

Dear Friend,

I am writing this from a bus seat that vibrates suspiciously every time we hit a hill. Which is often. We are in the Highlands, and hills appear to be included in bulk.

The bus smells faintly of shortbread, rain, and a very enthusiastic use of lavender hand cream. Outside the window, everything is so green it feels like someone turned the saturation up too far. There are sheep. So many sheep. All of them look vaguely judgmental.

I'm on a weeklong castle tour in Scotland with a group of authors—most of whom already know each other and are traveling in a loud, hilarious pack. They've dubbed themselves *The Plot Thickens* and have custom tote bags with their group name printed in swirling Gothic script. They are the kind of people who laugh loudly and have ongoing debates about whether it's more likely for a duke, a ghost, or a vampire to appear at the next castle.

I don't know how I ended up in their group. Technically, I'm not in their group—I just booked the same tour, and now I keep



getting absorbed into their chaos like a stray punctuation mark.

There are a few other solo travelers. A quiet man with a camera lens the size of a baguette. A retired couple from New Jersey who speak only in punchlines. And a woman named Trina, who travels with a large travel guide and verifies all the details our guide shares.

We've visited three castles so far. One had a spiral staircase so narrow I nearly had to reverse out of it. One was so wide they rode horses up and down it a couple hundred years ago or so. They all seem to have ghost stories, and one ghost announces her presence with the scent of roses.

But my favorite place wasn't the castle at all. It was a huge walled garden. The door was almost invisible behind the shrubbery. It's a place that feels like it remembers things you've forgotten. The fragrance of flowers was nearly overpowering in one of the "rooms". Bees moved slowly through



Crathes Castle Gardens

the lavender. It was a quiet and restful place, and I wished I could sit and just soak it all in.

I stood there for a while, not thinking much of anything. Just... being. And for the first time in a long time, that felt like enough.

I came on this trip to see beautiful places and step out of my own story for a while. And I have. But I've also stepped into something else. A different rhythm. A quieter kind of noticing.

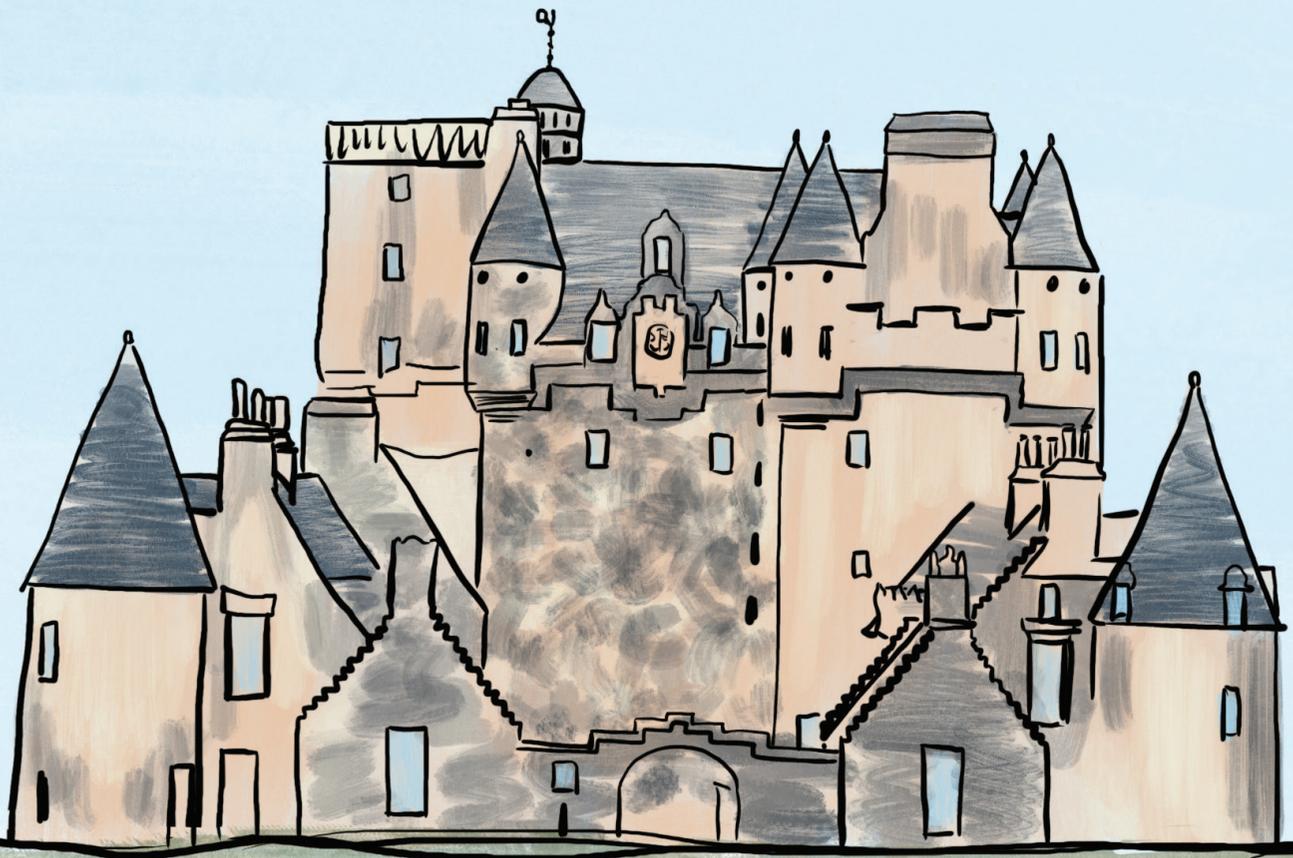
I'm heading on alone soon, continuing the journey I planned for months. But I can already feel something shifting—like the beginning of a chapter where you don't know the plot yet, but you know the tone has changed.

I'll write more later. I'm heading to Edinburgh shortly.

Annily

P.S. One of the authors is convinced I'm a "mystery protagonist" in disguise. I told her I was too introverted to solve crimes. She said that's exactly what a planter of red herrings would say.

Fraser Castle



Southwest England, 500 years ago...

"It's time, Miles," Festus said at first light.

"I'm not going to make it, am I?"

"I'm afraid not. They are too close and moving too fast."

"What now?"

"I'll take it far from here. You'll recover at the inn. They'll follow the relic and leave you in peace."

"How long will it be?"

"500 years."

"And if he's cursed me?"

"It may go with the relic... or it may remain with you. We're not sure."

The curse did not stay with the relic. It stayed with Miles and has troubled all of his descendants.

500 Years Later

Annily Edwards—a quiet artist from Michigan—planned a peaceful trip to Scotland and England.

Annily sets off on her trip with a sketchbook in hand and a plan to rest, reflect, and draw her way through gardens, historic sites, and quiet cafes. She doesn't expect anything unusual, who would?

Until she's followed and a ring she didn't pack shows up in her bag.

On the train to Edinburgh, strange things begin to happen.

And when she meets a man named David (again!)—carrying a story as strange as her own—Annily finds herself drawn into something deeper than coincidence.

Your First Letter Starts Here

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Join the Adventure Today



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