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Whispers in the Gloaming

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Introduction

Ava Sinclair had always been more comfortable chasing stories in bustling city streets than wandering through windswept mountainsides. Yet, when the letter arrived — heavy with unfamiliar handwriting and the scent of old parchment — her world tilted unexpectedly. The message was simple: her grandmother's cottage in the heart of the Scottish Highlands now belonged to her. No warm memories flickered at the news, only a vague recollection of a woman who spoke in riddles and shadows, forever distant even in their rare encounters.

Drawn by a curiosity she couldn't quite explain, Ava set her life in London on pause and journeyed north to the village of Glencara, a place the world seemed to have forgotten. The landscape unfolded in solemn grandeur: mist-veiled hills, deep lochs that caught the dwindling light, and the dark, hunched silhouette of her grandmother's cottage nestled at the edge of an ancient pine forest. The locals cast sidelong glances and exchanged murmurs behind her back, their words threading into the growing aura of mystery that seemed to cloak the cottage itself.

On her first evening, as the gloaming gathered outside her window and the wind pressed secrets against the glass, Ava discovered an old diary hidden beneath loose floorboards. Its pages were thick with cryptic entries — fleeting references to a lost treasure, veiled warnings, and the shadowy echoes of someone who had vanished decades ago, never to be found. With each passage Ava read, the boundary between history and legend blurred, drawing her inexorably into the half-remembered tragedies of Glencara and her family's entanglements with them.

The diary was more than a legacy; it was a challenge. Whispers of clan feuds, ancient pacts, and the stubborn silence of the village hinted at stories that begged to be uncovered. Ava's instincts as a journalist rose to the fore, pushing her to dig deeper, even as the villagers closed ranks and the Highlands themselves seemed to resist her intrusion. In the heart of her inheritance, Ava felt both a haunting isolation and the weight of unresolved promises.

As the days grew shorter and the shadows lengthened, Ava's search for answers led her to an unlikely ally: Ewan, a reserved historian whose own roots ran tangled through Glencara's soil. Together, they navigated a web of folklore, superstition, and half-buried secrets, all the while confronting their own reluctance to trust and to open their hearts. The sculptures of time and grief carved into the Highlands seemed to echo their journey—timeless, silent, and profound.

Whispers in the Gloaming is a tale of place and memory, of stories hidden beneath

centuries of moss and stone. As the cottage creaks with the weight of secrets long held, Ava must choose whether to let the past rest or risk everything to bring it into the light. In the journey, she will discover that the true heart of Glencara — and perhaps her own — beats strongest in the shadows.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Letter

The scent of stale coffee and unread newsprint usually greeted Ava Sinclair each morning, a familiar comfort in her cramped London flat. But today, a different aroma hung in the air—earthy, faintly metallic, like damp soil after a summer rain. It clung to the heavy cream envelope resting atop a precarious stack of bills and takeaway menus on her kitchen counter. The handwriting was a spidery, elegant script she'd never seen before, yet it sparked a flicker of recognition, a distant echo from a forgotten corner of her mind.

She picked up the letter, the paper surprisingly thick, almost parchment-like. Her finger traced the slightly raised wax seal on the back: a thistle, regal and defiant. A Scottish postmark. Her grandmother. The thought arrived unbidden, a ghost from a past Ava rarely acknowledged. Elara Sinclair, a woman whose existence had been more myth than reality in Ava's upbringing, a stern, elusive figure who sent a terse Christmas card once every five years and little else.

Ava's parents had always been vague about Elara, often changing the subject with a strained smile whenever her name came up. "She's... eccentric," her mother would offer, a diplomatic avoidance of anything more substantial. "A bit of a recluse," her father would add, as if that explained the chasm of silence between generations. Ava had learned not to press, to accept the blank spaces in her family history as unfillable.

Now, that blank space had sent her a letter. With a practiced journalistic efficiency, Ava tore open the envelope, the sharp rip a stark contrast to the quiet morning. Inside, a single sheet of paper, brittle with age, unfolded. The words were brief, formal, and to the point.

To Miss Ava Sinclair,

It is with regret that I inform you of the passing of your grandmother, Elara Sinclair, on the fifteenth of last month.

Ava paused, a small intake of breath. Regret? The solicitor's tone was almost clinical. No tears welled, no profound grief. Just a strange, hollow feeling, as if a distant landmark had simply vanished from the map.

The letter continued, outlining the unexpected: Elara had left her entire estate, including her cottage in Glencara, Scotland, to Ava. There were instructions for an executor, Mr. Hamish MacLeod, to contact her, and a date for the reading of the will, which had already passed. A postscript noted that her grandmother's personal effects

were already awaiting her at the cottage.

Ava reread the letter twice, her journalist's brain sifting through the sparse details. Glencara. She'd heard the name once or twice, whispered by her mother with a mixture of fondness and trepidation. A tiny village nestled deep in the Highlands, a place of ancient stones and even more ancient secrets, or so her mother had hinted. It sounded like something out of a gothic novel, a far cry from the bustling newsroom and trendy coffee shops that defined Ava's London life.

Her current life, however, was in a bit of a holding pattern. A major exposé she'd been working on had hit a legal snag, leaving her with an enforced hiatus and a sudden abundance of free time she hadn't known how to fill. She'd considered a trip to Tuscany, a yoga retreat in Bali, anything to escape the stagnant feeling that had settled over her. But Glencara? The Highlands? It was an unexpected, almost comical, twist.

The thought of inheriting anything from Elara was baffling. There had been no bond, no connection. Why Ava? And why a cottage in a remote Scottish village? Was this some elaborate, posthumous prank? Elara, from the few fragmented memories Ava possessed, had not been known for her sense of humor. Or, for that matter, any discernible emotions beyond a perpetual, faint disapproval.

She pushed aside the letter and made herself another strong coffee, the steam warming her face. The aroma of Glencara seemed to linger, a persistent whisper against the urban grit. Her phone buzzed; it was her editor, Marcus, probably wondering if she'd found a new angle for the exposé. She ignored it. For the first time in weeks, her mind was buzzing with something entirely unrelated to her work.

The internet, her usual first port of call for any mystery, yielded little on Glencara. A scattering of old B&B listings, some breathtaking landscape photographs, and a Wikipedia entry that spoke of a small, historically significant village, once a hub for clan activities, now primarily a tourist destination for hikers and nature enthusiasts. No mention of anything dramatic or mysterious. No unsolved disappearances or ancient curses. Yet.

A small, insidious seed of curiosity began to sprout. Ava, despite her urban sensibilities, had always been drawn to a good story, especially one with hidden layers. This wasn't just a story; it was her story, or at least a forgotten chapter of it. Her grandmother, the recluse, had opened a door, albeit reluctantly, into a past Ava hadn't known she had.

She spent the next few days in a whirl of practicalities, informing her landlord, postponing her assignments, and packing a suitcase that felt wholly inadequate for the remote Scottish wilderness she imagined. Her friends, mostly fellow journalists,

were intrigued by her sudden, dramatic departure. "Going to find your roots, Ava?" her friend Chloe teased, raising an eyebrow. "Or just escaping Marcus?"

Ava managed a weak smile. "Something like that. Apparently, I own a cottage."

"A Scottish cottage? How terribly romantic!" Chloe gushed, clearly envisioning a quaint, rose-covered dwelling by a sparkling loch. Ava had a feeling it would be less 'romantic' and more 'moss-covered and drafty.'

The journey north was long and reflective. The landscape gradually transformed, shedding the manicured greens of England for the wild, untamed beauty of Scotland. Rolling hills gave way to jagged peaks, dark lochs mirrored the brooding sky, and the air grew sharper, carrying the scent of pine and peat. Ava felt a stirring she hadn't anticipated, a sense of awe at the sheer, raw power of the land.

As the train pulled into a small, unmanned station—barely more than a platform—Ava stepped out into the crisp, biting air. A single taxi, a battered old black cab, waited patiently. The driver, a stocky man with a kind, craggy face and a thick Highlander accent, greeted her with a nod. "Miss Sinclair? Aye, I was told to expect ye."

The drive to Glencara was silent, save for the rhythmic crunch of tires on gravel and the occasional bleating of sheep. The villages they passed were sparse, their stone houses huddled against the elements, smoke curling from their chimneys. The further they went, the more the modern world seemed to recede, replaced by a timeless landscape steeped in history and legend.

Finally, the taxi turned onto a narrow, winding track, barely wide enough for one car. Trees, ancient and gnarled, formed a dark canopy overhead, their branches reaching out like skeletal fingers. And then, through a break in the pines, Ava saw it. Her grandmother's cottage.

It was exactly as she'd imagined: less charming, more foreboding. Nestled deep within a cluster of ancient trees, it was a low-slung, stone structure, its walls covered in ivy, its windows like dark, watchful eyes. A plume of smoke curled lazily from its chimney, a surprising sign of recent activity. The cottage exuded an aura of quiet age, a profound sense of secrets held close. It was not quaint; it was formidable.

A shiver, unrelated to the chill of the evening air, ran down Ava's spine. This was not just a cottage; it was an inheritance, a legacy, and perhaps, an invitation to a story far grander and more dangerous than she could possibly imagine. The taxi driver pulled to a stop. "Here ye are, Miss. Welcome to Glencara." His voice held a note of something akin to caution, or perhaps, simply knowing.

Ava stepped out, the damp Highland air a cool kiss on her cheek. The silence was

profound, broken only by the distant cry of a bird and the rustle of leaves in the ancient forest. She looked at the cottage, then back at the departing taxi, feeling an undeniable pull towards the old stone house. It was waiting for her, and she, unexpectedly, felt ready to walk into its embrace.

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