood tall and smiled wickedly as if giddy about winning a prize.

"I am not wed to you, William." Abigail concentrated on breathing in and out. "I will never be your wife."

He pulled a folded parchment from his vest and shook it open. "On this day of our lord 20 October fifteen sixty-three, William Gordon and Abigail Grace Lindsey were wed by the minister Jonathan Wentley."

"That is not true," she said, feeling her throat constrict.

"Ah, but here is your signature," William said, holding up the contract. "I even have two witnesses who say a woman with red hair signed it before the cleric."

"A forgery."

He folded it away. "I think my bride just got nervous with the thought of the wedding night and ran away. It is my duty to find her and instruct her in her new duties."

What weapons were in the kitchen? There were knives against the window and the iron skillet in the cold box.

"I am not going back with you," she said and dashed toward the knives. She grabbed one, brandishing it before her.

He laughed, coming forward. With a quick smack, he knocked it out of her hand. "I will have to punish you, Abigail, for your insolence toward your husband." He smiled. "Why does the idea of that make me hard?" He rubbed the front of his tight breeches where his erection bulged.

“Because you’re a monster,” she said, glaring. “But even monsters sleep, William. When you do, I will seek my revenge.”

He laughed. “You? Little Abigail, daughter of the book merchant? I am not afraid.” He leaned in. “In fact, I like a bit of pain with pleasure. Shall we find out if you do too?”

She turned to grab another knife, but he pushed her up against the counter, pinning her with his pelvis, his jack pressed against her backside. She reared backward, jamming into his groin. He grunted, cupping himself.

His face had hardened. “Every injury you inflict on me will be visited back on you, Abigail, ten times worse. You bruise my cock, just think what I can do between your legs, my dear.” The promise of torture made nausea roll through her. She barely noticed the wind breezing through the kitchen.

A bag of milled flour next to Abigail tipped, falling across the counter. She jumped to the side as William frowned at it. Suddenly a volley of flour flew from the open sack right at William’s face.

Run!

Rohaise’s word filled Abigail’s ears. She ran past William’s flailing arms and dove toward the larder where she’d locked up the heavy skillet. A cask of wine jumped off a shelf toward William, but he dodged it. It crashed on the floor, creating a flood of red. Baskets and tankards shot at him, the drinking glass shattering on the floor.

“Witchcraft,” he yelled, ducking, his gaze on Abigail. “You will burn for this.”

Would he rape her and then accuse her of witchcraft? Without Rohaise by her side, Abigail had few powers to save herself. But she could swing a skillet.

“Leave here and live,” Abigail yelled, her teeth bared.

“Leave you here with that man who is not your husband?” William yelled, wiping a hand down his flour-covered face. It gave his stern features the paleness of a ghost. “When he returns, you will be gone.”

Abigail’s trembling stilled, and she stood taller. “I am tired of running from you, William. You are a heartless monster, ruled only by greed and lust. I will die by my own hand before I allow you to torture me.”

He lunged for her, grabbing her arm that held the skillet. The iron went flying from her grasp, and Abigail fought against his hold. Where was Rohaise? All the objects lay about the ransacked kitchen unmoving. Fury and fear combined to funnel up through Abigail, and a scream came out of her. Long and shrill, it gave her strength she didn’t know she had. She twisted in his grasp, her knee coming up straight into his ballocks, and he grunted, his hold loosening.

Rapid footfalls drew Abigail’s wide eyes. A sob tore from her as Kerrick ran through the open doorway, wild fury on his face. Rohaise hovered near him. Kerrick picked William up by the throat. Muscles bulging and teeth clenched, Kerrick yelled in his face. “Ye fucking bastard.” His fist drew back, and he punched him square in the jaw.

The impact threw William back, and before she could think, Abigail yanked the skillet off the ground, holding it high.

Hit him! The hate in Rohaise’s voice added to her fear, and Abigail brought the iron pan down on William’s head. The massive weight of all she’d endured added to her downward thrust.

Crack! Thud .

The skillet hit his skull, and William fell over. Blood poured from his cracked head to mix with the wine on the floor. His eyes remained open with astonishment.

Abigail choked on a sob, the pan sliding from her weak hands to clatter on the floor. Kerrick pulled her into his arms, her face against his solid chest. He didn't say anything, just held her, letting her weep and shake. For a long moment, Abigail surrendered all her strength, letting Kerrick hold her up.

"Bloody hell," Kerrick murmured, backing them up.

Abigail wiped her cheeks and followed Kerrick's gaze. She gasped. William, blood gushing from his head wound, sat up. He looked at his blood and flour-covered hands, turning them this way and that. His gaze fell on Abigail and then Kerrick, a strange smile curving his lips. "I can still feel his warmth."

It was William, but it was not. "Oh my God," Abigail murmured.

"Rohaise?" Kerrick asked.

William's eyes, which had always been blue, looked darker, browner. He stood up slowly, the rest of his body whole. "It is heavy, but manageable," he said.

"Are ye Rohaise?" Kerrick asked.

"Aye," she said through William's lips, the accent strange coming from his mouth. "It has been a long time since I could feel this much." She walked to the counter where an apple lay half-smashed from being hurled across the room. She crunched into it, a huge smile growing across William's flour-washed face streaked with blood.

The entire macabre scene struck Abigail hard enough that she saw sparks on the edge of her periphery. "How is this possible?"



“’Tis Samhain,” Rohaise said, chewing greedily. Juice dripped off her bottom lip. “The line between the spirit world and your world is at its thinnest. I have never been able to slip into someone until now.”

“Is he in there too?” Kerrick asked, apparently able to think about something other than trying not to swoon.

She shook William’s head. “Nay. Abigail hit him dead.”

A small sob jumped within Abigail, and Kerrick pulled her back into his chest.

“His body is dead, then,” Kerrick said. Already William’s skin was taking on a bluish tint on the parts not covered by flour. “Are ye able to make his blood flow?”

Rohaise held William’s thick fingers up to her neck, pressing and feeling. Her hand dropped to his chest over his heart, and she frowned. “Nay, his body has stopped working.” She glanced down and they all saw the wetness from his urine and shite beginning to drain out of him, saturating his tight breeches.

“Daingead,” Rohaise muttered the curse and started biting the rest of the apple with a ravenous attack, taking every bit of the flesh while Abigail watched in fascinated horror. Rohaise dropped the core and wiped daintily across her mouth with one finger, then stuck it into her mouth to lick it clean.

She frowned at them. “He is growing cold and stiffening. He will smell by tomorrow. I dislike the smell of death.”

William’s eyes suddenly froze with morbid vacancy. His body went limp, falling to the kitchen floor. A whoosh of wind shot through the kitchen and was gone.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:05 am*

Abigail sat in the barn as the day wore on, the iron skillet, washed of blood, next to her. Waiting. Listening. Trying to ignore how hungry she was. Boo kept her company, curling up in her lap as if knowing she needed her closeness. It had been hours since Kerrick left with William draped over his horse.

The sound of hoofbeats made her stiffen, and she stood, ready to hide.

“Back again.”

Abigail released her breath when she heard Kerrick’s voice. When he’d left to haul William’s body out on the moor, she remained outside the castle where Rohaise roamed. The whole day had left Abigail cold and weak. I’ve killed a man.

He was going to kill you. If not today, then soon enough.

Her justifications did little to ease her conscience.

Kerrick rounded the door to lead Leum into the barn, making the kittens scatter into the corners which were growing thick with shadows. The day was waning. Soon Samhain would be over, and Rohaise would not be quite as frightening.

Kerrick saw Abigail and paused. “Are ye well?”

She took a full breath. “My middle name is Grace,” she said. “When I escaped Aberdeen, I started using it and made up the last name Winfield. I swore to myself that I would use it for the rest of my life so William couldn’t find me.” She blinked, trying to decipher his face, but he gave nothing of his thoughts away. “I would have

told you before more happened... between us. I was afraid that even speaking my name into the world would somehow alert him that I was here.” She shook her head. “I know that sounds insane. I—”

“Ye did what ye had to do to protect yourself,” he said. Kerrick led his horse into its stable, and Abigail watched as he removed the tack, his strength making easy work of it. Leum began to munch on hay, and Kerrick came out, sliding the latch shut.

He turned, stopping before her and met her gaze. “I had time to think on the moor.” He shook his head. “I have never been in the type of jeopardy ye were in,” Kerrick said, his voice deep and soft. “I have fought men as a man, as a soldier, or as a brother on equal footing.” His hand came up to rest on her shoulder. “As a woman, ye must feel hunted, easily entrapped, and at the mercy of those stronger than ye.”

She nodded but didn’t speak, feeling the press of emotion in her chest.

“It was foolish to grow angry at ye,” he said, dropping his hand. “My father told me often that I was easily fooled, especially when I joined Cromwell’s army. ’Twas my issue, not yours.”

“I am sorry.” Her remorse filled each word.

He pulled her closer, and she went into his arms willingly. He kissed her forehead. “Do ye want me to call ye Abigail or Grace?”

“Abigail,” she whispered, relief coming out with the word. “Now that William is dead.”

“Ye can claim your inheritance now,” he said, “back in Aberdeen.”

She hadn’t even thought of that, her mind had been so wrapped up with the grim

events and worry over Kerrick not forgiving her.

“I have crates of books there,” she said, taking a long deep breath that filled her with hope, something that had been missing for so long. “If I add it to yours, Delgatie will have a fine library indeed.”

His hand found hers, his fingers weaving through her own in an intimate hold. They walked together out of the barn, Boo following. The sun had started to lower toward the horizon.

“Has Rohaise been about?” he asked as they walked through the broken gate.

“I’ve been hiding out here, so I don’t know. I left the skillet in the barn, just in case.”

“Ye are wise,” he said.

Total destruction lay within the four walls of the kitchen. Flour, wine, and blood mixed on the stone floor. Tankards scattered and dented. Dishes and glassware shattered. Without a word, he guided her into the great hall where he lit several sconces along the walls.

“What do we do now?” she asked, her voice small.

“I think we stay out of her way while it is still Samhain. The sun should set within the hour, but we can return to town to sleep.”

She nodded, looking down at the blood-splattered green gown. “I need to change into my other stained gown,” she said. Thank goodness she’d scrubbed most of it clean. “It’s in my room. I’ll be right back.”

“Grab whatever else ye need for the night,” he called as she hurried up the stairs.

In the front room she'd used before, she slipped out of Rohaise's green gown and threw a clean white smock on over her head. Abigail turned and gasped, her heart pounding.

Rohaise hovered by the wall behind the bed's headboard. Tap. Tap. Tap . Her knuckles hit the wall.

"You scared me," Abigail said, feeling all the hairs on the back of her neck rise.

'Tis still Samhain . Rohaise floated closer to her. I need you to free me from the wall .

"Free you?"

I am imprisoned there. My father tired of my weeping for my love. He put me in the wall .

Abigail pressed a hand to her chest. "That is horrible."

You can help me. Go to the wall, Abigail. Help me like I helped you .

"I will get Kerrick. He will—"

Help me now! A breeze blew around Abigail as Rohaise whipped behind her, a rock held in her ghostly hand. Crack . A blinding pain shot through Abigail's head, and blackness engulfed her before she hit the floor.

\*

Kerrick stared at the mess in the kitchen. If anyone came up from town and saw it, there would be an inquiry. They needed to clean some before going to the inn.

Grabbing a crate, he began to toss shards of pottery and glass into it.

He heard steps in the great hall. "I'm in here," he called to Abigail through the open door.

"And I am in here for ye, Kerrick Hay." The oddly accented voice shot warrior's energy through his blood, like when he'd been about to fight on the battlefield. He turned sharply. Abigail stood there, her shoulders bare, wrapped in a sheet. Her smile was full of mischief.

"Abigail?" he said, but despite the outward appearance, he knew she was not the sweet, clever woman who had just gone above to change her dress.

"I have wanted this for a very long time," she said taking more steps toward him.

Hiss! Abigail's kitten leaped onto the counter, her tiny ears back, her hair standing on end to make her look twice her size as she arched her back.

Abigail ignored Boo and continued her advance toward Kerrick. He'd been stalked by brazen lasses when he was part of Cromwell's army, but this was different. There was a hunger in Abigail's face as if he were that apple Rohaise had devoured earlier.

She stopped several feet from him. Her fingers unfolded one by one until the sheet dropped to the floor, leaving her completely naked. His breath lodged in his chest. The waning sun shone through the small windows, revealing her smooth skin over gentle, soft curves. Abigail's smile grew, and she slid her hands over her full breasts, pinching her rosy nipples before traveling lower to stroke her own softly rounded abdomen, her fingers reaching toward the dark patch between her legs.

"Rohaise?" he said, trying to keep his voice even.

Her smile grew to show her teeth. “Aye.”

“What have ye done with Abigail?”

She glided over to him, and he saw that her blue eyes had darkened to brown. Kerrick grabbed her upper arms, and her smile faltered. “She is here, inside with me.”

Reaching forward, he pressed his fingers against her neck and inhaled fully at the strong pulse there. She’s alive. Kerrick stepped around her and grabbed up the sheet, draping it over her shoulders. “What are ye doing in her body?”

Her smile returned. “’Tis Samhain, and once I saw I could enter that villain’s dead body on this day, I tried with this very much alive one,” she said, and shook off the sheet.

Kerrick caught it. “Damnit, Rohaise,” he said, wrapping it and tying the ends in a knot over her shoulder. “Ye need to leave her body now .”

She pouted and shook her head. “I was meant to marry a Hay, and now I can. I will truly be the lady of Delgatie Castle. As it should be.”

He looked deep into her dark, flat eyes. Did Abigail know what was going on? “Abigail?” he asked.

Rohaise frowned. “She is sleeping.”

“Leave her body. Now.” His voice filled the dismantled room.

Abigail’s face pinched into a sinister mask. “Nay, milord,” Rohaise said through the tight clench she held with her stacked teeth.

Kerrick grabbed her arms, shaking her. "Leave her."

Rohaise's head snapped back. "What ye do to me, ye do to her."

Kerrick yanked his hands away, and Rohaise straightened, staring directly at him. "Human bodies are fragile, milord. I could trip and fall down the stairs. They are quite steep." The look of tightly held anger turned to satisfaction as she watched him. "As long as ye keep us safe, Abigail Lindsey lives." She raised her hand to his face. "And in this body, I can give ye such pleasure."

He remained still as her fingers traced down his cheek, the touch making his gut twist in on itself.

"I can have your children, Kerrick Hay. This body is young and beautiful and vigorous, everything a man of your endurance can use for his delight."

She reached up on her toes to kiss him. She smelled of Abigail, the flower scent remaining on her body, but the feel of her lips on his made cold dread roll through him. This monster would never be Abigail, despite the outward appearance.

Rohaise pulled back, a smile across her face. "And when Samhain is over," she said, "I'm certain I will be able to stay within this body permanently."

Bloody hell. The sun was sinking fast. Once it was below the horizon, Samhain would be over for another year. "How do ye know that?"

"Before you came to Delgatie, while she slept, I tried to slip into this woman, and I couldn't. But with the barrier between life and death thin on Samhain, I was able to easily." She shrugged Abigail's straight shoulders. "So once the barrier shuts, I will be able to stay."



The thought ripped through Kerrick. “Ye helped Abigail. Why would ye hurt her?”

“I am not hurting her,” she said, walking away from him to stretch her arms over her head. “She is still alive, and I know she desires ye.” Her smile turned teasing, and she reached down to touch between her legs. “She is wet for ye, milord.”

Dammit . “Can I talk to her?”

Rohaise crossed her arms over Abigail’s breasts. “Nay. She is sleeping, and that is where she will stay. She will keep this body living with all the workings that God gave her, but I will rule everything else.” Abigail would be caught in a nightmarish sleep, unable to control herself.

He needed a plan to expel Rohaise without jeopardizing Abigail. And he needed to execute it fast. He stared at her, his mind running through scenarios. Rohaise had acted independently for centuries. How would she react to being controlled by another?

“I am thirsty,” he said. “As my wife, ye will be required to see to all my needs.”

She smiled broadly and tugged at the knot he’d tied at her shoulder, letting the sheet drop. “I will, milord.”

He looked away from Abigail’s lush body. “I am thirsty, and ye will obey your lord. Tie that sheet around ye and fetch me ale.”

Her brows lowered, and she pouted as she wrapped the sheet around herself. “Ye would not rather bed me?”

“Ale. Now, woman.”

Boo hissed as Rohaise walked gingerly through the broken glass past her, the kitten running out the back door.

“Ye will be modest outside my bed chamber, Rohaise,” he said, his voice hard. “And ye will clean up all this mess and cook me some food.”

She frowned but walked over to the table, avoiding the blood and wine. “We will hire maids for that,” she said, bending to find a cask that hadn’t been smashed.

“I may use a maid or two if they are bonny enough, but ye, wife, will see to my needs, including keeping my castle clean and my belly full.”

She jerked upright, frowning. “I will not tolerate mistresses, milord.”

The sun was nearly set. How much longer did he have to save Abigail?

He stalked to Rohaise, grabbing her arm hard enough that Abigail would likely have bruises. ’Tis not Abigail right now . He frowned down into her face, piercing her flat brown eyes. “Ye will tolerate anything I desire, wife. I am the man, and ye are here to comfort and bring me pleasure and children, nothing else. And certainly not your opinion about the mistresses I keep.”

Rohaise pulled her hand back, cocked to slap him. Kerrick easily caught it and smiled wickedly as she struggled to yank it back. “Ye are not strong in Abigail’s body, Rohaise. As my wife in this weak body, ye will do what I say or suffer the consequences.”

“I will kill her then,” she said, her upper lip curling as if she growled.

He met her stare. “If ye kill her, ye will be trapped in this body, dying too.” He had no idea if that were true but neither did the spirit. “I don’t see God looking too

favorably on ye for killing an innocent woman.” Rohaise’s eyes opened wider. “Your soul will burn in Hell’s fires,” he said, hoping he found something, anything that she feared.

She shook her head as if casting off his words. “God knows of my turmoil. He will judge me worthy of his angels.”

Damn . His plan was not working. The sunset cast an orange glow in the room. Oh Lord, Abigail. He couldn’t fail her.

Kerrick slid his hand up Rohaise’s throat, resting under her chin just enough to show his dominance. “Ye will cook and clean all day and take my pleasure at night when I am not with my mistresses. Ye will smile and be the good wife ye wished to be, no matter what I do.” He leaned in. “Even if it gives ye pain or disgusts ye.”

Her eyes widened as he let his words paint terrible pictures in her mind. “Ye are a monster, then. Like Abigail’s William,” she said.

Kerrick did not loosen his hold on her and shrugged. “I will be your husband, and ye are too weak in this body to do anything about it.” He leaned into her ear. “Ye may find ye like being tied outside with your arse in the air for me to—”

“Nay!” She jerked her face away, shoving against him, her arms trying to break free of his fierce hold. But she was unable to escape while stuck in Abigail’s body. With a wild shriek, Abigail suddenly went limp, and a great wind whipped through the room.

Kerrick caught her, lifting her in his arms. Rohaise had left her.

He tore through the back kitchen door, Abigail pressed against his chest. Smashing through the broken wheelbarrow, he ran a direct line out of the gate. Past the boundary of the wall, he raced to the barn, setting Abigail down gently on the floor

against a hay bale. Boo jumped up next to her as if on guard.

“Abigail,” he said, his hands brushing her hair from her face. “Abigail, please.” Kerrick lowered his ear to her chest as his fingers sought the pulse in her neck.

Thud. Thud. Thud . He closed his eyes, staying there for a long moment, taking in the steady deep thud with relief. “Thank ye, Lord,” he whispered. His hands explored the back of her head where a bump swelled, the crustiness of blood indicating that Rohaise had hit her.

Kerrick grabbed a wool blanket from Leum’s back and covered her. “Abigail,” he said, sliding his thumb over her bottom lip.

“Meow.” Boo rubbed against her.

“Kerrick?” Abigail murmured.

“Aye, lass.” He swallowed, his breath ragged.

“Rohaise...” she said, her voice weak. “She hit me. I had the most horrible dream.” She reached up to touch his face and he grabbed her hand, kissing it. “It wasn’t a dream, was it?” she asked.

“Nay.”

“I... I did and said things...”

“It wasn’t ye, Abigail.”

He pulled her into his arms, holding her there as she shivered. “And you said... you—”

“Said terrible things I did not mean to get her out of ye.”

“I know,” she said, hugging him. “You are very clever, Kerrick Hay. I could feel her lust turn to loathing.”

He huffed, kissing her forehead.

“I am not going back in there until after Samhain,” she said, trembling.

“It comes every year,” he said. “And even as a spirit, Rohaise haunts this place. She is a constant threat.”

“I think terrible things happened to her,” Abigail said. “We must look inside the wall that she taps. When she was... in me...” She paused and pressed a hand to her chest, “there was this terrible trapped feeling, and such anger and betrayal.”

But Kerrick felt no pity for the spirit that had taken Abigail over. “She needs to go,” he said. “Tonight. If the veil between the living and the dead is at its thinnest, she is most vulnerable.” The sun had not yet vanished.

“What will you do?”

Kerrick inhaled. Seeing Abigail taken by Rohaise proved once again how deadly she was and how important Abigail had become to him. There was no way to live peacefully with the ghost. “I will set her free.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:05 am*

A bigail reached for his wrist, struggling to rise. “Don’t go back in there.”

Kerrick helped her stand, holding her close. It was obvious that she was all Abigail once again. There was a softness about her frame with a strength inside that he admired. His hand went to her cheek. “I need to do this, and I will take every precaution.” He touched his forehead to hers. “Ye are the one she wants to invade. So whatever ye hear or see, do not go back inside the garden wall or the castle, even after the sun goes down.”

She huffed, frowning, but nodded.

Kerrick strode around the hulking mass to the front. He stared up at the castle he’d dreamed would be the center of his estate, proving to his father that he wasn’t a disappointment. That he could take a ruin and build it into a profitable enterprise. That he was no fool or traitor, but a man of intelligence, ingenuity, and perseverance. What would his father think of his plan now?

Dim firelight flickered behind the windows. Where exactly were the sconces lit inside? He’d lit two, no three, lamps in glass in the great hall. There was a bowl of very flammable pine pitch next to the table where he’d been mending the back door with it.

He ran both hands down his face. “Am I really doing this?” he murmured, but he already knew the answer.

Taking a deep breath, Kerrick strode up to the double doors, clutching the iron key. Unlocking it, he entered, his gaze fastening onto the closest sconce. The air inside

was chilled as if filled with Rohaise's icy anger. Kerrick yanked the glass cover off the lamp's flame. Without further thought, he turned to the tapestry that Abigail had asked him to rehang against the wall and held the flickering flame to it. The ancient fibers caught quickly, food for the fire's voracious appetite. He lit a taper from it and dropped it into the pitch, and the bowl whooshed to life.

Kerrick used his kilt to hold the burning pot and ran up the stairs. In each room, he used his dagger to push some of the flaming substance out onto the carpets.

Kerrick Hay . Rohaise's voice shot through the crackle of the fire as it caught, but he paid it no heed and ran to Abigail's bedchamber, lighting the curtains and the green gown thrown across the bed.

Ye will stop .

Kerrick lit the mattress full of dry hay and ran back into the hall where fire glowed out of the rooms he'd already visited. He dashed into the master bedchamber and paused. Rohaise stood against the wall that she tapped, her arms spread as if protecting it. What are ye doing? Ye will burn me to ash.

"So be it!" he yelled, drawing in the smoke-laced air. Coughing, he dropped the hot, flaming pot on the bed.

Nay! Rohaise screamed, and Kerrick dodged as a rock flew across the space, thudding hard against the wall. He ran from the room, feeling the cold wind of the spirit whirl around him. He moved from side to side along the wide stairs, learning from his many battles to dodge when under fire. Could she slip into him if he were conscious?

At the bottom, he tore through the great hall where the one tapestry burned up the entire wall. He grabbed another of the lamps held in the sconce and ran to the other

two tapestries, catching them easily, their brittle threads welcoming the all-consuming flame.

Rohaise appeared before him, her hands out. Ye burn our home? How can ye?

“’Tis my home, not yours. Your time is done at Delgatie, and ye will hurt no one else.” He brandished the uncovered lamp before her, and a fierce look came over Rohaise’s face. Surprise and overwhelming turned into hatred and anger.

Then ye will burn with me .

A tankard from the sideboard flew across the space, and Kerrick dodged it and a heavy candelabrum as they smashed into the wall. He ran down the corridor and into the kitchen. Raising his lamp, he set hanging baskets and dried herbs on fire. It consumed them, spreading up to the wooden rafters as Rohaise shrieked in pure fury.

Knives flew toward him, making him duck, and embedded into the back wall of the kitchen, handles quivering as if enraged they missed him. Flames grew up around him, and Rohaise spread her arms before the door.

Ye will burn too, Kerrick Hay . She began to throw everything that wasn’t wall or floor at him. The table upended, rushing toward him. He dove out of the way, and a rafter fell. He rolled, barely escaping.

Leaping up, he pivoted toward the door to the garden, but Rohaise blocked it. Her hair swirled up and around her, its red hue very much like the fire raging quickly through the entire castle. It reached toward him like the tentacles of some deadly sea beast.

“Move aside,” he yelled. If he ran through her, would she lodge within him? He covered his mouth and nose with an arm, trying to hold his breath as the air was



consumed in the room. Heat and smoke swelled around him. He turned to run back into the great hall, but before he could leave the kitchen, another rafter fell, blocking the open doorway.

Rohaise glided to the hearth, and Kerrick ducked as a cauldron flew at him. If she knocked him unconscious, he would surely die. He ran to the door to the courtyard. “Damn!” Rohaise had locked the door without the key, probably pushing the tumblers inside like she pushed pots from counters.

Ye cannot escape!

Kerrick yanked out the iron key from his jacket, brandishing it like a sword. But before he could run to thrust it in the lock, Rohaise threw the hearth grate at his hand, knocking the key loose. A blast of wind hit the small window by the door, shattering the glass outward. The key rose in the air, flying out the small window into the garden.

Kerrick couldn’t draw in a full breath, and he felt his strength failing like he had on the battlefield as his leg bled fiercely.

Rohaise smiled wickedly before the door, floating there as she kept up a volley of smaller utensils. How would he be able to kick open that locked door without air?

“Abigail,” he said.

Your precious Abigail isn’t here . Rohaise’s words roared over the crackling flames, full of victory.

Before she could utter another word, the back door flew inward, straight through Rohaise’s body. “Yes, I am.” Abigail stood in the doorway. The key she’d retrieved stuck in the lock from the outside.

Kerrick wasted no time and hurled himself across the room, grabbing Abigail's hand on the way, tugging her as he coughed violently. In the garden, he sucked in large draughts of fresh air but didn't stop running. Together they escaped the open gate beyond the threshold of Delgatie Castle.

He fell to the ground. Abigail knelt beside him, wiping his blackened face with the blanket he'd wrapped around her. "I saw the flames. I heard you yell." She shook her head. "I couldn't stay behind." The scorching in his throat made it impossible to answer.

Crash!

Windows shattered along the second floor. Flames shot out like a dragon scorching the air with its breath. Even the back garden became engulfed.

Kerrick pulled Abigail against him, wrapping his arms around her as they sat on the cold, damp ground, watching the fire destroy his future.

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Abigail woke alone in the barn and reached out where Kerrick had slept next to her. His body heat still lingered. She pushed up from the hay bed, spotting Boo curled up with her siblings.

Abigail wrapped the warm blanket around herself, stepping out into the frost-coated dawn.

"Oh God," she whispered. Delgatie Castle sat in jagged ruin, smoke rising into the morning mist that rolled along the moors. She walked to the front where Kerrick stood, his tunic blackened with the smoke that had almost killed him as he set ablaze the only home he had.

He glanced at her as she took his hand in both of hers. "You can rebuild," she said.

"What coins I have, if they survived the flames, are only enough for seed and a few animals and provisions until the harvest. Not enough to rebuild a castle." She wove her fingers through his, squeezing.

The stony holes where the glass windowpanes had blown out looked down upon them like the vacant eyes of a skull.

"Is it safe to go in?" Abigail asked, her voice like a whisper.

He shook his head. "The upstairs has fallen down below, but there could be some loose timbers."

Abigail walked up to the stone doorway, careful not to touch. "Rohaise," she called into it, her gaze scanning the wreckage of planks, mortar, and burnt tapestries and what must have been the bed from above. "Rohaise. Are you here?"

Silence. She released a breath. Kerrick came up to stand next to her and pointed toward the center of the pile of broken soot-blackened plaster. "Do ye see them?" he asked, and she peered closer, trying to look amongst the pieces.

Abigail gasped softly. "Is that a skull?"

"Aye," he said. "A femur bone too." He leaned in, peering upward as if to judge where the pile of debris had come from. "In the wall above, between the rooms."

Abigail looked at him. "Where she tapped?" He nodded.

The bones lay amongst the pieces of the wall that had confined Rohaise. The wall had been her tomb. "You did it then," she whispered. "Rohaise is free."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:05 am*

A bigail stood before the daubed residence on the quiet street in Aberdeen. “I thought never to see it again,” she murmured as Kerrick took her hand. “I escaped town with the evening coach after my father was taken to be buried.”

“We can visit his grave when we inquire about interring Rohaise’s bones in my family crypt,” Kerrick said. In the broken walls of Delgatie, once the fire died away, they had recovered a set of women’s bones. She had been encased in the wall either alive or dead, and there was no proof either way. She had wanted to be a Hay for so long, he felt it right to inter her with the man she had been waiting for all those years.

Abigail pulled in a deep breath, her eyes scanning the windows that she’d stared out of her whole life. She wiped off the house key that she’d unearthed from the flowerpot where she’d hidden it before fleeing William’s grasp.

She climbed the steps in her simple blue gown and green cape that she’d purchased after the fire with the few surviving coins Kerrick had found in the wreckage. Kerrick followed her inside, and she stopped to breathe in the familiar scent hanging in the house. It was a mix of herbs, years of baked bread, books, and the soap she had learned to make from her mother. It was the smell of home.

Their boots echoed on the floorboards as they walked toward her father’s library. “William may have sold some things,” she said, noticing a pastoral painting absent from the foyer wall. “I sold some things too for money to travel.” Her footsteps clipped faster as she strode to the library.

“Thank God,” she whispered when she pushed through and inhaled the smell of her father’s old books. They looked untouched.

Kerrick slid the curtains back from the windows, letting in light. Specks of dust circulated in the air. “Ye have more tomes than I,” he said, his smile large as he walked along, bending to read the spines.

Her shoulders relaxed with her growing smile. “I thought I’d lost them. William knew they were precious to me.”

Kerrick walked over to her and touched her face softly. Since the destruction of Delgatie Castle three days ago, they’d slept in the same room at the tavern and traveled here as husband and wife. But Kerrick had slept on the floor despite the attraction that continued to grow between them, seemingly with each glance.

“We will have the largest private library in Aberdeenshire if we... combine them,” he said.

“Yes,” she said, studying his eyes. Combine them? What exactly did that mean?

Kerrick bent his face toward hers, and her eyes flickered closed as his lips touched.

Rap. Rap. Rap .

Abigail’s eyes snapped open, and they stared at one another.

Rap. Rap. Rap.

“A curious neighbor who saw Leum tied up outside?” he suggested.

“I haven’t a clue,” she said, looking down the hall toward the door.

Rap. Rap. Rap . “Lady Gordon?” called a voice from outside.

“Gordon?” she said, her heart sinking at the title she would have had if William were

still alive and had forced her back to Aberdeen with his forged marriage contract.

Kerrick frowned and turned, striding down the hall. Abigail followed but let him open the door.

A smallish man in trousers and a tailored shirt and ruff stood there, his head covered by a full black wig of curls. "Has Lady Gordon returned?" he asked.

"There is no Lady Gordon here," Kerrick said, but the man looked past him.

"A Lady Abigail Lindsey Gordon?"

He cannot hurt me. William is dead . "I am Abigail Lindsey. William Gordon was found dead, lost on the moors and killed by animals," she said.

"Aye," the man said. "My condolences." He unfolded a parchment, holding it up. "You are entitled to his holdings as the benefactress." He glanced at Kerrick. "There are no provisions for a new husband if she remarries."

Abigail came up closer, confusion slowing her thoughts. "I do not understand. William had no wealth of his own."

The man's brow rose. "He did not inherit until he wed. When the two of you wed a month ago," he said, holding open another parchment with her faked signature, "his father's will was enacted."

"He had to marry," Kerrick said, and the solicitor took it as a question.

"Yes, to inherit his twenty-thousand pounds and estates," the man said. "And I was to verify the marriage before relinquishing the funds. I've had a runner sitting outside this house for weeks to tell me if there was any movement. Today there was." He smiled tightly.

“I have to sit down,” Abigail said, unable to catch a full breath.

Kerrick lifted under her arm, his mouth near her ear. “Ye didn’t swoon when a ghost made William stand, so ye will not swoon now.” The humor in his voice helped her inhale as he led her to a wooden bench. She clutched the seat so as not to tip.

The man followed inside the house. “You are Abigail Lindsey Gordon, are you not? Wed to William Gordon within a year of his father’s death?”

“His father’s death?” she said numbly. William’s father had died last autumn. She wasn’t certain of the date, but the anniversary must be quite soon.

“Yes, Lord William needed to marry a woman before October thirty-first and bring her before me, his father’s solicitor, within a month of the date so I could assure he had held his part of the bargain, or else the estate and monies would be given to a distant cousin in Inverness.” He stared at Abigail. “So, are you Lord William’s wife?”

“That is what the document says,” Kerrick said, pointing at the paper in the man’s hand. Abigail managed to nod.

“Very well then,” the man said, relief in his voice. “My duty is fulfilled.” He looked closely at Abigail. “And if my sources are correct, the estate and inheritance are going to someone much... improved over Lord William Gordon.”

Abigail’s heart beat with wings, hope filling her. Twenty-thousand pounds . William had to marry to receive his inheritance, and no sane woman would agree.

And his forgery of her name had made her the beneficiary of it all.

The man shook Kerrick’s hand. “I will be by tomorrow with papers to sign and the keys to Gordon’s three estates.”

“Thank ye,” Kerrick said, ushering him out. The door clicked, and Kerrick returned to Abigail. He crouched before her and took her hands. “Are ye well, Abigail?”

She looked at him and blinked, her smile spreading across her face. “We can rebuild, Kerrick.” She swallowed. “I will sell two of William’s estates, and we will use the money to rebuild Delgatie Castle.” She stood slowly, and he did too. She grabbed his arms. “Even without your father’s money, we can make the land turn a profit. Maybe not this year but next.”

He looked down into her face. “’Tis your money, not mine.”

Her lips pinched tighter. “Then I am investing it in you, Kerrick Hay. I am investing... all of me in you,” she said, her voice softening. Had she said too much? Would he not want her? “I... I want us to be together,” she said.

A smile grew slowly across his handsome face. “Together?” he said, and she nodded. “Are ye courting me, Abigail Lindsey?”

She couldn’t stop the smile that grew on her own face. “Perhaps I am.”

Kerrick’s arms wrapped around her, pulling her into his warmth. His mouth came down to hers, kissing her with all the joy that came with hope. She held onto the back of his neck and slanted her face to deepen it. The kiss was familiar and tantalizing, and full of a future that Abigail would completely embrace.