



Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries™

Lass and Found



Sandra Orchard



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Library of Congress-in-Publication Data

Lass and Found / by Sandra Orchard

p. cm.

I. Title

2019955597

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



At the tinkle of the bell on Bread on Arrival's front door, Carol MacCallan brushed flour off her hands, then tucked a wayward hank of silver-streaked hair back behind her ear before bustling from the commercial kitchen out to the front counter. The 55-year-old retired math teacher enjoyed helping customers when she got a chance, though managing accounts and baking special-order cakes comprised her primary duties. Fortunately, the talents of her co-owners, Laura Donovan and Molly Ferris, rounded out the bakery's management quite nicely.

Laura, former head chef of a NYC restaurant, took charge of creating most of their delicacies, especially developing new recipes that heralded the bakehouse's Scottish theme—a nod to the fierce Scottish pride of Loch Mallaig, the quaint and quirky village in Michigan's Upper Peninsula where the bakery resided. Both Laura and Carol happily left Bread on Arrival's marketing to their other former college roommate, Molly. After all, she was the mastermind behind the bakery's name, which honored the fact that it was housed in a former funeral parlor. Molly also handled front-of-house duties alongside two part-time staffers, retired history teacher Hamish Bruce and college student Bridget Ross . . . although none of them were present to help their first customer of the morning.

Carol welcomed Reverend Stuart Findlay with a smile. "*Guid mornin*, Reverend." She'd recently adopted the greeting in honor of her paternal grandparents, who hailed from Edinburgh and had always said good morning to her in the same way.

“Same to you, Carol.” Reverend Findlay returned her smile, his dark eyes warm and twinkling. His gaze alighted on the display case of Scottish baked goods, and he clasped his hands enthusiastically. “And a good morning it is. I see you’ve got my favorite—blueberry scones.”

“Made with berries my grandkids picked yesterday. Thankfully Maisie and Gavin didn’t eat all of them before they brought me the spoils.” Carol grabbed a bakery tissue from a nearby box. “Just one today?”

“Don’t tell Bonnie, but make it two.” The reverend wiggled his eyebrows. “I’m working with the kids in Vacation Bible School again this morning, and I need fortification. It’s day four out of five.”

“You certainly need plenty of energy for that.” Carol grinned as she bagged the scones. “Especially since my daughter signed up the twins. I don’t think seven-year-olds have an off button.”

“I don’t believe they do.” Reverend Findlay chuckled as he pulled out his wallet. “Though Jenny and Craig seem to have taught them good manners.” He paid for his purchase and left.

As the door swung shut behind the reverend, Carol caught sight of another familiar face. “It must be Thursday,” she murmured as Jeanette Franklin—one of their regulars—bypassed the front door, her friendly spaniel, Scout, in tow. Carol knew she was heading around the house toward the fenced backyard, which the bakery staff cheekily referred to as “the barking lot.” Customers were welcome to leave their well-behaved pets in the yard while they were inside.

Molly’s Scottish terrier, Angus, who lived in the apartment upstairs with his mistress, considered it his calling to be a canine ambassador to four-legged guests and was usually on alert for visitors. At the sound of Angus catapulting out of his second-story dog door, Carol glanced through the side window as he scampered down the exterior stairs, yipping jubilantly. She went to the back entrance to let Jeanette in that way, which was more convenient.

Carol opened the door and peeked outside. “You can come through here, Jeanette.”

“Just a sec.” Jeanette attempted to untangle herself from Scout, who’d wound his leash around her in his excited reunion with Angus.

“Shush, Angus,” Carol scolded mildly. She adored him, but she also knew Molly would give him the same rebuke if she were here instead of out on a delivery.

“He’s fine.” Jeanette latched the gate closed, then unsnapped the lead from her dog’s collar. “Scout loves him.”

A fit fortysomething, Jeanette struck Carol as the quintessential outdoorsy type, always in a plaid shirt, jeans, and hiking boots with a backpack slung over her shoulders. True to the common belief that dogs often resemble their owners, Scout not only shared Jeanette’s love of hiking through the seemingly endless forests of the UP, but he also had remarkably similar close-set eyes flanking a narrow nose.

Carol watched the dogs sniff each other then give chase around the yard, tromping through the grass covered in cool dew that would soon evaporate into another warm July day. “They’re settling in fine,” she said. “Come on in. I’ll get your order ready.”

“Thanks.” Jeanette shrugged her backpack from her shoulders as she followed Carol to the front of the bakery. “Your oatcakes have become a staple for our hikes.”

Smiling, Carol began assembling a cardboard box to fill with Jeanette’s standing order of four dozen sugar-free oatcakes.

“Hi, Mrs. Franklin. I already prepped your order,” Bridget called from the eating area, where she was restocking sugar packets at the coffee doctoring station. She must have arrived and gotten to work in the short amount of time Carol had been outside. The Superior Bay College student was a remarkable self-starter and her striking hazel eyes, framed by stylishly bobbed black hair streaked with purple,

never missed a thing. Bridget pointed to a taped box on the counter opposite the cash register.

Carol scooped up the box and handed it to Jeanette with a grin. “And they say you can’t find good help these days.” Carol shot a smile at Bridget, who’d thankfully been able to take on more hours for the busy summer months.

“It’s true,” Jeanette agreed. “My daughter’s the same age as Bridget, and she’s always complaining that her classmates don’t want to work. At least not at their studies.”

“Well, we’ve been blessed then.” Carol’s heart swelled as the truth of it sank in. The reality was they hadn’t expected their online sales, especially of wedding cakes, to take off as quickly as they had. And with Loch Mallaig’s bustling tourist season now in full swing, Bridget had become an indispensable part of their team.

Jeanette nodded. “We certainly have.”

Carol rang up Jeanette’s oatcakes on the cash register. “Will there be anything else today?”

“Hold on.” Laura hurried out of the kitchen brandishing a huge tray of parlies, their fresh-baked ginger aroma filling the room. “Before you decide, you can be the first to sample today’s special.”

“I’m honored.” Jeanette eyed Laura’s tray. “What’s the special?”

“This is pending Molly’s approval, but . . .” Laura’s brown eyes twinkled. “I’m thinking each day we’ll offer a different kind of treat with a special deal. So for example, today all redheads, including those who are auburn like me”—Laura took a model’s pose drawing their attention to her hair—“or who are ginger like you, get a special deal on parlies, or parliament cakes as they’re formally known.” Laura inhaled deeply. “Because, as you can smell, they are ginger cookies. And ginger is reddish. Get it? So redheads can buy six, get one free.”

“Hey,” Bridget said, her tone mock insulted. She flicked her dark, glossy hair, which was courtesy of her Chinese-American and Hispanic heritage. “What about the rest of us?”

“Your turn will come,” Laura assured her. “Another day, we can offer black buns to customers with black hair.”

Bridget wrinkled her nose. “Fruitcake?”

Laura bit her lip. “Well, maybe something with chocolate instead.”

“You could give a deal on snowballs to people with white hair,” Jeanette suggested.

“And chocolate chip cookies for those of us with salt-and-pepper locks,” Carol chimed in, patting her own hair.

“Exactly,” Laura said, her spirits seeming to lift once more.

Bridget twirled the purple streak decorating her hair. “How about Empire biscuits for those of us with purple streaks?” She had a special affection for the jam-filled sugar cookies decorated with icing.

“Sure,” Laura agreed. “I’ll figure out a unique cookie for each hair color.”

A young man who’d slipped into the bakery at some point during their discussion piped up. “What’s the special for guys like me?” He rubbed his palm over his shaved head.

“How about peanut butter balls?” Laura asked.

He made a show of thinking it over. “Rum balls would be better.”

Laura laughed. “I could make those. Let me go check my recipes.” She disappeared back to the kitchen.

“I love a deal and my daughter loves gingersnaps, so I’ll take the special, Carol.” Jeanette put her box of oatcakes in her backpack, then pulled out her wallet. “And . . .” She scanned the display cases. “I’ll have some Selkirk bannock to eat here.” She glanced down the hallway toward the back door. “Scout will be happy for the chance to enjoy an extended visit with Angus.”

Carol collected Jeanette's payment, then handed her a tray with her breakfast order, which Jeanette carried to an empty table.

The bald man slipped a baseball cap on his head and ordered coffee and a cinnamon bagel to go. "Can't wait for the rum ball special," he called from the door as he exited.

Doreen Giobsan, the thirtysomething owner of the Thistle and That gift shop next door, gave him a curious look as she passed him in the doorway. "You have rum balls?" she asked Carol as she approached the register.

"Not yet." Carol explained Laura's new scheme.

Doreen patted her dark red bob. "And of course she started with a special for redheads because it covers three-quarters of our town." Her sky-blue eyes twinkled. "We Scots can't resist getting anything for free."

Carol grinned. Many of Loch Mallaig's townsfolk prided themselves on managing to trace their ancestry to Scottish roots—some to quite renowned historical figures. Whether true or not, the stories certainly enhanced the unique feel of the town.

Doreen perused the display cases. "Free or not, I can't say I fancy gingersnaps at the moment." Unlike Jeanette, who more or less stuck to the same order, Doreen preferred to mix things up, rarely choosing the same cookie two visits in a row.

"Then what can I get for you today?" Carol asked.

"I guess baking arsenic into Henry Roberts's next order of sultana cakes would be too much to ask?"

Carol didn't know whether to wince or chuckle. "What did Henry do?" The man was in his early sixties, so Carol doubted he and Doreen had had a romantic tiff.

"What hasn't he done?" Doreen huffed. "Ever since he bought and renamed Barb Nolan's antiques shop, all I hear from the summer tourists is The Artful Codger this, and The Artful Codger that. I'm

telling you, the man is a right chancer. He is seriously poaching my customers. At this rate, I'll never be able to pay back my brother, Glenn, the money he lent me to do renovations on the shop." She shook her head. "Makes me long to go back to the wellness retreat I went to last fall. Real life is too stressful."

"But you sell gifts of every description, and nothing used," Carol said. "I wouldn't have thought there'd be much overlap, if any, between your merchandise and an antiques shop. Was there a problem when Barb ran it?"

"Everything was fine before Barb retired to Florida." Doreen huffed. "All I know is that business in July is usually a lot brisker than this. And according to the tourists who liberally rave about the new-and-improved antiques store, Henry's furniture prices are a steal. Has to make one wonder what he paid for his merchandise, don't you think?" The inflection in Doreen's tone made it clear she suspected Henry Roberts wasn't on the up-and-up. "I mean, how do you trust someone who calls himself the artful codger? You know it's an allusion to that thief character in *Oliver Twist*, right?"

"I'm sure it's meant to be ironic," Carol said.

Bridget caught Carol's eye and jerked her head toward the front window. Outside, Henry Roberts was crossing the street, heading toward the bakery.

Carol nodded to Bridget. Since moving to town, Henry had become a regular too, and Carol certainly didn't want him to walk in on Doreen gossiping about him. "I'm sure folks are simply excited about the novelty of Henry's products." Carol's gaze strayed to the door as it opened.

Doreen glanced over her shoulder and sniffed indignantly. But at least when she turned back to the counter, she lowered her voice. "Antiques are hardly novel. It's his prices."

Laura emerged from the kitchen carrying a tray of fresh Empire biscuits for the display case.

“Ooh.” Doreen’s eyes lit up and she pointed to the cookies. “What kind of jam is in those?”

“Raspberry,” Laura answered as she rested the tray on the counter.

“Yum. I’ll take three dozen.” Doreen’s lips quirked into a satisfied smile. “They should entice the tourists to browse a little longer in my shop.”

“Good thinking.” Carol quickly assembled a box and carefully set three dozen cookies inside, depleting the supply Laura had just brought out.

“Guess I’d better go make more,” Laura said with a laugh, then took the empty tray back to the kitchen.

As Carol rang up the order, Doreen turned to Henry. “Another beautiful shopping day ahead of us, wouldn’t you say, Mr. Roberts?”

“Indeed, Miss Giobsan,” he agreed, in the warm, resonant tone Laura had dubbed a radio voice.

Admirably, Doreen’s cheery greeting didn’t betray a shred of her misgivings about the man and his shop. Pulling out her wallet, Doreen said to Carol, “I’ll take a cranachan and coffee with that too. For here. I skipped breakfast this morning.”

Carol suppressed a smile. Ordering a light breakfast like the cranachan—a cream, oats, and fruit trifle—wasn’t unusual for Doreen, but Carol couldn’t help but think the gift shop owner wanted to stick around the bakery to spy on Henry.

“Let me carry that to a table for you,” Bridget offered as Doreen juggled getting her wallet back in her purse while simultaneously reaching for the box of cookies and her breakfast tray.

“You’re so sweet. Thank you.” Her box of cookies in hand, Doreen trailed Bridget to the sitting area and stopped at the table closest to

the counter. "Here is good," she called to Bridget, who'd already passed the table on her way to the more popular window seats.

The amused twinkle in Henry's eyes made Carol wonder if he too suspected Doreen's motive for the choice.

"A sultana cake?" Carol asked him.

"I've only been here a month and you already know me so well," Henry said, his sonorous voice lifting cheerily. "I'll have that, but I think Miss Giobsan is on to something. I'll take a couple dozen shortbread cookies as well."

Carol could almost hear a head of steam hissing from Doreen's direction.

Henry took his order to go and soon after he left the bakehouse, Doreen followed, clutching her box of customer-enticing Empire biscuits.

Jeanette, who'd lingered over her breakfast much longer than usual, approached Carol at the counter, visibly upset.

"Is there a problem with the bannock?" Carol glanced to where the woman had been sitting, but her plate and glass were empty.

"It's not that." Jeanette made a flustered gesture toward the door. "I couldn't help overhearing Doreen's speculation about Henry Roberts's antiques. I bought a beautiful coffee table from him earlier this week. Like she said, it was an amazing bargain. It has 'Made in Scotland 1908' wood burned on the underside, so I'm sure it's genuine. But . . ." Jeanette wrung her hands and nervously glanced around. "Does Doreen think his furniture is stolen?"

Carol shook her head. "I wouldn't worry if I were you. I imagine Doreen was speaking out of her own frustration with slumping sales and because her would-be customers all seem to be talking about Henry's unique offerings. I wouldn't put any stock in the speculation."

Jeanette nodded thoughtfully. "I'd hate to think I'd bought stolen property. You're probably right, but maybe I'll ask her about it the next

time I see her.” She said goodbye, then hurried toward the back door to retrieve Scout.

Molly entered the bakery through the rear entrance a few moments after Jeanette left through it. Holding Angus snugly in her arms, she walked to the front counter. “Jeanette seems quiet this morning,” she said to Carol.

“She’s just a little worried her new table from The Artful Codger is stolen,” Carol said, then recapped the suspicions Jeanette had overheard Doreen share.

Molly grinned. “If he’s got such good deals, maybe I ought to go shopping. I was thinking we need an accent table in the corner with the fireplace.”

Carol raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure scoring a deal from Henry is worth raising Doreen’s ire. Then again . . .” She glanced toward the spot Molly had mentioned. “A little table might look nice there.”



Just before closing time the following Wednesday afternoon, Molly and Carol were busily serving a sudden rush of customers when a college-age girl burst into the shop and frantically glanced around, her eyes red-rimmed and her mouse-brown pixie cut quite unkempt. Although she seemed vaguely familiar, Carol couldn’t place her.

The girl spotted Bridget clearing tables and made a beeline her way. “Bridget!” she cried. “Something’s happened to my mom. And the police won’t do anything.”

Startled at the girl’s outburst, Bridget almost spilled the dishes precariously stacked on her tray. She set it on the table she’d just cleared. “What are you talking about, Annemarie? What happened?”

Carol mulled over the name. She didn’t recognize it, but the petite girl was clearly a friend of Bridget’s.

Twisting a sheet of paper in her hands, Annemarie's gaze darted around at the handful of customers staring her way as if also waiting to hear her answer. She smoothed out the paper and then hurried from table to table, asking each customer, "Have you seen this woman today?"

Some, like Doreen Giobsan's older brother, Glenn, dignified in his charcoal suit, scarcely glanced at the paper before saying "no" straight out.

Jane Thomson, an elderly member of the Fair Knitting Ladies group Carol belonged to with Laura, nodded in recognition at the picture. "I saw her at church on Sunday."

"Not since then?" Annemarie asked, crestfallen. After Jane shook her head, the girl shifted her focus to Jane's husband, Alastair. "Have you seen her, Mr. Thomson?"

"I saw her at the gas station yesterday," he said. "Hard to miss that green Saab of hers."

A nearby table full of senior ladies made similar comments. Molly had agreed to roll with Laura's idea of having a daily special, and that day's selection—white-haired customers could buy six Scottish snowballs, get one free—had been drawing in the elderly crowd all day.

Henry Roberts, also in a business suit despite the skyrocketing temperatures outside, folded the newspaper he'd been reading at a nearby table. He stood, then peered at the paper over the women's heads. "She reminds me of a customer I served in my store last week. Does she have a dog?"

"Yes!" Annemarie's demeanor brightened. "A springer spaniel."

Carol's attention jerked from the Abernethy biscuits she was boxing for her next customer back to Bridget's friend. Could she be looking for Jeanette?

"She takes the dog everywhere she goes," Annemarie went on. "Have you seen her today?"

Henry shook his head. "Sorry, can't say I have. My shop's closed on Wednesdays."

The young woman visibly deflated and returned to Bridget. "You've got to ask your bosses to help me find her."

Bridget cast a helpless glance at Carol.

"You said they're really good at solving mysteries," Annemarie pressed. "And they know my mom. She comes in here every week."

Carol gave her last customer his order and bustled over to the dining area. She introduced herself to Bridget's friend and asked if she might look at the picture.

When Annemarie handed it over, Carol's heart jolted in recognition. "Jeanette is your mom?"

"Yes," Annemarie said, her voice breaking. "Will you please help me find her?" The girl's eyes shone with fear and helplessness. "I'm afraid something terrible has happened."



Now that Carol stood face-to-face with Annemarie, she understood why the young woman had looked so familiar. She had her mother's nose and the same close-set eyes. But Jeanette's eyes had never looked quite so desperate.

"When did you last see your mother?" Carol asked gently.

"I talked to her on the phone last night," Annemarie said. "My neighbor told me she left the house this morning to take Scout for a hike."

"So she's been missing for six or seven hours?" Carol clarified. No wonder the police weren't concerned—but Annemarie clearly was.

Annemarie nodded miserably. "No one has seen her since early this morning, and she's not answering her phone. And she *always* has it with her."

"Cell reception can be spotty out on those hiking trails," Bridget said. "And on the lake. Maybe she went out on your boat?"

"No, I already checked." Impatience had crept into Annemarie's tone. "The boat is at its dock in the marina. I'm sure something must've happened to her."

"Is Scout missing too?" Carol asked.

"Yes," Annemarie said. "They were last seen together. And no one I've asked—and I've asked everyone I could find within ten miles of town—has seen a stray dog either."

Carol sucked in a deep breath, not sure how she and her partners could help Annemarie. Sure, they'd solved a mystery or two since moving to Loch Mallaig, but it wasn't like they were expert detectives

or anything. This was a job for the police. Too bad they weren't willing to help.

"Perhaps your mom drove farther afield than usual," Carol suggested. "Maybe she forgot to charge her phone. Scout is such an energetic fellow. They could've gone on an extra-long excursion."

"Did she know you were coming home?" Bridget chimed in.

Seemingly on reflex, Annemarie crumpled her mom's photo in her fist. "No, I wanted to surprise her. I wasn't supposed to be home from summer session until Friday."

"So she wouldn't expect anyone to be worrying about her until your dad got home for supper," Carol said, feeling relieved that the situation didn't appear as ominous as Annemarie had made it sound.

"Mom and Dad are separated," Annemarie said dully.

Carol cringed at having reminded Annemarie of a clearly touchy subject. But it meant Jeanette had no reason to be home and no one to answer to concerning her whereabouts. "It's sounding more and more like you just need to wait her out."

"You don't understand!" the girl wailed.

Torn between helping the distressed girl and not letting her disturb the bakehouse's remaining customers, Carol glanced at the wall clock. It was closing time on the dot, and the few guests lingering at the sturdy Northwoods-style tables got up and left.

Carol guided Annemarie toward a clean table in the corner and urged her to sit. "How about you explain everything to me."

Bridget went to lock the front door, but stopped short at the window. "Um, Carol . . ."

Carol angled to peer out the window. Her eyes went wide when she saw a stream of hungry-looking tourists bouncing off a bus with *Yooper Express Tours* emblazoned on the side. Closing time was a relative concept in the face of all that revenue.

The front door opened, sunlight bouncing off its colorful stained glass design, and people flooded in. They made a beeline toward Molly at the counter, calling out orders in a sudden onslaught of chaos.

Carol squeezed Annemarie's hand. "I'm going to need you to wait a few more minutes while we take care of these customers. Bridget can bring you a nice cup of tea." While Bridget nodded and scurried off, Carol squeezed Annemarie's hand one more time then stood. "I'll return as soon as I can."

Just then, Hamish pulled up out front in the 1939 LaSalle hearse the bakehouse had repurposed as a delivery vehicle, and the tourists' chatter escalated. Tall and thin, or a *skinny malinky* as Carol's Scottish grandmother would've described him, Hamish stalked through the front door, his white hair clinging in a ring around his head from where his hat had sat. He'd been delivering bread to their restaurant customers, and without air-conditioning, it had likely been a steamy drive.

Hamish looked over the customers' heads until his blue-eyed gaze locked with Carol's. "Ack, could the *blethering* get any louder?" he exclaimed. He was born and raised in Loch Mallaig, but he spoke with a hint of a Scottish accent inherited from his parents that got more pronounced the more agitated he was.

An elderly tourist with flaming red hair beamed at Hamish. "You're Scottish too?" He tipped the last of his Empire biscuit into his mouth with a moan of pleasure. "This is *well tidy scran*, isn't it?"

Hamish nodded. "Aye, that it is."

"Delicious food," Carol translated to a bewildered-looking customer clearly unfamiliar with Scottishisms, then she signaled to Hamish. "Could you please clear the rest of the tables? We don't have room for all these customers to eat in, but we should do our best."

Hamish went straight to work bussing tables. He could be surly, but he was a hard worker with a soft side.

"I'll help fill orders as soon as I give this tea to Annemarie," Bridget told Carol as she passed her, teacup in hand.

"That's okay," Carol said. "If she needs you, we can manage."

Carol joined Laura and Molly behind the counter and rang up the orders while her friends boxed them. Fortunately, the bus driver had only given his passengers a fifteen-minute window, so the group took all their orders to go, easing Hamish's load considerably.

Angus, who seemed to sense when the clock struck three, had snuck downstairs, and he delighted in discreetly trailing Hamish as he bussed the tables.

"Is that upstairs doorjamb swollen from the humidity again?" Hamish grouched. "The door's always popping open and out you come to pester me, laddie." He sounded gruff, but a moment later he slipped the Scottie a bit of piecrust left behind on one of the plates. Was it any wonder the dog adored him?

A few minutes later, they ushered their last customer out the door and locked it behind him.

Laura whistled as she came around the counter and assessed the display cases. "That group cleared out almost all our stock."

"Tourist season is in full swing," Molly said as she closed out the till.

Apparently done calculating what she'd need to do to restock the cases for the next day, Laura glanced up. Her gaze rested on Annemarie, then she raised an eyebrow at Carol. "Did the bus forget somebody?"

"No," Carol began. "That's—"

"I need your help," Annemarie broke in, springing to her feet. "My mom left this morning to take her dog for a walk, and no one has seen or heard from her since. I've driven all around the county looking for her car at the usual spots she likes to hike, and I showed her picture around town." Annemarie's explanation spilled out, the words toppling over each other in her breathless attempt to not miss a single detail.

Angus planted himself next to Annemarie, leaning into her leg. He licked her hand as if to offer comfort. Or maybe he knew his pal Scout was missing along with Jeanette and he was commiserating.

“The police said they couldn’t help you?” Laura clarified.

“They said a competent adult has to be gone for forty-eight hours before they’re considered missing unless there is evidence of foul play.” Tears dribbled down Annemarie’s cheeks, and Bridget handed her a paper napkin from a nearby dispenser.

Molly frowned. “I see.”

“No you don’t,” Annemarie argued. “Foul play is exactly what I’m afraid has happened.”

Foul play? Carol had listened to Annemarie’s fractured explanation of her mother’s disappearance twice now, and nothing in it suggested foul play. An accident while hiking in the woods perhaps, but is that what Annemarie meant?

Hamish flipped the sign in the window to *Closed* and cleared his throat. “Seems to me we should all sit down and let Miss Franklin explain exactly what happened leading up to her mother’s disappearance.”

“Thanks, Mr. Bruce,” Annemarie said gratefully.

“You were a conscientious student, Annemarie,” Hamish said, apparently having taught her when he was still working at the local high school. “Unless you’ve gone daft since high school, I assume your concerns aren’t baseless.”

Molly poured six glasses of water and filled a plate with the remaining cookies from the display case. She carried them over to the table where Annemarie sat with Bridget.

Once they’d all taken a seat, Hamish nodded at Annemarie. “Okay, now start at the beginning.”

Annemarie drew in a deep breath and flattened the picture of her mom in the middle of the table. “My mom is Jeanette Franklin.”

Annemarie recapped what she'd told Carol and Bridget earlier. "Since Mom wasn't expecting me home until Friday, I didn't start to worry about her until she didn't return for lunch and I couldn't reach her on the phone. I always call her at lunch, and she never misses my call." She looked from one person to the next around the table. "Never."

Carol's chest grew heavy. Annemarie hadn't mentioned that part earlier.

"After both texting and phoning for half an hour with no response, I called my dad," Annemarie went on. "He said Mom probably went shopping. But she had Scout with her, and it's superhot outside, so she'd never leave him tied outside the shops in the middle of the day, let alone in a hot car. He said she probably went to her sister's then, or to a friend's. So I tried calling Aunt Karen and Mom's friends. None of her friends had seen her and there was no answer at my aunt's."

"Could she have left Scout at your aunt's while they went shopping?" Bridget asked.

"It's possible. But she wouldn't ignore her phone. And I've been trying it all afternoon. By now she would've realized she missed my lunchtime call and checked for messages, charged her phone if that had been the problem."

"She didn't mention to your father what her plans for the day were?" Molly asked.

"They're separated," Carol whispered.

"Oh I'm sorry." Molly exchanged a glance with Carol, no doubt wondering the same thing as she was—did Annemarie suspect her father of the foul play she'd mentioned?

"I've spent every minute since searching the countryside for Mom's old green Saab. It's pretty memorable, but no one has seen it anywhere."

"Isn't this the day Jeanette usually comes in for her oatcakes?" Hamish asked.

Carol shook her head. "That's tomorrow. Thursdays."

"That's when she gets her alimony check from Dad." Annemarie glowered. "I mean, 'separate maintenance.' That's what they call it for couples who aren't divorced yet."

Carol gritted her teeth, not liking how convenient it was Jeanette should go missing the day before the next check was due.

Molly, who had a twentysomething daughter of her own, turned sympathetic eyes on Annemarie, but didn't speak. Perhaps she had no idea what to say.

Carol was at a loss too. Annemarie still hadn't divulged what she thought might be the nature of the foul play she was certain had befallen her mother. "Annemarie, you mentioned foul play. Are you thinking of something specific?"

Annemarie cringed. "It could be anything, couldn't it? That's what I need you to figure out. Mom adopted Scout soon after she and Dad separated. She already hated being alone in the house when I was away at school, and she was worried that living alone made her a target. What if someone was stalking her or something?"

"You think she was being watched?" Hamish tapped his fingers on the table, his lips pinching as if he'd swallowed something sour. "Sometimes spouses hire private investigators to spy on each other for evidence to use in divorce court. Do you think that's something your dad might've done?"

Annemarie shook her head. "Dad didn't want the separation. It was Mom's idea."

"It's hot out," Molly said. "Jeanette could've gone to the beach. I always leave my phone in the car when I go to the beach because I don't want to drop it in the water. She could've just lost track of time."

"Annemarie searched the parking lots for her mom's car at all the local beaches," Bridget reminded them.

“Okay,” Carol said, wanting to make sure she had all the facts straight about Annemarie’s request for help. “So you want us to find evidence your mom is a victim of foul play?”

Annemarie nodded.

“But there is no evidence of a struggle at the house?” Carol asked. “No reports of your mother’s car being found abandoned somewhere?”

“Not that I know of.”

Carol’s mind cataloged all the tidbits. “Based on that, let’s assume it’s more likely that she went hiking somewhere, was injured somehow, and can’t call for help because she’s out of cell phone range.”

Although Hamish merely sat with one hand scratching his neat, white goatee, apparently lost in thought, Molly and Laura nodded in agreement.

“That’s what I first thought.” Annemarie trembled. “But then I should’ve found her car at one of the trailheads.”

“Unless she went to a place you didn’t think to check,” Carol said, aware that even longtime residents didn’t always seem to appreciate the enormity of the forested areas in the Upper Peninsula.

Annemarie bit her lip. “I can’t stand the thought that she’s out in the woods in pain with no way to get help. Surely by now Scout would’ve attracted attention to her with his barking. She doesn’t go on remote trails.”

Carol glanced out the window. The blistering heat had zapped the energy from the now-limp petunias in the flower baskets on the lampposts. It wasn’t the kind of day many people would opt for a strenuous hike over relaxing on the water.

“I—we—know an avid outdoorsman who’s lived here all his life,” Molly said, no doubt referring to Fergus MacGregor, the handsome owner of the Castleglen golf resort and lodge. “I could ask him if there are lesser known trails he’d suggest we check.”

“I have a few ideas myself,” Hamish added gruffly, reminding them tacitly that he’d lived in the area a whole lot longer than any of them. Carol imagined his love of bird-watching had taken him on many a hike over the years. “I’ll drive around to a few and check for your mother’s car.”

Still clutching her napkin, Annemarie dabbed at her damp eyes. “Thank you. I can’t stand sitting around doing nothing when I know she must be out there somewhere, probably hurt. I did check with the hospital, but she hasn’t been admitted. And the police said there’d been no traffic accidents in the county today, so that’s reassuring at least.”

“You should drop by your dad’s office, lass,” Hamish said. “He might be able to suggest other places your mom would go.”

“I’ll come with you,” Bridget volunteered.

Annemarie pulled her keys from her purse and handed them to Bridget. “Do you mind driving? I’m a mess.”

After the pair left, Carol glanced at each of her friends. “What do you think?”

“I hope Jeanette went out of town with a friend and isn’t lying hurt in the woods somewhere,” Molly said.

“Me too,” Laura agreed. “I don’t see why the police wouldn’t at least be willing to issue a BOLO for her car.”

“Maybe because she’s a grown woman.” Hamish pushed his chair back and stood. “A grown woman who might not want to be found at the moment. I’ll still go drive past my favorite obscure haunts and see if I can find her, though.”

“Thanks, Hamish.” Carol motioned to the tables he’d cleared and wiped spotless. Whether it was renovations, repairs, or run-of-the-mill chores, he did all his tasks at the bakery meticulously. “For everything.”

His lips curled at the corners as he slapped on his tartan cap, betraying a crack in the curmudgeonly veneer he seemed so fond of projecting.

Already feeling too tired for the work yet to be finished before they could leave, Carol forced herself up from her chair. “Those dishes aren’t going to wash themselves.”

Molly collected the tray of untouched water glasses from the center of the table. “I wonder if the cell phone company could ping Jeanette’s phone to locate her.”

Laura trailed them into the kitchen. “They wouldn’t do it without a warrant. Or do you have a connection in the phone company we don’t know about?” she teased.

Molly shook her head. “Sadly, no.”

An idea came to Carol, but she bristled at the implications. Still, it might be worth pursuing. “I don’t like to think it, but I can’t help wondering if there’s a clue to a secret liaison in Jeanette’s computer or journal. A liaison she wouldn’t want Annemarie to know about.”

“So you think Hamish is right?” Laura asked.

Carol shrugged. “As much as I don’t want it to be the case, is it worse than her lying injured in a forest somewhere unable to move or call for help?”

Just as the last of the dishes had been put away, Carol’s cell phone rang. She glanced at the screen and her hope surged. “It’s Bridget.” She connected the call and immediately asked, “Good news?”

“Sorry but no,” Bridget answered, tentacles of tension in her voice. “I actually have a bad feeling.”

“What happened?”

“Mr. Franklin was abrupt and impatient with Annemarie when we showed up at his office. He was really dismissive, telling her he was in the middle of an important business meeting even though she was obviously upset.”

Carol’s heart squeezed for the poor girl. “Some men can’t stand tears.”

“She’s his daughter!” Bridget snapped. Her voice softened almost immediately. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t blame you. It’s a stressful situation and it doesn’t help that he doesn’t seem to be taking it seriously,” Carol said gently.

“Yeah,” Bridget replied. “I was just thinking. There was something *off* about the way her dad acted.”

“Off how?”

“I can’t explain it. It’s just a feeling I have.” Bridget released an audibly troubled exhale. “I think he knows more about Jeanette’s disappearance than he’s letting on.”