



Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries™

A Reel Threat



Gayle Roper



A Reel Threat



Gayle Roper

Annie's[®]
AnniesFiction.com

Books in the Scottish Bakehouse Mysteries series

The Jig Is Up
If Looks Could Kilt
A Reel Threat
Lass and Found
Silence of the Clans
Shepherd's Lie

... and more to come!

A Reel Threat

Copyright © 2020 Annie's.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews. For information address Annie's, 306 East Parr Road, Berne, Indiana 46711-1138.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

Library of Congress-in-Publication Data

A Reel Threat / by Gayle Roper

p. cm.

I. Title

2019953703

AnniesFiction.com

(800) 282-6643

Scottish Bakehouse Mysteries™

Series Creator: Shari Lohner

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



Molly Ferris stepped into the backyard of Bread on Arrival, the bakery she owned with her best friends, Laura Donovan and Carol MacCallan, and took a deep breath of the late afternoon air. As the gentle breeze ruffled her short, blonde hair, she felt like clicking her heels together. She wasn't in Kansas anymore—or Chicago to be more accurate. The peace and quiet of Loch Mallaig, Michigan, touched something deep inside her. Instead of traffic and sirens, she heard the chitter of a kingfisher hunting for dinner in the lake across Yooper Boulevard, visible through the trees of Dumfries Park.

She smiled down at her Scottish terrier, Angus, who had followed her outside. “Don't you love it, Angus?”

His answer was a yip followed by a quick circuit of the yard with a prolonged stop at a mound of bush honeysuckle. He sniffed appreciatively at its yellow flowers, which were a bright splash of color along the white picket fence.

Molly walked to the edge of the yard and rested her hands on the recently painted pickets, a shiny white in the warm June sun. She smiled as she watched a pair of kayakers leave the public dock across the street, their oars moving in tandem as they dipped left, then right to traverse Loch Mallaig's namesake lake.

The quiet rumble of a car engine entering the parking lot beside Bread on Arrival drew Molly's attention. “She's here, Angus!”

She and Angus hurried forward and arrived at the lot just as Lindy Raymond was climbing from her midsize sedan. The sun caught in

her blonde, naturally curly hair, making it gleam like a halo. She was elegant as always in her cropped white pants and sleeveless coral top. Somehow Lindy never seemed to wrinkle, not even after a six-hour drive from Chicago.

Angus ran ahead of Molly, barking a happy greeting. When he reached Lindy, he sat back, his haunches hovering slightly above the ground as his black tail wagged.

Lindy bent and gave him a rub between his bushy eyebrows. "I've missed you, little guy," she cooed.

With a happy woof, Angus circled Lindy. Greeting over, he trotted back to the yard to continue his explorations.

Molly rushed forward and gave her dear friend a warm hug. "I've missed you!"

It was only now that she was up close that Molly noted the circles under Lindy's eyes and the air of fatigue that enveloped her. In all their correspondence, Lindy hadn't mentioned being weary, but she clearly was. *Too many hours at work? Molly wondered silently. Trouble with Mike or the kids? Or did she have a bad asthma attack that landed her in the hospital?*

Lindy returned Molly's hug, then stepped back and surveyed the beautiful yellow Victorian that housed both Bread on Arrival and Molly's second-floor apartment. "It's way better in real life than in pictures."

Pride surged through Molly. "It is, isn't it?" In truth, it was way better than anything she had imagined too.

Lindy grabbed her oversize leather purse from the front seat and draped the strap over her shoulder. She popped the trunk of her gold Honda Accord and pulled out a rolling suitcase and a large canvas tote.

"I'm so glad your husband and kids didn't mind you coming to visit," Molly said.

“It was now or never for me and a vacation.” Lindy pulled up the handle on her suitcase. “Chic Events is booked all summer, and spring has been one thing after another. I badly need some decompression time, and Mike knew it. He sent me on my way with his blessing.”

Good, no marriage trouble. “Well, tell him I said thank you.” Molly took the tote from her friend and led the way to the exterior stairs that went up to the second level. Her apartment could also be accessed from inside the bakery, but it was closed for the day. “You must be exhausted from that drive. Come get a drink or a nap. Whatever you need.”

“I saw the kids off to school this morning, their last Monday of the school year, and started driving. After six hours sitting, I could use a cold drink, a nap, and a walk around the block, probably in that order.” Lindy pulled her case to the stairs, lifted it, and followed Molly up to her apartment. Angus trailed along behind, his nails clicking on the treads as he climbed.

“The bakery is locked up for today, so I’ll give you a tour later.” Molly opened the exterior door that led into the office, then led Lindy inside. “Let’s get you settled and get you a little snack, then you can pick between a nap and a tour of the neighborhood.”

She showed Lindy into the den with its queen-size sleeper sofa, cozy armchairs, and carefully chosen decor. She’d had to downsize significantly for her move to Loch Mallaig, and although she still occasionally missed some of the possessions she had shed, she’d kept enough to imbue the apartment with homey comfort.

Lindy swept her gaze over the room. “Your sense of style hasn’t deserted you here in the back of beyond.”

Molly felt a glow at the compliment. For years, she and Lindy had worked together at Chic Events, a prominent Chicago event planning business, and Molly knew Lindy had a very high standard for what pleased her artistic eye.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” Molly gave her friend another hug. “Come to the kitchen when you’re ready, and I’ll have something for you to drink. Coffee? Iced tea?”

“Iced tea, please. It was a hot drive with the sun beaming in the car.”

While Lindy settled in, Molly arranged scones from Bread on Arrival on a plate and set it on the kitchen table. She was filling two glasses with iced tea when Lindy entered and sat down.

They ate and chatted as if they’d last parted hours earlier instead of months ago. Lindy proudly updated Molly about her teenage kids, Chase and Marin, while Molly told stories about how she and her college roommates had bought the Victorian house—a former funeral parlor—and converted it into the bakery they’d always dreamed of opening together. With Laura helming the kitchen, Carol decorating cakes and handling the books, and Molly focusing on promoting the business, they’d deftly tackled any challenge that came their way—whether it was related to baking or not. Molly neglected to mention the fact that she and her friends had managed to solve a murder or two in between batches of shortbread.

When her tea glass was empty, Lindy stood. “Never mind the nap. I’m ready for my tour. I need to understand why you’re here at the North Pole instead of at Chic Events with me.”

“Michigan’s Upper Peninsula is hardly the North Pole,” Molly said. “Although I suppose it’s easier to make that argument in June rather than December.”

A few minutes later, they stood at the four-foot-high picket fence that separated the bakery’s backyard from Dumfries Park with Loch Mallaig beyond. Angus stood between the women, peering between the pickets.

Lindy squinted at the lake. “Is that a loon out there?”

“It is,” Molly confirmed. One of the bakery’s part-time helpers, Hamish Bruce, was an avid bird-watcher, and he’d given her a crash course in local ornithology. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

As they watched, the black-and-white bird dived. It resurfaced several feet to the left. A little fish wiggled in its mouth, then disappeared down the sleek, black throat.

“The circle of life,” Lindy muttered.

Molly clipped a leash on Angus, opened the back gate, and led the way through the trees of Dumfries Park and across Yooper Boulevard to the lake’s edge. She gazed out over the vast expanse of water and sighed happily.

Lindy laughed. “I can see you’re smitten with the place. I must admit it’s beautiful. But how do you sleep in all this silence?”

“You learn.”

“And what about winter? It’s cold enough in Chicago with the wind whipping off Lake Michigan. What’s it going to be like even farther north?”

“I thought about that before I committed to the move,” Molly said, patiently withstanding her friend’s well-intentioned interrogation. “Remember, Carol, Laura, and I went to college not too far from Loch Mallaig. We knew what we were getting into when we relocated here to open the bakehouse. Plus, I lived in Chicago for decades. Harsh winters aren’t new to me.”

“Yeah, but there’s harsh and then there’s *harsh*. Sault Ste. Marie isn’t that far away, and it’s often the coldest place in the continental United States.”

Unaffected, Molly turned her face to the sun. “But right now it’s wonderful.”

They’d walked only a few yards along the water’s edge when Lindy gave a long and weary sigh. Molly glanced at her with concern. It was as if Lindy had suddenly wilted, a flower with her perky head facing the sun one moment, a drooping bloom the next. “Are you okay?”

Lindy managed a wan smile. “The long drive took more out of me than I realized. Do you mind if I lie down for a while? We can finish the tour later.”

“By all means,” Molly agreed quickly, and they started back to the house. “You nap for as long as you want. Then we’ll have dinner and you can decide whether you want to come with me to Leaping Lowlanders or stay at the house and relax.”

“What in the world is Leaping Lowlanders?”

“It’s the local Scottish dancing group,” Molly explained.

“I thought you hated dancing.”

Molly shrugged. “It’s not really my thing, but it’s Guid Nychburris Day on Saturday, and the group needed more dancers for their performance since it’s a big draw for the festival. Carol, Laura, and I are being good citizens by participating as background dancers, and we have rehearsal tonight.”

“And Guid Nychburris Day is . . .?”

Molly grinned. “Good Neighbor Day. It’ll be held here in the park, with lots of food and craft booths, including one hosted by Bread on Arrival.”

“So for this performance, you dance what? The Highland fling?”

Molly did a little kick as she raised a hand over her head.

“You’re kidding.” Lindy raised a skeptical eyebrow. “You’re really buying into the Scottish town stuff, aren’t you?”

“As Scottish as a Scotsman.” Molly closed the back gate behind them. “I’m even learning to play the bagpipes.”

Lindy rolled her eyes. “Well that sounds like the easiest thing in the world to pick up.”

“I’m not saying I’m good, but it’s great fun.”

“Where did you get a set of bagpipes?” Lindy asked, incredulity continuing to color her tone.

“I bought them on the Internet.”

Lindy laughed. “Talk about the old world colliding with the new.”

“The seller even threw in a free instruction book.”

“A bargain for sure. Does it help?”

Molly grinned as she followed a bounding Angus up the stairs.

“The Piping Yoopers let me fumble my way along.”

“The Piping Yoopers? Is that the bagpipe equivalent of Leaping Lowlanders?”

“Essentially. We meet every Sunday.”

“I get the piping part of the title, but what’s a Yooper?”

“Someone who lives in the Upper Peninsula. The UP. Yooper. Get it?” Molly flashed a grin.

A groan was Lindy’s only answer.



A little while later, Molly and Lindy walked the few blocks from Bread on Arrival to the Loch Mallaig Community Center, a large brick building with several multipurpose rooms. A nap and Molly’s beef stew had revitalized Lindy, and she declared herself eager to dance—or at least try.

As they passed the parking lot, a petite young woman with delicate features and teal streaks in her shoulder-length black hair waved to get their attention. “Hey Molly!” she called, jogging over from the bike rack.

Molly waved in greeting. “Hi, Bridget.” She indicated Lindy. “This is my friend, Lindy. We used to work together in Chicago, and she came to visit for a few days. Lindy, this is Bridget Ross. She’s studying forensic science at Superior Bay College and works at the bakehouse in her spare time.”

The effervescent coed smiled brightly, her hazel eyes sparkling as she shook hands with Lindy. “Welcome to Loch Mallaig. Don’t you love it so far?”

“What’s not to love?” Lindy answered. “Are you a Leaping Lowlander too?”

While Bridget nodded, Molly said, “Bridget is one of the best dancers in the group.”

“Skye’s way better than me,” Bridget said graciously.

“And Bridget is the reason Carol, Laura, and I got roped into participating in the Guid Nychburris Day performance,” Molly said, then added wryly, “Thanks again for your confidence.”

“You know you can’t say no to this face.” Bridget batted her eyelashes, making Molly laugh. They’d only hired Bridget recently, but she already felt like a daughter to Molly and her partners.

“And I thought you were the persuasive one,” Lindy said, raising an eyebrow at Molly.

“I got you to come, didn’t I?” Molly checked her watch. “Speaking of which, we’d better get inside.”

Once inside the practice space, Bridget went to join a group of principal dancers milling at the front while Molly scanned the crowd for Laura and Carol. She spotted them in the back row and beelined over, Lindy in tow.

“Look who’s here,” Laura said warmly, hugging Lindy. She and Carol had met Lindy a few times when visiting Molly in Chicago. “How long has it been?”

“A few years, at least,” Lindy answered.

“So glad you made it safely,” Carol said as she took her turn embracing Lindy.

“I’m glad I made it too.” Lindy smirked at Molly. “Just in time to join the fun.”

“Will you still be here Saturday to perform with us?” Laura asked.

Lindy cringed. “I’m only here to have some fun tonight. I’ll be in the audience on Saturday, where I belong.”

“Don’t be too quick to judge,” Carol cautioned. “You may love it.” A levelheaded former math teacher, Carol had surprised Molly with her affinity for Scottish dancing, but the tall grandmother of two had channeled her Scottish ancestors and taken to the activity with natural grace.

“It’s a blast.” Laura tucked a lock of auburn hair behind her ear. “Almost as gratifying as turning out perfect macarons.” Once the head chef at one of New York City’s trendiest restaurants, Laura had left the fast pace of the big city behind for the fast pace of the Highland fling.

“I can’t wait to try. When in Rome, right? Or in Scottishville, USA, I guess.” Lindy grinned at Molly.

Molly chuckled affectionately at her friend’s enthusiasm and wondered how much of Lindy’s gusto would wane after an hour of jumping in time to the music.

The skirl of recorded bagpipes started blaring over the room’s loudspeaker, drowning out the murmur of dancers talking.

Dallis Witherspoon, the leader of The Leaping Lowlanders, clapped his hands for attention as he took his place at the front of the room. “Feet in first position,” he called in a loud voice to override the wail of the pipes.

Lindy’s eyes went wide. “What’s first position?”

“Heels together,” Molly explained. “Toes as far apart as possible.”

“Ballet arms!” Dallis performed the movements as he called instructions.

Along with everyone else, Molly raised her arms in twin arcs.

“Toes pointed,” Dallis said.

Molly curled her foot in her dancing shoe, pointing daintily to the side. Or, at least, as daintily as she could muster.

“Bow to the count of six,” Dallis continued.

Molly bent at the waist as she was told. *One, two, three down, four, five, six, up.*

“At least I can do this part,” Lindy muttered. “How’d I let you talk me into this?”

Molly laughed. “You don’t have to dance. You can just watch—if you don’t have the guts.”

Lindy stayed with it, and they jumped and bounced in time with the music, Molly feeling every one of her fifty-plus years. The Highland fling, for all its apparent simplicity, was not for sissies. Beside her, a pink-cheeked Lindy kept up impressively well. Granted, Lindy was a good ten years younger, and Molly had never known her not to put her all into any endeavor.

“Take five,” Dallis called just as Molly began to doubt she could convince her mightily complaining calves to power one more hop.

Molly, Carol, Laura, and Lindy gathered near the wall, where they’d set their belongings, and Lindy grabbed the bottle of water she’d brought at Molly’s insistence. “And you do this for fun?”

Molly wiped the back of her hand over her forehead. “We’re here temporarily to help the community. Though I will admit that it’s good exercise.”

“No one could argue with the exercise bit,” Lindy said. “I haven’t panted this hard in years.”

Molly flicked a hand toward their instructor. “Dallis is a personal trainer by day. It carries over to the class.”

“Ah, that explains it.” Lindy studied the man, who was listening carefully to a pair of obviously smitten teens. With his auburn hair, green eyes, and athlete’s build, thirty-year-old Dallis was the

quintessential Scotsman. “He’s very good-looking—which explains his fan club.”

“Several of the single ladies have their eyes on him,” Carol said. “He manages to be friendly without being encouraging, which is quite a feat.”

“But still, they try.” Laura shrugged, clearly amused.

“They certainly do.” Molly indicated the attractive woman who had just rushed to Dallis and started talking, edging the teens out of the way. “Take Janae.”

“Janae?” Lindy sounded distracted.

Molly glanced at Lindy and found her friend frowning. “What’s wrong?”

Lindy blinked and looked at Molly, her expression vague as if she was trying to figure out something that puzzled her. “That woman talking to the teacher is named Janae?”

“Yes, Janae Harbison,” Molly said. “She’s a really good dancer. All the local kids take lessons from her.”

Shaking her head as if to clear it, Lindy continued to stare. “She looks so familiar, yet she doesn’t, you know? Do you ever have that feeling? Sort of like when you see the cashier from your local grocery store at a restaurant. You know you should know her, but you don’t out of context.”

“Like when you see your incredibly strict and crabby math teacher at the movies wearing Bermuda shorts, with his arm around his girlfriend, and *laughing*. I’m still scarred.” Molly chuckled at her high school memory, then furrowed her brow. “But how would you know Janae?”

“I’m not sure.” Lindy’s frown intensified. “But it’s going to drive me crazy.”

“Okay, everyone.” Dallis clapped his hands. “Janae’s going to demonstrate what we want this dance pattern to look like.”

Dallis aimed a small remote at a stereo, and once more the skirl of the pipes filled the room. Molly watched Janae, amazed at how something as elementary as a bow could be done so elegantly. Her dancing was both beautiful and precise, every movement fully extended and complete. When Janae finished, applause filled the room.

“Now that’s what Scottish dancing is *supposed* to look like.” Molly glanced at Lindy and was surprised that the frown hadn’t left her face. She was staring at Janae.

Janae, her face wreathed in smiles as she enjoyed the ovation, ran her gaze over the crowd. When she saw Lindy, however, her smile fell away and she turned abruptly, putting her back to the room.

“Did she just recognize you?” Molly asked her friend.

“And I recognize her.” Lindy appeared dazed. “But how can it be? She’s dead.”



Molly peered at Lindy with concern. “Who’s dead?”

“Janae.” Lindy said the name as though grinding it between her teeth. “That’s what she’s calling herself, right?”

Molly studied Janae’s rigid back from across the room. “She’s obviously not dead, Lindy.”

Lindy bobbed her head slowly, seemingly confused and unsure. “Maybe I’m wrong.”

Molly relaxed. “I’m sure she only looks like someone you know. Or knew. It’s that grocery clerk thing, like you said.”

“Mmm.” Lindy’s eyes narrowed. “I need to talk to her. Then I’ll know for sure.”

“She’s been in Loch Mallaig for years,” Carol said. “She runs the local dance studio.”

A beautiful teen with strawberry-blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes rushed up to Janae and started talking animatedly, though her words were lost in the general noise of the room. Molly started to point out that she was Janae’s daughter, Skye, but stopped when Lindy made a noise of distress and slapped her hand over her mouth. Her face went unnaturally pale, and she swayed.

Molly reached for her friend. “Lindy!”

“It can’t be,” Lindy whispered. “Can it?”

As they watched, Janae said something that must have upset Skye, because the girl’s face collapsed. She assumed the posture of a puppy being scolded, hunching in on herself. Janae grabbed her by the arm and

dragged her from the room. The girl glanced back over her shoulder at Dallis, her expression both confused and apologetic. Molly read Skye's lips as she said, "Sorry. Bye."

"She's leaving." Lindy made a move to follow. "I have to talk to her. Who is she?"

"Janae," Molly repeated, growing more concerned about her friend. "Remember?"

"Not Janae," Lindy said. "The girl. Who is she?"

"That's Janae's daughter, Skye," Molly answered.

"Skye." Lindy took a step toward the door. "She's the one I want to talk to. I *need* to talk to her."

Carol and Laura exchanged confused glances with Molly, who shrugged. She thought about Janae's face when she saw Lindy, thought about the woman's turned back, her sharpness with her daughter, and the speed of their departure. Odds were that Janae wouldn't be happy about any contact with Lindy. Molly put a gentle hand on Lindy's arm. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Of course it is." Lindy appeared ready to chase the girl.

Molly shook her head. "Now might not be the best time." Though she wasn't sure what was going on, Lindy's intensity concerned her. Emotional distress could trigger her asthma, and Lindy suffering a life-threatening attack was the last thing they needed. "Maybe another time. You're going to be here for several days."

Lindy glanced around the room at all the dancers and finally gave a jerky nod. "You're right. It's too public."

Relief washed through Molly, but it was short-lived. She noticed the stricken expression on Lindy's face as she collapsed into a nearby chair.

"Okay," Dallis called. "Let's try it again."

The class fell into place, but Molly stayed with her friend, squatting

down beside her. It was obvious that Lindy's dancing was over for the night. Her face was now flushed, her eyes overbright. One hand rested on her heart, and the other held her water bottle. The liquid quivered as she trembled.

Lindy turned an appalled expression on Molly, her hand leaving her heart to clasp Molly's arm. "What if you'd never moved here? What if I hadn't come to visit? What if we'd never worked together and become friends? I'd never have known."

"Lindy, what are—"

Before Molly could ask what her friend was talking about, Lindy threw her arms, water bottle and all, around Molly. "But I do know. Thanks to you, I do." Then, eyes wide, Lindy grabbed her purse. "My phone." She began searching. "Where's my phone? Maybe I can get a picture."

Molly stood. "Come on. I think we'd better leave before we disrupt the rehearsal."

Phone now in hand, Lindy bolted for the door. Molly waved goodbye to Laura and Carol, who both appeared worried and confused, then gathered her own belongings and followed Lindy. She found her friend outside, phone pressed to her ear, her face full of disappointment.

"She's gone, Mike." Mike said something, and Lindy nodded. "Right. Tomorrow's another day. I'll call you later. Love you." She disconnected the call and stuck the phone back in her purse. She turned haunted eyes on Molly. "I missed them."

"I'm sorry," Molly said, though she still had no idea what had her friend so upset.

"Oh no! Is rehearsal over already?" A short, redheaded woman came rushing toward them, her face filled with distress. "How will I survive without a Dallis Witherspoon fix?" She put a hand dramatically to her

forehead like an overly emoting actress, paused a moment for effect, then scowled. “That’s what comes of district-wide faculty meetings. They’re always so long.”

“Hi, Bitsy.” Molly couldn’t help but smile at Bitsy Barkley, Loch Mallaig Elementary School’s spirited, sharp-witted principal. She was barely taller than her charges, but she could bring a room full of unruly kindergarteners to heel in seconds with her commanding presence. She was a regular at Bread on Arrival, often buying boxes of pastries to reward her hardworking staff, and Molly was very fond of her. “You haven’t missed him. They’re still rehearsing.”

“Thank goodness.” Bitsy flashed a grin. “I can still drool from afar.”

From the corner of her eye, Molly saw Lindy slowly sink to the ground. It wasn’t a faint—it was as if her legs had gone on strike. Her breathing became ragged. She brought her purse close, searched through it, and pulled out an inhaler, her constant companion. She took a deep breath of the medication.

“Lindy!” Molly knelt beside her, her heart tripping over itself with worry.

“Oh dear.” Bitsy crouched down on Lindy’s other side. She felt Lindy’s forehead, peered into her eyes, and felt her pulse.

“I’m okay.” Lindy stuck the inhaler back in her purse. “Really. It all just caught up with me. I mean, can you believe it?”

Believe what? Molly still had no idea what was going on.

Her breathing normalized, Lindy scrambled to her knees and started to push herself to her feet.

“Give it a moment.” Bitsy reached a hand to hold Lindy down. “Just to be sure.” Somehow, though her voice wasn’t raised, it was full of authority. Lindy obeyed without question. Bitsy patted Lindy on her back. “So you’re visiting Molly, Lindy? Are you from Chicago like she is? Wasn’t our weather gorgeous today?”

Bitsy sounded like she was rambling, but Molly saw her checking first her watch, then Lindy. After a minute, she removed her hand from Lindy's back.

With help from the other women, Lindy climbed to her feet. "Sorry if I upset you. It's just so much to take in. Frankly, thinking about it makes me dizzy."

Although Molly was becoming desperate to know what had upset Lindy so much, she wanted to get her somewhere safe before they delved too deep. Her hand still on her friend's elbow, Molly could feel Lindy shaking in continuing reaction to whatever was going on. Would she be able to walk home in this condition? It had been a lovely walk coming, but now she doubted Lindy was up to the three-block return trip. Fortunately, Bitsy had a solution.

"Tell you what." Bitsy continued to speak directly to Lindy in her pleasant, take-charge voice. "I live right around the corner on Balmoral. Let's go to my house and have a cup of tea. Once you're feeling better, Lindy, I'll drive you both home."

Molly beamed with relief. "Thanks, Bitsy. That sounds wonderful."

Bitsy started walking, and Molly and Lindy followed. Noting that Lindy didn't seem to be having any more trouble breathing, Molly relaxed. The crisis had passed—well, one crisis anyway.

They turned the corner, and Bitsy led them to a charming bungalow painted deep marine-blue with white shutters and a bright red door. Pots of well-tended red geraniums, white lobelia, and vibrant green sweet potato vine flanked the porch steps.

As soon as Bitsy opened the door, a white cat, fluffy as a summer cloud, appeared and wound around her ankles. Bitsy bent and picked her up. "This is Miss Priss."

Molly reached out to pet the cat. "She's beautiful."

When Miss Priss began to purr, a rumbling thunder of noise,

Lindy emerged from her thoughts and laughed. “A big noise for a dainty lady.”

In no time, they were seated at the kitchen table while Bitsy put on the kettle and got out cups and saucers. Miss Priss arranged herself in a late-day sunbeam on the shelf of the nearby bay window and promptly went to sleep.

Through the window, Molly glimpsed a patio edged with more pots overflowing with colorful blooms, including daisies, zinnias, ageratum, blue salvia, and petunias. Rich, healthy grass filled the rest of the yard. “You seem to have a knack for gardening, Bitsy.”

Bitsy grinned. “I love it. I could do with a longer growing season, but when you live in the UP . . .” She trailed off with a shrug.

“I hear that.” A series of planters close to the house caught Molly’s eye. “Herbs?”

“Basil, oregano, thyme, mint, and rosemary.” Bitsy set a stack of napkins and a basket of tea bags on the table. “I love to cook too, and fresh herbs make all the difference. I keep pots on my windowsill all winter.”

While she and Bitsy chatted, Molly watched Lindy out of the corner of her eye. The younger woman seemed unaware of the conversation swirling around her, again lost in her thoughts. Agitation showed in every tense line of her body and in a single jiggling foot.

A piercing whistle sliced the air, and Lindy jumped. She quickly relaxed and smiled as Bitsy poured boiling water from the kettle into a ceramic teapot shaped like a cottage with colorful flowers growing around its base.

Bitsy placed the teapot and a plate of cookies on the table, then finally took a seat. She gestured toward the plate. “They aren’t Laura’s Empire biscuits, I’m afraid.”

Molly smiled and selected chamomile tea. “It’s hard to compete.”

Lindy selected an Earl Grey tea bag, but paused before ripping it open. “Her name’s not Janae Harbison, you know. It’s Alana Gladstone.”

“Janae’s not Janae?” Bitsy appeared fascinated. “Why do you think that?”

Lindy’s head snapped up as if she heard a challenge in Bitsy’s question. “Because I know her. Knew her. She was my brother’s girlfriend.”

Molly paused in the middle of squeezing the water from her tea bag. “I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“I don’t. Not anymore.” Lindy swallowed as a flash of sorrow crossed her face. “He was murdered.”