



Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries™

If Looks Could Kilt



Elizabeth Penney



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Library of Congress-in-Publication Data

If Looks Could Kill / by Elizabeth Penney

p. cm.

I. Title

2019951565

AnniesFiction.com

(800) 282-6643

Scottish Bakehouse Mysteries™

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Series Editor: Elizabeth Morrissey

Cover Illustrator: Kelley McMorris

10 11 12 13 14 | Printed in China | 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



A drifting mist shrouded the green hills and gathered in the steep valleys below. In the cramped back seat of the rental car, Laura Donovan hugged herself, both against the damp air and in excitement. *I'm in Scotland!* she thought gleefully. *And I'm going to meet my idol!*

Former professional chef Laura and her fellow bakery co-owners, Carol MacCallan and Molly Ferris, had traveled from their home in Scottish-influenced Loch Mallaig, Michigan, to the real Scotland for a workshop taught by celebrity baker Agnes McVie. As if that wasn't enough to send any culinary-minded woman into a tizzy, the master-level class was being held at Glenellen Castle, an ancient estate on the shores of a loch. They hoped to learn new techniques to use in their bakehouse, Bread on Arrival.

"You all right back there?" Molly asked. She sat up front, next to Carol, who had become their designated driver after revealing she'd driven in the United Kingdom before. Under other circumstances, adventurous Laura might have given driving on the left a chance, but having barely slept on their overnight flight, she'd thought it best to wait on that particular new experience. Her brain felt as if it were stuffed with the fog swirling past her window.

"I'm fine," Laura said. "Just getting excited now that we're actually here. I've only waited fifty-one years for this." She spotted sheep on a hillside. Not that they didn't have sheep in Michigan, but these were *Scottish* sheep, eating *Scottish* grass.

"Same here," Molly said. "I'm so glad you talked us into this, Laura."

“I know Agnes McVie is your hero,” Carol said, “but I can’t wait to see what she has to teach us. And to learn Scottish baking techniques in an actual Scottish castle? Why, what a brow idea.”

The ladies chuckled over Carol’s use of a Scottishism commonly heard in Loch Mallaig, a town settled in the early 1800s by Scottish pioneers that retained much of the homeland’s customs, colloquialisms, and, in the case of some residents, brogues.

“I’ve watched Agnes McVie’s shows and own all her cookbooks, but I never thought I’d actually meet her.” Laura grinned. “And I can’t think of anyone I’d rather do it with than my favorite former college roommates and current partners in crime.”

Molly tucked a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. “We took a chance closing the bakehouse for ten days so soon after we opened, but I think that the risk will reap rewards when we can advertise the fact that we’ve trained with Agnes McVie.” As the group’s PR mastermind, she had a keen sense for marketing. “I’m just grateful that Harvey was willing to watch Angus.”

“You may have a hard time getting your Scottie back. Harvey’s ego can only take so much of Pascal’s indifference.” Carol laughed, no doubt picturing her husband cuddling with Molly’s beloved Scottish terrier while the MacCallans’ cat hid under a bed, as usual. “Speaking of which, have either of you heard from anyone at home?” The ever-organized Carol had overseen the purchase of overseas SIM cards for their cell phones, which they’d swapped in upon landing in Edinburgh.

Laura had never been married and Molly had been widowed for more than ten years, so unlike Carol, they didn’t have husbands waiting for them in Loch Mallaig. However, Molly’s twenty-seven-year-old daughter, Chloe, and Laura’s brother, Brody, had both requested frequent updates about their Highland adventures, so they checked their phones.

“I don’t have any texts,” Molly said. “Chloe is working double shifts at the veterinary clinic this week, though, so she’s pretty much off the grid.”

“Nothing from Fergus?” Carol asked innocently.

“No,” Molly answered quickly. Laura couldn’t see her face, but she was pretty sure her friend’s cheeks were bright pink. Fergus MacGregor, who had helped them get their bakery on its feet, had been Molly’s teenage crush, and they’d rekindled their friendship—and nothing more, Molly insisted—since the women had moved to Loch Mallaig.

“I don’t have any messages either,” Laura reported. “But I bet service is spotty out here.” They were in the heart of the mountains, quite close to Ben Nevis, the country’s highest peak at over 4,000 feet, and her phone didn’t display any reception bars.

The road grew steeper and even more narrow, the hills crowding close on each side. Laura thought they should be going down rather than up, since the hotel was on the water, but hesitated to say anything. Former math teacher and current bookkeeping expert Carol had assured them that she’d mapped out the entire trip, door to door.

After a few more minutes of the car grinding uphill, Molly glanced over at Carol. “We’re on the right road, correct?”

In response, Carol’s shoulders hunched and she gripped the wheel tighter. “There was a choice of two routes and I chose this one. I thought it’d be more scenic.”

“It is that,” Laura said.

“Chocolate?” Molly pulled out a bar and broke off pieces. “I bought this at the airport.”

Laura blessed Molly’s wisdom as she took a piece. She bit into it and allowed it to melt on her tongue. It was creamy and rich, and it dissolved some of the tension in the car.

The vehicle finally achieved the crest and began heading downhill. “There’s the loch,” Carol said, relief evident in her voice. “We’re going the right way.”

They wound down into the valley, the mist thickening the lower they went. Still visible in the fog were more sheep, an occasional crumbling cottage, stacked stone walls, a man on horseback.

Wait, what? Laura squinted into the mist. It parted slightly, revealing a horse cantering through a field. To Laura’s delight, the rider was dressed in a red tartan kilt and plaid, his legs bare save for knee socks, and a tam topped his curly locks. Maybe people up here wore traditional clothing and used horses rather than cars.

“Do you see that?” Molly asked. “He’s like something out of the past.”

“What are you looking at?” Carol pulled her gaze away from the road for a quick glance. “You’re right.”

“There are some more people wearing kilts,” Laura pointed out. In a grassy hollow, two men circled each other warily, and to her surprise, she saw they were carrying swords. Surely that wasn’t how they settled disputes here. A woman with flowing auburn hair stood to one side. Her clothing too was traditional Highlands, with a long plaid draped over her flowing skirt.

Carol slowed the car to a crawl. “What on earth is going on? Should we call 911?”

“Over here it’s 999,” Laura corrected. She’d picked up that tidbit while standing in line at customs and reading wall signs.

Molly suddenly clapped her hands and issued a squeal of glee. “There’s Charlotte Martin!” As the others continued to give her puzzled glances, she added, “The star of *A Highland Lass*? The TV show?” She sighed in exasperation. “Haven’t you ever watched it?”

“No,” Carol and Laura said in unison.

“It’s a story about star-crossed lovers from warring Highland clans set in the mid-1700s,” Molly said. “There’s lots of real history and the costumes are to die for. And so is the male lead, Finn Paterson.”

As Laura continued watching, the man on horseback swept into the clearing, pausing only long enough to sweep Charlotte onto his saddle before spurring his horse on. A chill ran down Laura’s spine and she broke out in goose bumps. Even without a soundtrack, the scene was thrilling.

“There he is,” Molly said. “Rescuing Ainslee again. That’s the name of Charlotte’s character.”

“Wow. Talk about swoon worthy,” said the usually pragmatic Carol. Her bright brown eyes shone with excitement. “How often do you get to see something like that?”

“Or your favorite television show being filmed.” Molly’s nose was practically pressed to the window glass as they drove by the scene. A short distance on, they saw the film crew, which had previously been hidden behind a cluster of trees. At angry gestures from a couple of people, Carol hit the gas.

Wincing, Laura hoped their car—or its engine noise—hadn’t been caught on camera. But they hadn’t seen any signs closing the road.

As they drove down the hill, the fog obligingly parted, revealing the shores of Loch Glenellen and a small cluster of houses and other stone buildings beside it. A little way inland from the village, a beautiful manor house stood on a hill. And straight ahead, like something out of a fairy tale, was Glenellen Castle, a sweep of gray stone ornamented with towers, turrets, and battlements. The trio all gasped at the sight.

“It’s gorgeous,” Laura said. The pictures she’d seen online hadn’t done it justice.

As they descended the grade, the castle was lost behind trees. At the bottom of the hill, the road intersected with another. Here,

thankfully, was a signpost informing them that the castle could be accessed to the left, along with the village. Glenellen Manor, a stately yet elegant stone house, was to the right.

“The manor looks intriguing too,” Molly said. “I wonder if it’s open to the public.”

“I hope so,” Laura said. “I want to see everything I can while we’re here.” She felt an urgency to savor every second of this experience.

A tall wall soon appeared to their right, a sign they were close to the castle entrance. Then Laura spotted massive iron gates beside a charming stone gatehouse. A plaque attached to the wall announced that this was indeed Glenellen Castle.

The gates were open so Carol drove in, the small sedan’s tires crunching on gravel. The curving lane provided sweeping vistas of leafy trees, colorful flower gardens, and lush rolling lawns. Laura had a very real sense of stepping back in time, to a period when they would have approached the castle on horseback or in a carriage.

At last they emerged from a final band of trees and reached the castle’s courtyard. The building towered over them as Carol continued along the circular drive to the front entrance, marked by a portico.

“Here we are, ladies.” Carol shut off the engine. “After we get checked in, I’ll see where they want me to park the car.”

After a long drive, they climbed out with stretches and groans. The place was quiet, with the sound of songbirds drifting on the breeze. The air carried fragrances of freshly cut grass and something blooming.

Laura felt all her tensions drop away. In an impulse she gathered the other two women into a group hug. “We’re going to have the best time. I just know it.”

As the massive wooden front door opened, a huge black dog ran out, panting.

“Minnie, heel,” a slender woman with an unlined face and a gray bob called from the doorway. “Don’t mind her, lasses. She’ll do no harm.” The woman’s Scottish accent was slight but charming.

Minnie was more interested in slobbering on their shoes than anything else, and she paid her mistress very little mind, if any. Molly smiled and gave the Newfoundland’s scruff a vigorous scratch while Carol opened the car’s trunk and began depositing bags onto the flagstones.

Laura waved at the silver-haired woman. “We’re here for the baking workshop. Are you Lady Freya Cameron?” she asked, having been the one who’d contacted the castle owner to book their stay.

“I am indeed. You must be the three ladies from Michigan. Welcome to Glenellen Castle.” Lady Freya stepped out of the portico. “Do you need help with your bags? I can call my husband.”

“We packed fairly light, so I think we’ll be okay,” Carol answered. “But thank you.”

“Your car is fine here for now,” Lady Freya said. “Let’s get you settled.” She grabbed a couple of totes, and as a group, they entered the castle, Minnie padding along behind them.

Laura sucked in a breath at the sight of the magnificent entrance hall, with its painted ceiling two stories above, impressive chandeliers, and grand staircase winding up. Carved wood was everywhere—over arched doorways, ornamenting the surround of a massive fireplace, and lining the walls. She also noticed hints of red-and-green fabric here and there, and was surprised at how it added to the elegance of the hall.

“Lady Freya, can you tell us about this fabric?” Molly asked, apparently noticing it as well.

“That’s Clan Cameron’s traditional tartan,” Lady Freya explained, trotting toward a tall reception desk. “We like to show pride in it here.” She set the totes down carefully and went behind the counter.

Here, in stark contrast to the tasteful, historic room, stood a sleek computer and printer.

While they waited, Laura glanced around, noting the sheer sense of history in the place. Crossed swords and a couple of shields hung on the wall above the fireplace. Through an archway, she caught glimpses of statues on stands and walls hung with oil paintings. She craned her neck to peek through another open doorway behind the check-in counter—and met the gaze of an older man seated at a desk.

With a jolt at being caught staring, Laura issued a quick smile, then glanced away. Her sights rested on a portrait of a young man hanging on the wall, a cravat around his neck and an aloof expression on his handsome face. A moment later, she felt a presence at her side.

“That is the fifteenth Earl of Glenellen,” the older man said in a cultured voice, gesturing toward the painting with the half-glasses he’d just removed. “I am the thirtieth. The first structure on this property was built in the fourteenth century, more of a stronghold than anything. You can see remnants of the castle’s history all through the place, if you know where to look.”

“Don’t let on to Alan if you like history,” Freya announced, tapping away at the computer. “He’ll talk your ear off.” But the smile she sent him was fond.

Lord Alan swung his glasses by the earpiece. “I’m working on a series of biographies about Scottish kings and queens, so I am rather immersed. You must forgive me if I bore you.”

Hamish would love to meet Lord Alan, Laura thought. Their part-time bakehouse employee was a retired history teacher and fascinated by Scottish history—he could also be a bit prickly, so she made a mental note to learn everything she could to share with him when they got home, thinking that plying him with factoids might soften his edges a little.

“We’re from a town that revels in its Scottish roots,” Molly said.

“So believe me, we’d love a tour of the castle and to hear any stories about your ancestors.”

Lord Alan beamed. “That’s fantastic.” He folded the glasses and hung them in the V of his sweater’s collar. “I’ve got a good one for you.” He leaned a little closer, dropping his voice to almost a whisper. “They say there’s a stash of gold hidden somewhere on this property. Left behind by Bonnie Prince Charlie’s men after his failed attempt to regain the throne.”

Carol sucked in a breath of excitement. “I know about Bonnie Prince Charlie. His grandfather, King James, was exiled to Europe when William and Mary took the throne. In 1745, Prince Charlie led an uprising based in Scotland.”

“That’s right,” Lord Alan said. “The uprising failed miserably, leading to the dissolution of the clans. Scotland has never been the same.” He leaned against the front desk, obviously making himself comfortable for a good, long chat.

“Away with you, my dear.” Lady Freya waved at her husband. “You can have this discussion later. I need to get our guests settled.” She placed printed pages on the countertop for them to sign.

Her husband took the scolding in good grace, ambling back to his office with a promise to catch up later.

After the ladies signed the registration forms, Lady Freya gave them each a key. “I’ve put you together in the east wing,” she said. “Those rooms have en suite bathrooms and a view of the loch.” She circled their rooms on a floor plan of the castle.

“Sounds perfect,” Molly enthused. “We’re so happy to be here.”

“And we’re glad to have you with us.” Lady Freya handed a printed program to each woman. “This is the schedule for the baking classes. They will begin tomorrow after breakfast. Now let me show you to your rooms.”

Laura scrutinized the schedule on the way along the upstairs corridor, which seemed to stretch forever. She smiled as she read over the topics: Scotch pies, almond lace cookies, oatcakes, sticky toffee pudding. All familiar dishes, but she was eager to find out what Agnes McVie could teach them about each one.

Molly, on the other hand, had her mind on different matters. “We noticed them filming *A Highland Lass* on the way here,” she said to their hostess. “I’m a big fan.”

“Some of the cast and crew are staying here, in the west wing.” Lady Freya sent Molly a smile. “Including Charlotte Martin.”

Molly practically swooned. “You mean I might get to meet her?”

“I expect so,” her ladyship said. “She’ll be here at least until the end of this week.” She stopped in front of a door. “This is you, Carol.” Using her master key, she unlocked the door and stood back to let Carol enter.

Laura followed along inside. The room wasn’t huge, but it was furnished with a canopy bed and carved antique furniture. Thick carpets and wall hangings gave it a cozy feel. Freya showed Carol the bathroom—once a dressing room—and Carol set down her bags. “I want to see your rooms,” she said to Laura and Molly.

Molly’s room was similar, but with a blue theme instead of red. Laura’s was decorated in pale yellow, and she couldn’t wait to take a long bath in the slipper tub and maybe even pretend she was a member of the royal family.

“You must be exhausted from your travels,” Lady Freya said. “If you want, I can bring up a tray. I recommend you get a good night’s sleep.”

The trio accepted their hostess’s offer with gratitude. Laura knew she wasn’t up to eating in public right now. The friends decided to unpack and rest, then gather to eat when the food arrived in an hour or so.

After the others had left, Laura hung her clothing in the closet and put her toiletry bag in the bathroom. Then she opened the curtains wide to the view of the loch and plopped on the bed to rest for a bit.

Her break didn't last long. Excitement overcame her physical exhaustion, and she sprang to her feet. She wasn't going to waste a minute of this precious trip. She made a circuit of the room, studying the handwoven tapestries and ornately framed oil paintings. There was carved wainscoting and one wall was fully paneled. She ran her hand along the satiny wood, admiring the carved thistles and other emblems. No one did work like this anymore. Who could afford it?

Something clicked under her touch. Not sure if she'd imagined the sound, Laura pressed on the panel again. A length of wood separated from the one beside it. Laura's heart began to pound. Was this a secret doorway? She'd heard of such things and had always wanted to see one in real life.

She slid her fingernails between the panels and tugged gently, and the opening widened enough for her to peer inside. Cool air brushed past her face, which meant there was ventilation somewhere. Laura stepped inside the opening. The shaft of light from her room revealed that she was on a landing, with shadowy stairs going up and down. She had found a secret staircase.

Carol and Molly have to see this. She turned to go back out, but to her shock, the opening slid shut without a sound.

Laura was trapped in the dark.



For a long moment, Laura stood in the dusty dark, not quite sure what had just happened. Then she barked a laugh. “Well, that’ll teach me,” she murmured as she returned to the wall and used her fingers to try and find the opening.

But there was nothing. The wall had sealed so seamlessly that she couldn’t even feel where the doorway had been.

Time for plan B. Laura pounded on the wall with both fists. “Anybody there? Help! I’m trapped!”

No one came. Laura leaned against the wall. Was she going to be stuck here forever? She grimaced as images of skeletons from other unfortunates flashed into her mind. Then she rolled her eyes. *Carol and Molly will realize you’re missing and look for you.* But had she locked her door? Her brave attitude nearly cracked at the question. No, she’d left it open, she was pretty sure.

Trying to ignore the fears circling her head like bats—and she certainly hoped there weren’t any of those in here!—Laura slid down to the floor and sat with her back against the wall. She had to be patient and wait, that was all. She’d certainly learned her lesson. No exploring secret passageways, at least not without a light. Even her cell phone would help, but that was sitting on the bedside table.

How much longer was she going to be in here? Their meals should be arriving soon. She’d spent at least half an hour unpacking and examining her room.

At a muffled noise, Laura leaped to her feet, her ear pressed to the

wall. Was that a voice? Straining to listen, she definitely heard voices getting louder and rising in inquiry. Then she distinctly heard Carol call, “Laura? Where did you go?”

She banged on the wall. “I’m in here!” she yelled. “Behind the wall.” When there was no response, she pounded harder, with every ounce of strength she had.

“Laura? Are you in there?” Carol called.

Someone knocked on the wall and Laura rapped back eagerly.

“Hang on,” Molly called. “We’re going to get you out.”

Laura waited, her heart thumping in her chest. She liked adventure as much as anyone, but suddenly she couldn’t wait to get out, to see sunlight and breath fresh air, to see the faces of her—

Click. The panel slid open. “There you are, my girl.” Lady Freya gestured. “Why don’t you step out of there?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Laura said, slipping through the gap. Both of her friends were hovering nearby, anxiety etching their faces. They gathered Laura into a group hug.

Lady Freya closed the panel. “I’m going to have to put up a warning sign, I suppose. Or block the opening with furniture.” She swung around to wag a finger at Laura. “We can’t have guests disappearing on us.”

“I appreciate the rescue,” Laura said, brushing dust and cobwebs off her sweater. “I opened the passageway by accident and then I couldn’t resist going inside. I had no idea it would close on me.”

“There’s a latch on the other side,” Lady Freya said. “You must have hit it.”

“Is it a secret room or a secret passage?” Carol asked, running her hand along the paneling.

“There’s a staircase that goes down to the kitchen as well as up to the tower,” Lady Freya answered.

“Ah, so it’s just servant access,” Carol said.

Lady Freya held up a finger. “Not entirely. It was built in the days when people—like priests—had to hide.”

“Including Bonnie Prince Charlie?” Molly asked, her eyes glowing with interest. “Do you think gold is hidden in the castle, like your husband said?”

The lady scoffed. “No, that’s only a myth. If all the gold Charlie was supposed to have hidden was found, you could pave the streets of Edinburgh.”

Laura nodded. Like many tall tales, the rumor of gold was probably for entertainment purposes only. Besides, if there actually was a hidden treasure, surely it would have been found by now, over two hundred years after Charlie had fled Scotland.

Apparently tired of the topic, her ladyship said, “If there’s anything else you need, give me a ring on the house phone. Otherwise, enjoy your evening.” She bustled toward Laura’s door, which stood open to the hall.

“Our food is in my room,” Carol said. “I have a big table so we can eat in there.”

“She brought us chicken stew and bannock bread,” Molly said. “I can’t wait to try it.”

At the mention of the tasty biscuit-like bread baked in a cast iron skillet, Laura’s stomach rumbled. “Let’s go. I’m starving.”



Laura’s first night in a Scottish castle passed peacefully and she woke up refreshed. She opened the curtains to a view of sunlight sparkling on the loch and not a speck of fog anywhere. From here, she could see the hills surrounding the water like a bowl, a touch of white on the peaks where snow still lingered.

Stunning. Absolutely stunning. Laura inhaled a deep breath of gratitude at this opportunity to experience life in Scotland, however brief. Someone knocked at her door. “Come in,” she called.

Carol popped her head in. “We’re going down to breakfast in ten. Will you be ready?”

“Sure. Let me get dressed and I’ll be over.” Laura had taken a bath to rid herself of any remaining cobwebs after her secret passage adventure, so all she needed to do was brush her teeth and run a comb through her shoulder-length auburn hair.

Laura put on a fresh pair of jeans and a quirky T-shirt from a food festival she’d attended in upstate New York a few years earlier, then slipped her feet into some low-heeled boots, assuming they’d be standing at cooking stations for the workshop.

Not that she was a stranger to long hours on her feet—as the former head chef at trendy Manhattan restaurant 29 North, she felt as though she’d spent more hours standing than sitting for the past few decades. She’d thrived on the late nights and high-pressure atmosphere of the New York City restaurant scene. But after a visit to her aging parents in Michigan the previous summer, she’d found herself longing to be closer to them, as well as Brody and his family. When she’d confessed that to Carol and Molly on a girlfriends’ trip the next month, they’d also admitted to craving a midlife change. Less than a year later, the three women—whom Fergus had dubbed the Bakehouse Three—had cut the ribbon at Bread on Arrival’s grand opening.

Laura stood and bounced a little in her boots, deciding that they’d be perfect for a morning of cooking lessons, and even for a walk in the afternoon if they had time. In the room’s local guide, it said the village was less than a mile away following a path along the loch.

She popped her billfold into her tote to take downstairs, not willing to let her passport or wallet out of her sight. She was just locking her

door behind her when Carol and Molly emerged from their rooms.

“Good morning,” Laura greeted her friends.

“*Guid mornin*,” Carol answered with a sparkle in her eyes. She seemed to remember a new phrase used by her father’s Scottish parents every day.

“Let’s get some breakfast.” Laura grinned. “Or is there something else I should be calling it?”

“Breakfast works fine for me,” Carol said.

Molly studied a tourist map of the area as they descended the stairs. “I want to go shopping later. We need souvenirs.”

“I have to bring the kids something.” Carol laughed. “Including Harvey.” Carol’s daughter, Jenny and her husband, Craig, had school-age twins, Maisie and Gavin. They lived in Loch Mallaig and were a large part of the reason Carol and Harvey had relocated from Pittsburgh.

“The fun part is deciding what to buy,” Laura said. “I like to find locally made crafts whenever I travel.”

“That will be our mission,” Molly said. “And yes, I accept it.” She pulled her gaze from her map to point out a corridor opening off the lobby. “The dining room is that way.”

The dining room was spacious, with green-and-cream embossed wallpaper and several round tables dotting the floral-patterned carpet. On one side, a pleasant fire crackled under a carved mantel, and on the other stood a long table holding urns and chafing dishes. Lady Freya stood at the table, checking something under a lid.

“Good morning, ladies,” she said. “I trust you slept well?”

The women all assented.

“Glad to hear it.” Lady Freya gestured to the buffet. “We’ve got tea, coffee, and juice. To eat, there’s oatmeal as well as a full Scottish breakfast.” She pointed to a smaller table. “Over there we have fruit, yogurt, and cold cereal for lighter appetites.”

“I want the full breakfast,” Molly said. “When in Rome, right?” She set down her bag at one of the tables and the others did the same. Then they lined up at the buffet, filling gilt-edged china plates and cups.

“Did you make all of this yourself?” Laura asked Lady Freya, thinking that their hostess would need professional training to handle all the cooking alone. The full breakfast included beans, eggs, fried mushrooms and tomatoes, an assortment of breakfast meats, and golden tattie scones made from potatoes—and it smelled amazing.

Lady Freya laughed. “Certainly not. We have a cook, Mrs. Beasley. She does most meals, though we use caterers for events. Here she comes now.” A tall and very thin woman with iron-gray waves and a forbidding expression swept into the dining room carrying a serving pan.

“Everything looks wonderful,” Laura said to Mrs. Beasley, who merely glanced down her nose with a sniff as she replenished the black pudding and bacon. Laura took some of each, not scared off by black pudding’s real name, blood sausage. After adding a scoop of mixed berries to her plate, she joined the others at their table.

“Yum,” Carol said, pushing a piece of tattie scone through egg yolk. “This is delicious. Everything tastes so fresh.”

Laura pulled out her phone and took a picture of her full plate. “This is what I call culinary research.” She cut a piece of black pudding and popped it into her mouth, chewing with appreciation at the mix of flavors.

“You’ll have to share that photo with me for our social media page,” Molly said.

“Sure,” Laura agreed. “Though maybe don’t identify the blood sausage by name.”

“Good advice.” Molly winked, then tucked in to her own helpings of oatmeal, bacon, and fruit.

They were about halfway through the meal when two men and two women came in together. Recognizing one of the women—who could forget that glorious head of red hair, even if it was tightly restrained in a bun this morning?—Laura whispered to Molly, “Isn’t that Charlotte?”

Molly glanced over, her eyes widening, and nodded. Then noticing where Laura’s attention had refocused, she added, “And that’s Finn.”

Although she’d met her share of celebrity diners at 29 North, Laura couldn’t help but stare at the handsome young actor. Despite being casually dressed in jeans and a fleece pullover, Finn had undeniable magnetism. His chiseled face and dark curls were perfect for his role as a Scottish hero.

The other man was shorter and slighter, with a balding head and wire-rimmed glasses. But what he lacked in good looks, he made up for in attitude. His sharp eyes went everywhere, landing on Laura with a glare. When she frowned in response, he broke eye contact and got in line for food. As the line edged forward, he talked to the second woman, who had a slim build and thick coppery hair pulled back in a ponytail.

“The man in glasses is Clive O’Connor, the director,” Molly murmured to Carol and Laura. “I’ve seen him in photos at parties with the cast.” She tipped her chin toward the copper-haired woman. “And that’s Kyla Paterson, Finn’s sister. She’s also in the show.”

Now that Laura had that information, she could see a family resemblance. Besides similar eyes, Kyla had a dimpled chin like Finn, but hers was much more feminine. She was pretty, if not eye-catching and charismatic like Charlotte. *Star power is an elusive thing*. Perfect features didn’t guarantee it, she realized. It was something innate.

Over by the coffee urn, Finn touched Charlotte on the shoulder and leaned close. She shrugged him off with a glare.

“Quit it,” Charlotte hissed, loud enough that the women heard.

Finn stared down at the star, his face forlorn, but she ignored him as she finished filling her cup and marched off. She sat down at a table near the American women, then sipped at her coffee, staring into the distance with a moody expression.

Clive and Kyla joined Charlotte. “Aren’t you eating?” Kyla asked, a spiteful edge to her tone. She picked up a piece of toast and bit into it, her eyes on Charlotte’s face.

“I will in a minute,” Charlotte said. “I can’t eat a thing until I have my first cup of coffee.”

“Is she French?” Laura whispered to Molly. “She has a slight accent.”

“Raised there,” Molly said. “But on screen, her accent is pure Scots.”

Finn came to the table with a loaded plate, careful to sit across from Charlotte, not next to her despite the empty chairs. “Any news from the network about next season?” he asked Clive, pulling up to the table.

Clive, head down over his plate while he ate, gave a surly shrug. “You’ll be the first to know. Right now the important thing is to make this season irresistible.”

Kyla fixed her gaze on the director. “So we’re not looking to make any casting changes.” She cut her eyes toward Charlotte when she said this, who jumped, then set her cup carefully on the table. What was that about?

The director growled. “Certainly not until I hear back from the network. We’ve finally achieved the right mix, and we’d better keep it if we have any hope of a third season.”

“I sure hope we get renewed,” Finn said, his voice deep and resonant. “We’re finally building momentum with fans.”

“You are, anyway,” Kyla said. “Remember those rowdy women in Edinburgh? And the one who sneaked onto a closed set?”

Finn groaned. “How could I forget? She surprised me on the way to my dressing room and asked me to marry her.”

“Ridiculous.” Clive shook his head. “Hopefully we’re far enough out in the countryside to prevent a repeat of that incident.”

Charlotte, who had seemed lost in her own thoughts, pushed back from the table. “I guess I will get something to eat.” Her voice sounded brittle, and Finn stared after her in concern. She dithered at the food table, then returned a few minutes later with a small bowl of oatmeal and a side plate of sausages.

Laura returned her attention to her friends, and they all exchanged guilty looks for having caught each other eavesdropping.

“Does anyone have the class schedule handy?” Molly asked, refocusing them on the day ahead.

“I do,” Carol said, reaching into her bag. She was seated between the other two so they read over her shoulder. “The first lesson starts with piecrust.”

“Oh no.” Molly groaned. “I have never been able to make piecrust. It’s either too wet or too dry, and I usually have to patch the crust into a pan like a jigsaw puzzle.”

Laura gave her friend a comforting smile. “You have to find the techniques that work for you. I’ve failed enough to know that for certain.”

“Really?” Molly asked, her voice skeptical. “Everything you make is perfect.”

“That’s because I hide my mistakes in the trash.” Laura winked, then picked up her cup. “And I’m sure Agnes McVie has as much to teach me as either of you.”

After finishing their coffee and breakfast, the trio had a little while before class started, so they explored the ground floor of the castle. They found a charming sitting room overlooking the loch, a billiards room complete with taxidermy trophies, and a two-story library featuring a rolling set of steps that reached the upper shelves. Once one of the

thousands of volumes had been chosen, comfortable leather chairs and sofas offered the perfect spot to curl up and read.

“I could stay in here and read forever,” Molly said in wonder.

“I’m glad you like my humble abode.” With a chuckle at this understatement, Lord Alan stepped further into the library from the opposite end. He carried a laptop case under his arm.

“Where did you come from?” Laura asked, not seeing another entrance besides the one she and her friends had used.

“There’s a hidden doorway in the paneling,” Lord Alan said. “The castle is absolutely rife with architectural eccentricities.” He moved to a long table, where he set down his computer.

Laura laughed. “Don’t I know it. I discovered one in my room.”

“You must be in the Primrose Room,” the laird said, apparently referencing the yellow wallpaper. He opened his laptop and pressed a few keys. “I’ll be happy to talk to you about the history of this place, if you’re interested.”

“I am,” Molly said, and the others assented. “But right now, we need to get to our baking lesson. Could you tell us how to get to the kitchen?”

On the way down the corridor after receiving Lord Alan’s instructions, Carol held up her map of the castle. “We could have used this, you know.”

“True,” Molly agreed, “but I love listening to the laird speak. It’s like living in an episode of *A Highland Lass*.”

“It’s so fun to be immersed in Scottish life,” Laura said. “I keep thinking about Hamish and how much he’d love to be here.”

“Yes, he probably has an ancestor from Glenellen too,” Molly said with a chuckle. Hamish somehow managed to work his purported familial ties to former king of Scotland Robert the Bruce into many a conversation.

After a few more zigzags through the corridors, they reached the enormous kitchen, which featured a flagstone floor and brick arches defining different work areas. Although one wall was lined with ancient cast iron ovens and a hearth large enough to roast an ox, the other equipment was state-of-the-art.

“Oh,” Laura said, stopping short in the doorway. “I’m suffering from a severe case of kitchen envy.”

“Me too,” Molly admitted. “And I’m a novice compared to you.”

As they strolled further into the space, they spotted a plump woman with an auburn bun hunched over a long wooden table. She wore a khaki dress covered with a bib apron and was writing intently in a notebook.

Laura elbowed her friends and murmured, “That’s Agnes McVie, our instructor.” She felt her face flush with excitement. “One of the most famous pastry chefs in the world.”

As the trio drew closer, Carol cleared her throat as a warning so as not to startle the distracted woman. Agnes stood upright and turned, her small, pale eyes taking in every detail of the three women. In response, Laura stood up straighter, suddenly wishing she’d chosen to wear something more professional than an old T-shirt.

“You must be my students,” Agnes said in a clipped tone as she scrutinized them with a frown. “At least you’re on time. Lessons will begin and end at the appointed hour. We have much to do.”

Laura glanced at Molly, whose eyes were glassy with what looked like fear. As the least experienced baker, she was likely nervous to work with someone like Agnes. “If you can handle Hamish, you can handle her,” Laura muttered to Molly, who laughed and relaxed a little.

The Bakehouse Three introduced themselves, and Agnes’s frown softened into a curious expression. “Laura Donovan, you say?” she repeated as though trying to place the name.

“I used to be the chef at 29 North,” Laura supplied.

“Ah, that’s it.” Agnes paused. “Your beef Wellington was quite satisfactory.”

Swelling with pride at what was likely a high compliment, Laura beamed. “Thank you.”

“Why ever did you leave?” Agnes asked. “Wasn’t Jacques paying you enough?”

In fact, Laura’s old boss, restaurateur Jacques Bileaux, had offered her quite a hefty raise if she’d reconsider and stay on. “It was time for a new adventure,” she told Agnes, then gestured toward Carol and Molly. “We’ve opened a Scottish bakehouse together, and we’re here to learn from the best.”

Before Agnes could respond to the flattery, Lady Freya hurried into the kitchen, her soft leather shoes almost noiseless on the flagstones. “Oh good, you’re here,” she said when she drew close to Carol and Molly.

Agnes put a hand on Laura’s arm. “Excuse me.” She turned to Lady Freya. “I presume the other students are on their way?”

“Oh, I . . . well, they . . .” Lady Freya wrung her hands in dismay. Finally she swallowed hard and said, “They called this morning. They’re all quite ill.”

The instructor rested her fists on her substantial hips. “That won’t do, Lady Freya. I must have six students at the very least. If not, the class is canceled.”

Laura exchanged glances with her friends. Had they crossed an ocean for nothing?