



Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries™

The Jig Is Up



Rachael O. Phillips



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Books in the Scottish Bakehouse Mysteries series

The Jig Is Up
If Looks Could Kilt
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“Back in college, I never would’ve guessed that we’d open a bakery together someday,” Molly Ferris said, clasping her two dearest friends’ arms as they waited for their real estate agent.

Amid the group embrace, tall Carol MacCallan’s mouth quirked in a wry grin. “We certainly never dreamed of buying an old funeral home together.”

“We wouldn’t be considering it now if Fergus hadn’t told you about it.” Laura Donovan cast a mischievous glance at Molly.

Fergus MacGregor, Molly’s crush from long ago, would join them later. “It was nice of him to help us.” Molly ignored the tendrils of warmth winding into her cheeks.

Carol rescued her. “Yes, wasn’t it? Especially since there aren’t many commercial properties for sale in Loch Mallaig.”

A popular tourist destination in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Loch Mallaig was a quaint town founded by Scottish pioneers in 1825—and from the Scotland-themed businesses to the faint brogue many residents had inherited from previous generations, the village stayed true to its bonny roots.

Laura twirled a lock of her auburn hair as she surveyed the peeling paint on the Victorian mansion’s wraparound porch. “Not the cheeriest atmosphere for a bakery. Maybe the inside is nicer.”

“You know that no house in Michigan—especially in the UP—is cheery in March,” Carol pointed out. Though they’d scattered since college, the former roommates all had grown up in the Wolverine State.

Molly tipped her head back to scrutinize the house's upper stories. "Those shutters don't add much," she admitted. "They must be at least fifty years old."

"What color would you call that, anyway?" Laura wrinkled her nose. "Slime-green?"

"Easily replaced," Carol put in, ever the voice of reason. "Not like siding and windows." She tugged on Laura's coat sleeve. "Let's check those out while we're waiting for Beverly. She said the Baileys recently replaced the windows, but I'd like to see them for myself."

Leave it to Carol to zero in on practicalities. Molly grinned as they carefully navigated slippery sidewalks and deceptively deep snowdrifts. During college thirty years ago, Carol had saved them from putting a deposit on a darling apartment with hostile plumbing.

They circled the big house and confirmed Beverly's assessment of the lower story. The creamy yellow siding could use a power wash or some touching up, but after a long winter or two, what house wouldn't?

Molly couldn't add numbers in her head like Carol, the retired math teacher, but anyone could see that after paying for all this, the Baileys had probably had to wait on painting the porch and shutters.

A "Yoo-hoo!" drew them back to the front door.

"Did I get the time wrong?" Lochside Realty agent Beverly Scott's apologetic smile gleamed against her smooth, dark skin.

"Not at all," Molly assured her. "We're just nosy—wanted to see a little on our own."

"Feel free to look as much as you want." A freezing gust of wind reminded them it was still winter, and Beverly shivered as she inserted the old-fashioned key into the heavy, wooden front door, which had an elegant stained glass panel installed in the top half. "Come in, come in. My husband, Ethan, built a fire this morning to take off the chill."

He certainly knows how to help his wife sell properties. Molly and the

others gave cries of delight at the sight of the enormous stone fireplace in the spacious front room. Flames crackled a friendly greeting as the women warmed their hands.

Beverly gestured at the worn carpet. “Of course, this would have to be replaced—although Mrs. Bailey did say that the floors underneath are hardwood taken from local pine trees.”

Molly pictured the gleam of hardwood accented with colorful rugs. Perfect for rustic yet trendy decor. She shouldn’t show too much interest too fast, but as a former Chicago event planner, she couldn’t help mentally arranging tables and chairs around the fireplace.

Laura, eyes alight, seemed to follow a similar vein, pointing to the opposite end of the room. “We could put display cases over there for breads, scones, cookies, and so on.”

Laura had left her position as chef at the hip 29 North restaurant in New York City to join their business venture. Molly could picture cases full of the spectacular pastries and desserts her friend would create for their customers.

Carol, who had run her own cake business on the side for years, inquired, “Is there room for a big kitchen on the main floor?”

“There’s a kitchen down this hallway.” Beverly led the way. “It’s larger than you’d expect in a funeral home. But then, families in this area tend to be close-knit. I’m sure sizable groups gathered here for coffee and snacks.” She smiled. “We all *love* to eat.”

“That’s good.” Molly blinked as they entered the room, where huge windows magnified the bleak March sunshine. “It’s much bigger than I anticipated.”

Carol measured the walls with her eyes. “We’d have to install more ovens and more sinks, but there appears to be room for them.”

Laura flung open one door, then another. “These must have been storerooms. They’re the perfect size for a walk-in fridge and freezer.”

Had they been closets? Or workrooms where bodies were stored or prepared for burial?

Molly shook off such thoughts. So far, the place presented good possibilities for their Scottish bakehouse, its theme a nod to the village's heritage as well as to their shared ancestry. If she and her friends were going to make their dream come true here, they couldn't afford to get bogged down in irrelevant details.

But she saw similar doubts on her friends' faces after viewing the upstairs, which included an office, storage, and living space. The Baileys had inhabited the ample apartment with its outdated, cranberry-and-mauve decor for years.

When Beverly excused herself to answer a phone call, Carol asked in a low voice, "How did they ever live above caskets and—and—"

"Dead people?" Laura finished for her. "At least the Baileys never had problems with noisy neighbors."

Despite the joke, her laugh sounded nearly as uneasy as Carol's, and Molly remembered that back in college, both had balked at visiting haunted fraternity houses at Halloween. Even adventurous Laura had her limits.

Molly scanned the kitchenette, bedroom, den, and full bath again. She shrugged off her own small shiver as new ideas beckoned. Reject a promising property for silly non-reasons? No way.

"C'mon." She summoned her most persuasive smile. "We're bigger than all that. We're bakers. We're brave. We're *women*." Molly struck the fist-in-the-air pose they had caricatured during college.

Carol and Laura both smiled at the memory.

Beverly bustled back. She must have sensed their underlying nervousness because she hurried them through a minimalistic tour of the bare attic with its "infinite storage space," then outside again, near the garage, where they almost ran Fergus down.

Molly had spoken with him only on the phone, but even after thirty years—and with his addition of a dark beard peppered faintly with gray—she would have recognized Fergus anywhere. He had the same twinkling blue eyes and devastating smile that had captured her teenage heart.

“Molly Kirkpatrick.” His grin widened. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

She hadn’t heard her maiden name in ages. Molly chuckled, trying to ignore the Scottish jig her heart was performing. “You fib much better than you used to.” Sensing the others’ eyes on them, she gestured toward the house. “Thanks for telling us about the property.”

“Glad to help.” Fergus turned to Beverly. “Have they seen the LaSalle yet?”

“The what?” Laura’s forehead crinkled.

“It’s an old car they don’t make anymore,” Carol said, wearing an equally puzzled expression.

“Is this car part of the deal?” Molly asked in surprise.

Beverly gave a slight cough as she unlocked the garage’s side door. “We usually don’t include vehicles in a real estate package. But Hennie insisted anyone who liked the home would like the LaSalle.”

“It’s a 1939 classic,” Fergus enthused. “I’ll open the main door so you can see it.”

If you’re so hooked on this car, why don’t you buy it? Molly could almost hear her friends’ thoughts.

Nevertheless, they all shifted position. With boyish excitement, Fergus bounded ahead, reached inside, and pressed the wall-mounted opener.

The heavy wooden door creaked open to reveal . . .

A hearse.

“Isn’t she gorgeous?” Fergus sounded as if he were introducing them to his girlfriend.

Molly pushed aside a hint of annoyance at his dreamy tone. “It’s certainly, um, elegant.” Even the dust couldn’t hide the LaSalle’s classy lines.

“It is lovely in its own way.” Carol was using her polite-teacher voice, the one that had probably gotten through more than one conference with a difficult parent.

Laura didn’t bother. “So’s the cemetery, but we’re not setting up a bakery there either.” She crossed her arms. “I’m sorry, but this whole place creeps me out. A hearse? Seriously?”

Carol hesitated. “It is somewhat unsettling.”

Molly’s gaze swept the mansion as well, and her heart sank as she glimpsed Beverly’s and Fergus’s tight smiles. If she and her partners refused this property, how long before they could open their bakery?

This is the right place for us. Hearse and all. Molly knew it, the way she’d known the bakery venture was what she really wanted. What they all wanted.

But how could she help the others see it?

Fergus cleared his throat. “You’ll need a delivery vehicle, won’t you? The LaSalle has plenty of space. You could deliver to the whole town in one trip.”

Laura rolled her eyes, but Molly grabbed his words and a flash of inspiration. “It’s perfect. We can call the bakery ‘Bread on Arrival.’ We’ll use the LaSalle for deliveries.”

Her partners gaped at her as if she’d lost her mind.

“‘Bread on Arrival’?” A small grin blossomed on Laura’s face.

“Don’t you get it?” Molly summoned her best smile. “Once we remodel the house, polish up this beauty, and put a bright-colored logo on its doors—a loaf of bread, cupcakes, or whatever—the funeral-home-turned-bakery aspect will promote our business like nothing else. Our bakehouse will be one of a kind. Perfect for local advertising, and fabulous online.”

Laura's brown eyes sparkled. Even Carol uncrossed her arms. A few weeks earlier they'd tried to envision a way to jump-start their business without success. Now they had finally found a viable solution.

"I think you have something there, partner." Laura's smile grew as she turned to Carol. "How about you, other partner?"

Carol slowly nodded. "We'll need to talk about it more. Maybe over lunch. My stomach's starting to growl."

"Of course," Beverly interjected smoothly as she closed the garage. "May I suggest Neeps and Tatties across the street?"

"That restaurant wasn't there back in the days when my family spent summers here." For the moment, Molly was glad to shift the subject. "I know 'tatties' is the Scottish word for potatoes. But what are neeps?"

"Great question," Beverly laughed. "Since Fergus has a Scottish background, I'll let him answer."

"Sure." Fergus beamed at them. "In Scotland, neeps are a lot like rutabagas. My mom mashes and serves neeps and tatties side by side, especially at holidays, like my grandmothers did. The ones at the restaurant"—he gestured with his thumb—"are almost as good."

Mmm. Molly's freezing nose could almost smell steaming, buttery vegetables or savory soup, but another possibility had occurred to her, one she wanted to ponder before discussing it with the others. "I'd like to peek inside one more time before lunch." She glanced at Beverly, who nodded. "Mind if I meet you there?"

"Sure. I'll drink your cup of hot chocolate too," Laura joked.

Carol grinned. "Let's go."

Molly watched her friends amble toward the restaurant, tossing bright-eyed glances over their shoulders at her and Fergus. In her absence, she suspected they'd discuss matchmaking more than the property, but it couldn't be helped. She wanted to go over the house again, especially that apartment.

Fergus accompanied Beverly and Molly, which shouldn't have surprised her. After all, he was the one who had connected them to this property. Even as a teen, he had taken interest in all things historical—especially in Loch Mallaig.

As they approached the front porch again, Molly ignored its peeling state, choosing to picture its gingerbread trim glistening with fresh white paint, maybe with lush ferns hanging from its arches. They would set big pots of coral geraniums here and there, with tall topiaries flanking the front door. She mentally added a couple of porch swings with pillows in cheerful prints where customers could linger over coffee and Laura's to-die-for pastries.

Voilà! All traces of funeral home gloomies gone.

Ideas leaped and danced through Molly's mind as Beverly led them around the first story and up the venerable carved staircase, then unlocked the landing door again and showed them into the apartment. Though Molly again winced at the sight of mauve walls and outdated wallpaper featuring cows in a field, she applied a mental paintbrush. A soft blue throughout would bring a summery Lake Superior vibe into the apartment. She'd paint the cabinets in the tiny kitchen white to lose the dark, dated feel. Molly opened one of the few drawers.

"The kitchen is small, but it would make a great break room," Beverly suggested.

"I don't believe Molly's thinking of using it for the business."

Fergus's voice made Molly jump. She'd almost forgotten he was there. But that quirky, raised brow and the knowing glint in his eyes told her he'd read her mind, just as he often had decades before.

Realizing that they were both watching her for a response, Molly smiled at Beverly. "Fergus is right. Of course we'd need the office and storage room for the bakery. But if we buy the property, I might consider living here. After it's updated, of course."

Beverly blinked, but quickly listed the advantages. “Your walk to work will be the shortest in town. That would be especially nice in January.”

Molly nodded. “I loved Chicago, but I hated commuting to work.” Her mind was already listing larger pieces of furniture she could give her daughter, Chloe, who had just bought her first house.

Slow down, Molly ordered herself. She and her partners certainly couldn’t buy the place with only one walk-through. Even if they did end up purchasing it, Carol and Laura would have to agree to her living in the apartment. “Right now, it’s only a thought—something we’ll discuss.”

“Of course,” Beverly said. “Do you want to revisit anything else in the house? If you’d like to do it on your own, I’ll leave the key with you. You can drop it off at my office later.”

“That would be great. Thanks for your help.” As Molly took the key and shook hands with Beverly, her disobedient mind continued to race. *I’ll keep the love seat, but the big sectional will have to go. Grandma Kirkpatrick’s chairs probably will have to be reupholstered, but they’re the perfect size for that den.*

Beverly started down the staircase but paused and called, “Don’t worry about the fire downstairs. Ethan will drop by during his lunch hour and take care of it.”

Moments later, the front door thumped shut.

Molly hadn’t anticipated being alone with Fergus. She definitely didn’t mean for her own glance to intercept his.

Easy, girl. “This place needs work, but it has possibilities.” She moved across the room and examined the refrigerator and range. This was just a time to catch up with an old friend. A handsome old friend. “These seem reasonably new, and given the kitchen on the main floor, I don’t need anything bigger. In fact, I don’t want anything bigger.”

Fergus nodded. “Traveling light these days, are you?”

Molly opened a cabinet and stared at its empty shelves. “Yes. I’m done with keeping up a full-size home alone. It’s been more than a decade since my husband, Kevin, passed away.”

“I’m sorry.”

She knew he didn’t say it lightly. “Thank you. But I’ve weathered that, and my daughter, Chloe, has left the nest. She’s a veterinarian in Milwaukee.”

“My son, Neil, lives just down the road from me. He’s a big help in the business.” Fergus owned the Castleglen resort and lodge, which his grandfather had started with just a golf course. “But I must say it was hard when my little girl, Blair, grew up on me. She lives in Indianapolis.”

“Never easy, is it?” Molly knew Fergus and his ex-wife, Lucy, had divorced years before, but she wasn’t about to mention it.

He laughed outright. “Oh, on some days, letting Blair go was the easiest thing I ever did. She is a redhead after all.”

They wandered through the rooms again, chatting comfortably all the while—sometimes catching up, sometimes brainstorming remodeling possibilities. Fergus had learned a lot about renovations while running Castleglen, and he offered to help Molly and her partners in any way he could, whether they bought the funeral home or another property. Fergus also knew “the best handyman in the Upper Peninsula,” Hamish Bruce.

“He’s an eccentric old codger, but he knows his stuff,” Fergus said. “When you’ve decided on a place, I’ll introduce you.”

Once they’d finished touring, Molly feared another awkward moment. Did Fergus expect an invitation to lunch? She and her partners really needed to talk. Alone.

Besides, too much time spent with him might complicate matters, and Molly wanted life to stay simple. At least for a while.

Fergus solved her dilemma neatly by saying he had a meeting with Neil to discuss business matters. Was it her imagination, or did his smile hold just the right amount of regret?

Molly waved as he headed to his Range Rover, with its abundant, polished chrome, parked along a side street. Obviously, he still liked sharp cars. *I'll bet it has leather upholstery.*

She bundled up, locked the front door, then gazed up at the big house one more time. Could she persuade her partners to buy this lovely old mansion that had already begun to seem like home?

As she followed the delicious noontime fragrances wafting from Neeps and Tatties, seasoned public relations warrior Molly prepared to give it her best shot.



A few weeks later, light from the chandeliers at King's Heid Pub glimmered in Molly's glass as she raised it high. "To Bread on Arrival! May it be the best Scottish bakehouse Michigan's Upper Peninsula has ever seen."

Laura, Carol, her husband, Harvey, and Fergus echoed her elation and drank the toast, but Fergus, who owned the restaurant, raised his glass a second time.

"To three lovely ladies who will improve our community with their sweet presence." He patted his stomach. "And their sweet treats. I can hardly wait."

Laura toasted him in return. "I'll make you a chocolate truffle cake so rich, even you will gain weight."

Laughing, they clinked glasses. Gratitude surged through Molly as she drank. Not only had Fergus helped them find the funeral home, but he had already committed to standing orders of their bread and pastries for his two restaurants. When Molly and her friends had closed on their new property, they had unanimously voted King's Heid as the perfect place to celebrate.

"Fergus, we can't thank you enough for your help." Molly allowed extra warmth to seep into her words.

"It was my pleasure." His gaze rested on her a moment, then shifted to the red-haired man approaching their table. "Allow me to introduce my son, Neil. He's the brains of my business."

"Oh, sure, Dad. Georgetown taught me everything I need to know,

and I didn't learn a *thing* from you," the tall, young man joked. Shaking hands, Neil flashed a smile that rivaled his father's. He exchanged a few pleasantries, then excused himself to make rounds of the kitchen and serving areas. Molly couldn't imagine Neil would find any flaws. The maple-glazed Chinook salmon—caught that day in Lake Superior, according to their waiter—had tasted heavenly. The dining room, with its rich wall tapestries, polished antique weapon displays, and spotless white tablecloths, extended a royal welcome to the guests. Molly was pleased to note that the place was packed, despite it being the off-season.

"Neil's on the quiet side—always has been—but he does a great job with the staff." Fergus's voice rang with pride in his son. "So glad my kids are smarter than me."

"Oh, right." Molly rolled her eyes. "Don't be silly, Fergus. We know he's learning from the best. We'll take lessons too."

"Any lessons you want to teach us," Carol said. "We have a lot to learn—and a lot to do—between now and our grand opening." She consulted her phone's calendar. "Goodness, March is nearly over. Still, I think we'll be ready by the end of April."

"We can do it." Laura clasped her partners' hands. "I can hardly wait to get started." Little by little, she'd reversed her stance on the funeral home. Now her enthusiasm leavened her partners' like yeast in her brioche.

"Watch out," Harvey teased, shooting a warning glance at Fergus. "These three have always been dangerous together."

"You've got that right." Carol winked at her husband, and he clutched his heart.

Fergus joined Harvey in a fake show of fear. "Och no!"

"Och yes." Molly raised her chin in mock defiance. "As Dad used to say, 'The three Scottish hens are on the loose again.'" She grinned wickedly at the phrase. "Loch Mallaig will never be the same."



By the end of the following morning, Molly wondered if her *back* would ever be the same. Though she, Carol, and Laura had each claimed a section of the large main room, taping it in preparation for painting was taking forever. The tall windows, ornate woodwork, and built-in cabinets with beautiful lead glass required extra care.

Stop whining, Molly admonished her creaking bones as she carried in buckets of paint and other supplies. Had she thought a dream come true would happen by magic?

“Whose idea was this, anyway?” Carol demanded from the top of a ladder, where she was taping off crown molding.

“Let’s blame Molly.” Hunkered next to the baseboard, Laura peered up at her, a mischievous light in her eyes. “In fact, we should let Molly do it all, since she’s going to live here.”

Setting the paint buckets on the floor with a thud, Molly sugared her voice. “Oh, you can live here too. We could all share that apartment, just like we did in college. So what if there’s only one bedroom? We could do bunk beds.”

Laura snorted. “We’re good friends, but not *that* good. I’m glad I’ve got the lease on my rental cottage signed.”

“I don’t think Harvey would like that arrangement,” Carol commented. “He’s already in love with our new log home, and I’m pretty sure he likes having me there too. And both of you, of course.” Molly and Laura were staying with the MacCallans until they moved into their own places.

“Oh, I’m sure Harvey thanks his lucky stars every night that he’s got two extra roommates,” Laura said with a chuckle. “A retirement dream come true.”

Molly luxuriated in banter and laughter as they worked. It was so

good to be with friends again. And she was so happy that at day's end, sad goodbyes and long distances no longer separated them.

Halfway through the morning, though, Carol asked Molly how Chloe had reacted to their purchase.

Molly gulped, mentally scrambling for an answer.

"You haven't told her?" Carol lowered her chin, nailing Molly with the sharp expression that had cowed many an unruly student.

"She doesn't need to know everything that goes on in my life," Molly retorted.

Laura added a "you've got to be kidding" stare to Carol's.

"Okay, I just sounded like your average seventeen-year-old," Molly admitted, then sighed. "Chloe liked the job opportunity in Milwaukee better than two other possibilities farther south. It pays more too. But she also wanted to live somewhere where we could visit on a regular basis. Now we're more than six hours apart, rather than just the two-hour train ride that separates Milwaukee and Chicago."

"I get that." Carol patted her shoulder. "Harvey and I are lucky." The fact their daughter and her family lived in Loch Mallaig had made their move from Pennsylvania an easy decision.

"Still, it's not like you moved to Alaska." Laura rolled her eyes. "You didn't promise her you'd stay in Chicago forever, did you?"

"Well, no. But children are like that, regardless of age." How could Molly explain this to Laura? Happily single, she didn't understand—though she should. Laura now lived only two hours away from her family, the proximity to her aging parents being part of the reason she'd made the move. Molly shrugged. "Kids assume parents will always be available."

"But you have your own life to live too," Laura insisted.

"And we're so glad you want to share it with us." Carol, who did

understand, squeezed Molly's hand. "But Chloe deserves to know, just as you should know about her major life decisions, don't you think?"

Molly groaned. "Do you two always have to be right?"

"No. Just ninety-nine percent of the time," Carol declared with a smirk.

"So call Chloe." Laura pulled Molly's phone from her jeans pocket and dangled it in her face. "Now, before you talk yourself out of it."

Molly grabbed the phone. "I'll call her tonight."

"No you won't." Carol eyed her. "Didn't you say Chloe works from noon into the evening most Mondays?"

Molly frowned. "Not only are you two bossy, your memories are too good."

"So call her." Laura's teasing tone faded to serious. "The longer you delay, the madder she'll be."

True. "All right, all right. I'll call—but you girls get back to work. No eavesdropping." Her face grim, Molly headed for the kitchen.

She took a deep breath and another, then hit speed dial. Too late, Molly wondered if she'd awaken her sleep-loving daughter.

"Hey, Mom." Chloe sounded almost cheery, relieving the smallest of Molly's concerns.

"Hi, sweetie. How are you?"

They exchanged chitchat about Chloe's new house and a scary but successful surgery she'd performed on a family's beloved Irish setter, but the younger Ferris woman soon cut to the chase. "So have you seen any property that might work for your bakery-in-the-wild?"

Molly swallowed. "As a matter of fact, I—I mean, we, Carol and Laura and I—bought a building."

"You already bought it?" Chloe's voice went up an octave. "I thought you were just looking."

Molly knew she'd given Chloe that impression, and shame washed

over her. “This place was an excellent deal. We figured we’d better snap it up before someone else bought it.” Molly tried to ignore how many months the funeral parlor had remained empty.

Chloe pounced on the fib. “Yes, we all know that thousands of businesses are competing for space in northern Michigan. With the bears.”

“I haven’t seen a single bear.” *Even though they do prowls around the edge of town sometimes.*

Her daughter sniffed. “Yet.”

Hoping to get the conversation back on track, Molly focused on the positive. “Seriously, it’s beautiful here—lake, evergreens, quaint little town. The house is a big old Victorian with gingerbread trim and a gorgeous wraparound porch. It just needs a little work.”

“I’ll bet.” Despite her skepticism, a note of curiosity crept into Chloe’s voice. “So you’re remodeling a big old house?”

“Ah, yes.” This time, it was Molly’s voice that went up an octave.

“Mom, what aren’t you telling me?”

Giving up, Molly plunged in. “It’s an old funeral parlor.”

“A *what?*”

“It was a mortuary,” Molly said, then added brightly, “We’re going to use its history as a PR tool.”

“How could you possibly sell baked goods using a funeral theme?” Chloe practically shrieked the words.

“We’re calling it Bread on Arrival. We bought the hearse too.”

“The *hearse?*”

“We’ll use it as a delivery vehicle.”

Chloe remained silent for so long that Molly thought she’d hung up.

“Hello?” Molly ventured softly. “Are you still there?”

“I’m here.” Her daughter took a deep breath. “Couldn’t your midlife crisis just be buying a motorcycle like a normal person?”



Returning to the main room, Molly stuffed her phone into her pocket like a pistol into a holster.

Carol took one look at her and grimaced. “Chloe didn’t handle it very well, did she?”

“You could say that.” Her daughter’s forced courtesy during the remainder of the phone call had reminded Molly of ice on a puddle—brittle, with plenty of mud underneath.

“Give her time,” Laura urged. “She’ll get used to the idea.”

“Maybe.” *In a year. Or five.* Nevertheless, Molly straightened her shoulders and returned to her task. “At least she knows now. I don’t have to keep rehearsing speeches.”

Strangely, taping woodwork no longer felt like drudgery. Compared to dealing with a disgruntled adult daughter, it seemed uncomplicated, even easy. Molly threw herself into her work, as did Carol and Laura, all eager to forget about the phone call.

Fergus surprised them by appearing at eleven o’clock, though he’d said he wouldn’t be free to help until the afternoon. A tall, wiry, white-bearded man accompanied him. His eyes reminded Molly of a hawk’s as he scrutinized each of the three women.

Fergus introduced him. “This is Hamish Bruce, my former history teacher. Now he’s the best handyman in the UP.”

“An exaggeration, lad,” Hamish admonished Fergus as if he were a teenager instead of a man in his early fifties. “But only a little.”

He sounded serious. Molly exchanged glances with her partners while Hamish paced the room, inspecting it as if he were in charge of the entire project. They needed help, but what was Fergus getting them into?

“I used to help out the Baileys sometimes,” the old man continued

in his faint Scottish brogue, “so I know there’s a kitchen here—one that’ll need changes if you’re going to open a bakery.” He started down the hall. “I like to do kitchens.”

“Hamish remodeled mine at King’s Heid,” Fergus explained as they trailed after the older man, who seemed to have already hired himself. “He saved me all kinds of money, and my chef is still raving.”

Thank goodness. Molly sensed the others’ relief too.

Upon entering the kitchen, Hamish whipped out a tape measure. “Probably need a commercial oven—”

“Two commercial ovens,” Carol interjected. “We hope to do lots of wedding cakes, along with breads and pastries.”

“More sinks for cleanup too,” Laura added.

“My department, probably,” Molly said as Hamish began measuring and muttering to himself.

“You bake, don’t you?” Fergus asked. “I recall eating incredible blackberry pie at your summer cottage.”

He’d remembered her specialty. Molly brushed off her pleasure. “I do pies and basic cakes and breads. I’ll help out. But Laura and Carol are the real bakers in this business. I’m the marketing person, the counter lady, the cleanup guru, and whatever else we need.”

“You get to drive that hearse.” Laura hadn’t quite reconciled with the LaSalle.

“I’d love to. But it has a manual transmission.” Molly pictured the vintage car jolting and jerking through downtown as she mishandled the gear shift. No wedding cake would survive that.

“No problem there.” Fergus’s face lit up, and Molly’s stomach fluttered. “I’ll teach you.”

Calm down, Molly. He just wants to drive that car. “Thanks.” Molly smiled. “I might take you up on that after we get this place going.”

Hamish moved faster than Molly would have expected from a man

his age. Examining the proposed walk-in refrigerator and freezer space, he said, “Ah, the embalming areas. Didn’t work around there much.” He scratched his neatly trimmed beard. “Jim Bailey was a good man with a noble occupation. Not easy, you know, preparing folks for their heavenly homes. Och, some were ugly as a bucket of frogs when they came in. Took a real trick or two to make them pretty in a casket.”

Laura and Carol froze. Molly thanked heaven they’d already signed the mortgage contract.

Her partners’ reaction didn’t register on Hamish’s radar. “Jim took care of all my family.” He puffed out his chest. “My great-great-grandfather helped found this town. We’re pure Scots, of course, related to Robert the Bruce.”

Any subject was better than embalming, so Molly pounced. “The Scottish hero?”

A big smile—his first—filled Hamish’s face. “None other.” Continuing his inspection, he spouted a treatise on Bruce’s exploits but eventually wandered back to what he considered the subject at hand. “Jim Bailey and his kin always took care of the founding families. Even did the mayor a couple of years ago. Mayor Kinnaird, I mean. Not Mayor Calhoun, who’s in office now.”

When Laura interrupted Hamish with appliance alternatives she’d researched, the man’s heavy, white brows scrunched over his eyes.

Sorry, Hamish. It’s our project, not yours. Over the years, Molly had encountered other experts who tried to take over. They’d always thought they knew what she needed better than she did.

Carol leaped into the discussion. As she and Laura revealed their plans for the kitchen, Hamish’s brows relaxed, and he eventually gave a grudging nod of approval and agreed to do what they wanted. “I see these hens know their work,” he told Fergus as he headed upstairs without invitation.

Molly halted on the first step. Laura's brown eyes snapped. Carol's expression said she wanted to give Hamish detention.

Fergus risked a glance backward, then hastily followed the handyman upstairs.

Of course the "hens" knew the expression was a common Scottish term for "women," one that even Molly's father used. But coming from Hamish, it sounded decidedly uncomplimentary. Molly paused, seeing her own debate mirrored in her partners' taut faces. Could they tolerate the outspoken man for a few weeks in order to get the bakehouse going? Or should they show "the best handyman in the UP" the door and lock it behind him?

Molly took a deep breath. "I'm going to see what he has to say about the upstairs."

"Have fun," Laura muttered.

"Good luck." Carol cast a sympathetic glance at Molly, then started back toward the main room with Laura.

"No, no," Molly protested, "I need your help. Safety in numbers, you know. Besides, working with Hamish has to be a joint decision. We should do this together."

The other women sighed and followed Molly to the apartment, probably to watch the fireworks that would ensue. Molly sighed too, but she'd handled difficult people before. She could do this. To make her dream come true, she *would* do this—for a limited time.

Her smile seemed to startle Fergus. Hamish didn't appear to notice, of course. But Molly needed all her tools of persuasion, and a smile always warmed her voice. She honeyed her next words. "My, you work quickly, Hamish."

He was going over the kitchenette. "No sense in wasting my time and yours."

"I agree. We're not wasting money either. Other than painting it

and adding a backsplash, I'm leaving this kitchen as is. So let's move on to the business rooms. For starters, we'd like a new exterior door in the office. And we'll need shelving in the storeroom."

Hamish seemed to soften a little as Molly explained their plans for the upper story. *Maybe he just needs a firm hand.*

Finally, she, Carol, and Laura found themselves agreeing to Hamish's reasonable hourly charge. The next day, he began painting, installing, and constructing at lightning speed—and doing it well.

As the main story's new appearance took shape, Molly mused at the gift Fergus had sent their way.

If only Hamish and his monologue had an "off" button.



Even when the prospect of opening the bakehouse in Loch Mallaig had been little more than a dream for the three women, Carol and Harvey had moved to town to be closer to their daughter, Jenny, and her family. The MacCallans were well established in their large log house, so Laura and Molly felt like they were returning to a real home at the end of each long, hard day. The only thing missing for Molly was her Scottish terrier, Angus.

Not wanting to impose or traumatize the MacCallans' cat, Pascal, Molly had insisted on boarding Angus at a kennel in Copper Harbor. Now, though, she missed her beloved Scottie so much that she secretly wished she'd taken the couple up on their invitation to let Angus stay with them.

For months, Molly had pictured the trio's first weeks together in Loch Mallaig. Every night, they'd sit in front of the MacCallans' fireplace and sip herbal tea or indulge in big mugs of hot chocolate topped with mountains of whipped cream. Their wee-hour gabfests would drive Harvey to ice fishing.

Instead, after working at the bakehouse all day, the reunited roommates microwaved frozen dinners, then fell into bed. Molly hadn't slept so well in years.

Despite better rest, she didn't welcome a nudge one morning before the alarm went off.

"Molly. Wake up."

Her foggy brain cells, occupied with a dream that combined Laura's chocolate éclairs and an international hearse race, ignored the hand poking her shoulder.

When it refused to cease and desist, Molly turned over. "Go away. Too early to paint."

"It's not really," Carol's no-nonsense voice intoned, "but that isn't why I'm dragging you out. The police called. Somebody broke into our bakehouse."