

CHAPTER ONE

Throughout her flight into Inverness, Scotland, Clarice found herself repeatedly going over the printout she'd taken of her destination: Moss Cottage on the Isle of Skye. It promised unspoiled vistas, a homely atmosphere and most importantly of all: a quiet getaway from the hustle and bustle of modern life.

That's what she needed most: to get away. Away from the distractions of life in London, away from the constant buzz of her phone, notifying her of incoming emails or tweets. Away from all reminders of the life she used to share with Alan before she caught him cheating on her.

Upon her arrival at the cottage, she would send a message to Lily, her best friend, who had also been the one to suggest the Isle of Skye as a destination to begin with, and that was it. Clarice had promised herself to switch everything off. From nine to five daily, she would be *unplugged*, allowing her to focus on the task at hand.

After stealing a glance out the window - they were still descending through thick cloud cover - she flipped the page over, reading the backside again. *Local attractions include wildlife walks, beach walks, hill trails.* Walks, basically, all you could do on the Isle of Skye according to this text was go for a quiet walk.

It is going to have electricity, though, won't it? Clarice read the other side again and studied the accompanying pictures.

SCOTTISH WERE BEAR: AN UNEXPECTED AFFAIR (SAMPLE)

There was a table lamp in one of the shots, which suggested that electricity was indeed going to be supplied... As long as her laptop had power, everything was going to be all right.

As the small plane landed bumpily on the runway, she felt a surge of excitement as well as nerves build within her chest. Soon, a mere three-hour drive away, she was going to arrive at her destination.

"Please remain seated until the fasten seatbelt sign is switched off," said the captain's almost robotic voice over the intercom.

Clarice smiled to herself. *No way that's going to happen.* Half these people would be up, carry-on luggage and phone in hand, before the plane came to a halt.

She leaned over to get a better look out the window. The views throughout most of the flight had been obstructed by a thick layer of clouds, far below the altitude of the plane. Now, the outside world looked as one would expect Scotland to look in early autumn: grey and damp.

How does it matter, it's not like I'll leave the house, much. Clarice took a deep breath, holding it in an attempt to calm her nerves. She had never done anything like this. Leave it all behind for a few weeks of solitude.

But this time, it was necessary. Early attempts to figure out if there was any flexibility in the deadline for her latest book had only resulted in her editor breathing down her neck harder. Apparently anything short of a deadly illness wasn't cause enough to postpone a release. A messy breakup and resulting existential crisis didn't count. That was why Clarice had been forced to resort to drastic measures to finish the manuscript on time.

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Finally, the fasten seatbelt signs switched off with the customary ding, and soon after, the doors of the plane opened. Clarice smiled a final goodbye to the quiet old man seated next to her. The flight was relatively short, as far as flights go, but she was still surprised that he hadn't said a word throughout. He nodded, then joined the throng of impatient passengers heading for the door.

It was a small airport, meaning you didn't get one of those fancy walkways leading from the plane straight to the door. Instead, all the passengers were let off via a mobile staircase, and then they walked along demarcated pathways painted on the concrete taxiway, towards the modest looking terminal building to collect their bags.

The bags arrived in a similarly low-tech manner: on trolleys in plain view of the waiting passengers. Clarice found her suitcase and started walking, aimlessly at first, until she spied the car rental sign.

Alan used to take care of all of these things during their holidays together, but now it was all up to her. *How hard can it be?*

As it turned out, picking up a pre-booked rental car wasn't very difficult at all. However, Clarice was still battling residual nerves by the time she made it into the driver's seat and started leafing through the various printouts of the route to the Isle of Skye. It looked easy enough, there weren't very many roads to choose from. The maps on Clarice's phone concurred.

A deep breath later, she turned the key. So far so good, now it was time for the home stretch.

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As pretty as the drive towards the Isle of Skye was, it did nothing to prepare her for the beauty ahead. Stark black cliffs stood out against the dramatic clouds overhead. There wasn't much vegetation, just grasses and mosses with the occasional small grouping of trees that had managed to battle the elements for survival.

Though the road snaked through the landscape up ahead, Clarice still felt like an explorer, discovering this mysterious land for the first time. At every bend, she instinctively slowed, both to cater for oncoming vehicles - which were few and far between - as well as to admire the views.

She passed through a few small towns on the way, but for the most part, the island seemed unspoiled and almost barren. The road narrowed more and more as she reluctantly drove on. Every map she'd printed out, even the satellite navigation on her phone confirmed she was on the right track, yet the road ahead looked too small to lead anywhere.

Finally, she made it to a small settlement that according to Google was a mere twenty minutes away from her destination. *Village* would be too big a word for the cluster of houses she found. Luckily one of the buildings housed a small daily needs shop. Clarice parked right outside, eager to stock up on some essentials so she wouldn't have to leave the cottage at least for the next couple of days.

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"Hello?" she called out through the open door.

No answer.

She stuck her head inside, looking around the dimly lit interior of the store. It looked like somebody's living room, with a few racks of groceries, as well as firewood and some camping supplies stacked up inside.

"Excuse me?" she asked again.

Finally, an old man appeared through the door at the far end of the room.

"Ah, a customer!" He shot her a smile that seemed to wrinkle up every inch of his face all at once. "How can I help?"

"I just wanted to buy a few things," Clarice explained, smiling nervously while eyeing the shelf of cookies nearer the wall.

"Aye, of course. Please take a look around. If you're after anything specific, we may need to order it in."

Clarice nodded and gathered up some packets of digestives. It was a bad habit, snacking while writing, especially when writing was your main job and you spend a lot of time doing it. With the deadline hanging over her head, she didn't know how else to cope.

She rounded off her selection with some bread, eggs, and other daily essentials, then made her way towards the counter where the old man was waiting. He didn't even have a till. Instead he listed up everything on a notepad and totaled it in his head.

"Where are you staying, if I may ask?" He handed her the torn off sheet of paper, with the total, £20.78 written in shaky pencil.

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Clarice paused for a moment, wondering if it was wise to answer. *What the hell, this place is so small, he would probably find out anyway. You're not in London anymore!*

"Moss Cottage. That's just up the road I suppose?"

"Ah yes. The old McMillan farm. Lovely place, very quiet. Just-" He leaned forward, raising his hand gravely. "Take care of the bear."

"Thanks. Umm, wait, what bear?" Clarice asked.

"Up in the hills around the farm. Keep your eyes open if you go wandering out by yourself. Especially in the evenings."

Clarice scrutinized the old man's face, looking for any sign that he was just pulling her leg, but his expression remained completely serious.

"I wasn't aware that there were bears in Scotland?"

The old man let out a chuckle. "Well, according to the authorities, there aren't any, but we've all seen him. A big fella too, could tear you in half, he could." By the end of his sentence, again the old man's expression turned deadly serious.

"But enough of that, you seem like a sensible lass, you'll be careful. Enjoy your vacation." He smiled again, his weathered skin folding into a million little creases.

"Uhh, thanks."

"Bye now!"

Back at the car, Clarice tried to shake off her unease at the preceding conversation. *A bear. Here? That's ridiculous, right?* As far as she knew, bears had been extinct in Britain for pretty much forever. Unless it was some kind of zoo escapee.

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No, perhaps the old man had been enjoying his Scotch a bit too much. That must be it.

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