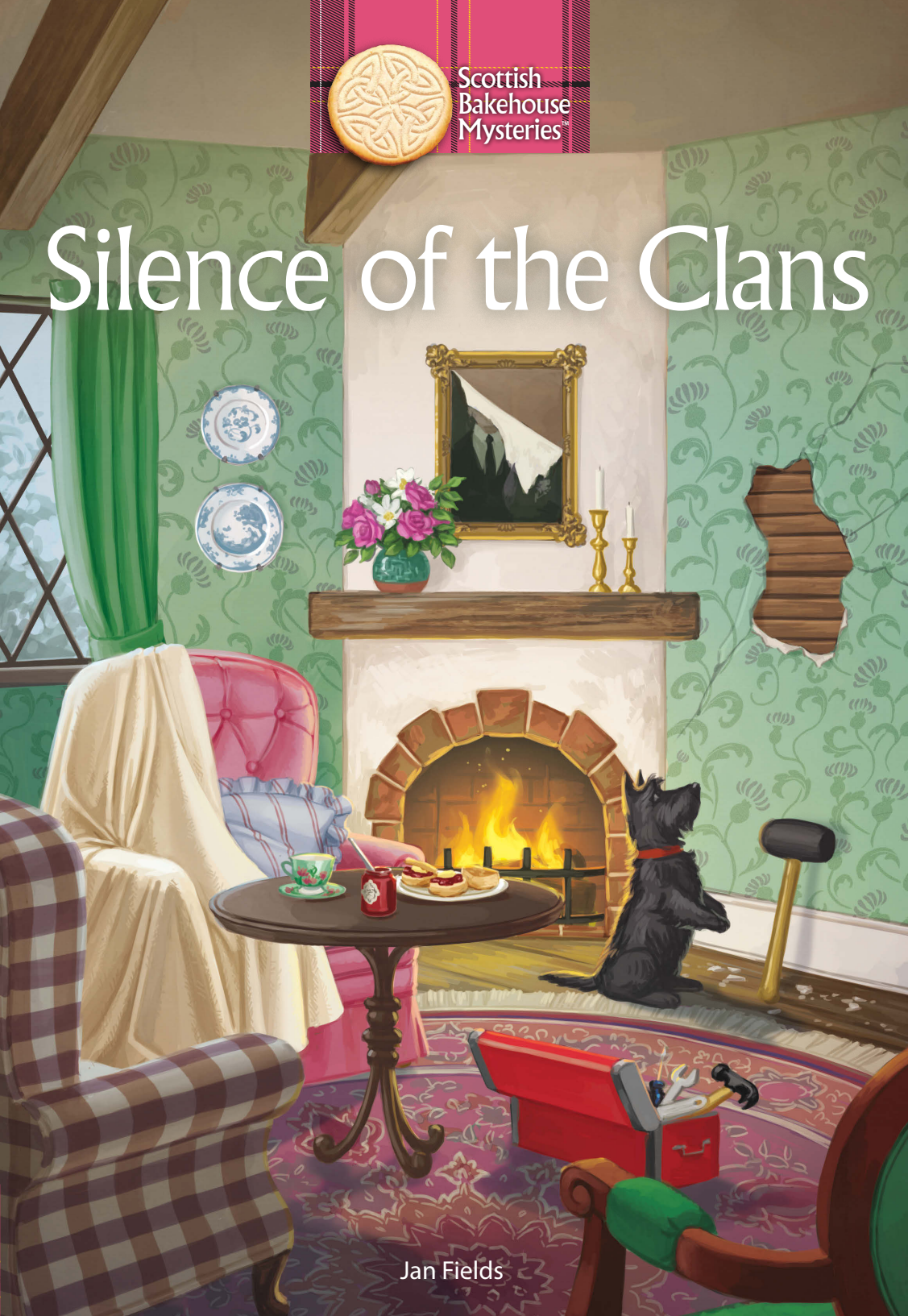




Scottish  
Bakehouse  
Mysteries™

# Silence of the Clans



Jan Fields



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*Silence of the Clans*

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On a bright Monday morning in August, Molly Ferris finished checking the register at Bread on Arrival in preparation for opening. As she closed the till, she stood still for a moment behind the gently curved display counters, each packed full of fresh-baked treats to tempt the morning customers. This was the few minutes of the day when the bakehouse's displays looked absolutely perfect, with all the cookies, scones, bagels, and bars lined up in neat rows. The large room, full of charmingly rustic decor that blended woodsy style with a taste of old Scotland, smelled of fresh bread, the aroma rolling in from the kitchen behind Molly.

Combined, the effects of sights and scents never failed to make Molly smile. This was her dream. Well, not only hers. Her two best friends, Laura Donovan and Carol MacCallan, had dreamed right along with her. And thus far, it was all they'd hoped for.

Molly had been away from the bakery a lot in the past few weeks, tied up with the event planning of a huge Scottish wedding at Castleglen. The gorgeous golf resort retained plenty of staff for even the largest occasion of course, but her friend Fergus MacGregor had deferred heavily to Molly's suggestions since her previous career had been in event planning. And the cake Laura baked and Carol decorated had been beautiful beyond belief, inspiring everyone from the bride to the bartender to gush over it at length. The event was a success all around, but it had meant Molly had only rushed through Bread on Arrival on her way out the door from her upstairs apartment. Now she breathed it in, allowing it to fill her with joy.

On the other side of the counter, part-time employee Bridget Ross rushed around, giving the rustic, Celtic Northwoods-style tables and chairs a last quick wipe before opening. It wouldn't do for any customer to find dust or crumbs on their tables. Bridget pulled out one chair to better reach the tabletop, and Molly smiled at the sight of the rough Celtic knots carved into the chair back and on the braces. They always reminded her of the way the Scottish people wove themselves into the land and made their own unique community, even in someplace as far from Scotland as Loch Mallaig, Michigan.

A rustle near the stone fireplace drew Molly's eye to Angus, her beloved Scottish terrier, who was rooting around the various decorative baskets and crockery near the fireplace. "Angus, upstairs," Molly sang out. When Angus ignored her, she put a little more sternness in her tone. "Angus, upstairs."

Angus glanced her way before sticking his nose into a basket of fire-starter pine cones and pulling out his favorite toy. Once the plush sheep called Woolie was clenched in his jaws, he trotted out of the room toward the inside stairs leading to their apartment. He paused just long enough to eye Molly as he passed. Angus knew he wasn't allowed downstairs during working hours, but he considered the whole building part of his domain and stretched the rule as often as he was able. Angus, like most Scotties, expected the world to conform to him, not the other way around.

"Off with you," Molly murmured as she shooed him up the steps, though she smiled as the words passed her lips. Angus waited dutifully at the top step for one last adoring head rub, then disappeared into the apartment. Molly closed the door and pulled on it to ensure it was tight, then descended the stairs.

Returning to the front of the house, Molly washed her hands at the sink behind the counter. She shut off the water just in time to hear

a giggle from Bridget, who was peeking out the front window. The lovely young woman wore her shoulder-length black hair pulled back, but Molly still saw a few streaks of blue among the black as it caught the light. The college student was fond of small dramatic touches.

“Everyone’s favorite customer is right on time,” Bridget said.

“Favorite customer?” Molly echoed. “And who would that be?”

Bridget eyed her with surprise for a moment. “Oh that’s right. You’ve missed out on something truly special since you’ve been busy at Castleglen. Not that I imagine spending all that time with Mr. MacGregor was a hardship.” She wiggled her perfectly shaped eyebrows.

“He’s sweet,” Molly said, hoping to deflect any possible gossip about her friendship with Fergus. “And an old friend. Emphasis on the *friend*, Bridget. We were children together.”

“Did I say otherwise?” the younger woman asked with mock innocence—apparently Carol and Laura’s opinion about Molly and Fergus being destined for romance was rubbing off on her. “I was only saying that you’re in for a totally different sort of treat this morning with Mrs. Ferguson. She’s a bit of a fixture around Loch Mallaig, but she only recently *discovered* us here at the bakery.”

Molly couldn’t help but laugh at Bridget’s cheerful mischief. There was something infectious about the girl. “Well then, you’d best unlock the door and let our favorite customer in. I believe it’s seven o’clock on the dot.”

As soon as Bridget opened the door, an elderly woman shuffled in. She had probably been of medium height in her younger years, but now her posture was stooped. She wore her steel-gray hair in a bun, though none too neatly. Hairs fluffed out all around her head, giving her a bit of a halo. She wore a thick, handmade sweater, which made Molly feel too warm on sight. How could anyone wear something so heavy in August, even at seven in the morning?

Mrs. Ferguson stopped at the counter and squinted suspicious gray eyes at Molly. “Who are you?”

“I’m Molly Ferris, one of the bakery owners.”

“I haven’t seen you in here. Are you too lazy to work?”

Molly blinked at the startlingly rude question. “I’ve been working somewhere else lately, but now I’m back.”

The woman sniffed, clearly losing interest. Her gaze swept the counters. “Those scones fresh?”

“Yes, ma’am. They’re always fresh. Otherwise we’d wrap them for the day-old shelf.” Molly pointed to a metal-and-wood rack nearby.

“There aren’t ever any scones on that thing,” Mrs. Ferguson said, her tone suspicious.

“They sell well. We don’t often have day-old scones.” Molly glanced over the woman’s head at Bridget, who was holding the door open to greet customers. She did manage to throw a saucy wink in Molly’s direction. Molly was beginning to understand why Bridget had taken special notice of this customer. “What can I get you?”

“A girdle scone,” Mrs. Ferguson said. “And cut it in half. And a cup of hot water. Make sure it’s hot. Lukewarm water doesn’t make good tea.”

“What kind of tea do you want for your water?” Molly asked.

The old woman’s eyes flashed. “Did I ask for tea? No, I did not. I want hot water. And make it *hot* this time.” Mrs. Ferguson raised her voice at the end, glaring toward Bridget, who grinned back as she trotted over.

“I’ll get the water,” Bridget said, slipping behind the counter. “Piping hot.”

While Mrs. Ferguson harrumphed, Molly retrieved one of the girdle scones. Made on a griddle instead of baked in the oven, girdle scones were slightly thinner than baked scones but had a unique flavor and lovely browning on both sides.



Molly was surprised and grateful to find a sharp knife tucked into the girdle scone pan. She had no idea how she'd cut such a delicate pastry in half with one of the plastic knives for customers. Once she'd cut it into two thin triangles, she slipped the scone into a pastry bag and returned to the counter, holding out the bag to Mrs. Ferguson at the same time that Bridget set a mug of hot water on the counter.

Molly smiled brightly. "Here you go, Mrs. Ferguson."

Mrs. Ferguson took the bag with a frown. "Seems foolish for two people to do such little work. If you'd step smartly, you could do the work with one lass easily enough. You'll be lucky if you stay in business with such wastefulness. You wouldn't see folly like this in Scotland." Then her frown sharpened and she pointed at Molly. "And you don't need to call me Mrs. Ferguson. It's fine for the lass. She's young enough to need some practice in manners, but you've probably learned all the manners you ever will. You may call me Kathleen."

Molly blinked at how many insults the woman had packed into such a short speech. With no idea of how to respond to most of it, she settled on, "Thank you, Kathleen."

Kathleen nodded once, her sharp chin almost cutting through the air. Then she carried her bag and cup slowly to one of the empty tables, continuing to grumble to herself as she went. Once settled at the table, Kathleen pulled a small tin box from her pocket. Curious, Molly craned her neck to see what was in it and was surprised when the older woman pulled an obviously used tea bag from the tin and began dunking it in her water.

"That 'un will pinch a penny 'til it screams."

Molly glanced up to see Catriona McCauley, who owned Neeps and Tatties, the Scottish restaurant across the street from the bakehouse, with her husband, Brodie. A native Scot with brown eyes and curly hair, Catriona spoke with an authentic brogue.

“You’re a patient woman,” Catriona whispered. “I might have called her a name and been less ashamed about it than I should.”

Molly heard Bridget giggle behind her, but she simply said, “Life is filled with challenges.”

“Don’t I know it?” Catriona huffed. “Like when I run out of bread before the breakfast rush. It’s not a true Scottish breakfast without toast.”

“It certainly isn’t,” Molly agreed. “How many loaves do you need?”

Molly rang up two loaves each of wheat and white sandwich bread for Catriona and sent her on her way. She noticed Catriona say something gracious to Kathleen as she walked by her on the way to the door, but the young chef received only a grumble in reply. That trend continued as customers came and went. Molly noticed that Kathleen sat up a little straighter each time someone paused to greet her. *She might be grouchy, but it appears that she enjoys the attention.*

When Mayor Tavish Calhoun came in for his usual coffee and scone, Molly was surprised to see him stop at Kathleen’s table. The mayor was a stout man whose red hair and green eyes made plain his Celtic heritage. He was also a skilled bagpiper and belonged to the same bagpipe club as Molly, The Piping Yoopers, though his skills put hers to shame.

Molly couldn’t help but perk up an ear to try and catch the conversation between the mayor and Kathleen. She was curious what connection he had with the cranky woman, other than their shared Scottish heritage. “It’s fine to see you, Kathleen. How are you on this bonny morning?”

“Same as always,” she replied. “Aching and *crabbit*, with little interest in a chat with some *clatty chancer*.”

Molly winced at that insult. She’d been in Loch Mallaig long enough to know that clatty chancer meant dirty conman. Though the mayor was technically a politician, he was also a retired dentist

and considered throughout the community to be an upstanding man. Molly felt annoyance well up in her and contemplated marching over to tell the old woman that such attacks on other customers weren't welcome in Bread on Arrival.

To her surprise, however, the mayor laughed off the insult and his mirth sounded genuine. "You sound in fine fettle today, Kathleen. I'm glad to hear it."

Again Molly was surprised when Kathleen's lips quirked briefly in what appeared to be a smile. "I *dinnae ken* why you're wasting your wind talking to me," the elderly woman said. "I'll not be voting for you again. My ungrateful brood is carting me off to Florida, of all the horrible places."

"And why is that?" the mayor asked.

"Some rubbish about my being too old to live alone." Kathleen crossed her arms. "The lot of them are at the house banging and thumping to get it ready to sell. You'd think they'd have wanted to fix up the place for their old ma to live in it, but no, they want it nice for strangers. As if I want to show my house to a bunch of *blethering eejits* and sell it. The house my Thomas built. No respect. They have no respect." She smacked her hand on the table, making her scone crumbs jump.

"Perhaps they don't realize how vital you are to our town," the mayor said kindly.

She snorted. "They say it gets too cold here in the winter. They want me to be somewhere warm. And besides, my daughter lives there, not that I expect she'll be dashing over to see me. She didn't even come up to be part of the mess they're making of my house."

"You know, you might come to like Florida," Mayor Calhoun suggested. "It is a beautiful place."

"Och, and be off with you if you're going to talk foolishness."

“It’s not foolishness,” he insisted. “Look at you, Kathleen, bundled up in the middle of August. It is probably fair for them to worry that you might freeze solid next winter.”

“I’ve made it through every winter up ’til now. Leave me to eat my breakfast in peace and go dig up votes somewhere else.” She hunched over the crumbs of her scone then, giving the mayor the cold shoulder. Again, he didn’t seem to let it bother him and simply joined the line of customers.

No one else bothered Kathleen for a while. She finished half the scone, then carefully folded the wax paper around the second half and slipped it back in the bag. She returned the used tea bag to the small tin as well. Her table was tidy except for the cup of weak tea that she sipped while gazing around the bakery.

The bakehouse door burst open and a teenager appeared, his gaze darting around frantically. He wore a slightly tattered T-shirt covered in some kind of dust. As soon as he spotted Kathleen, he rushed to her table. “You need to come home, Gram,” he said, tugging on her sweater. “It’s an emergency. You’re needed.”

Kathleen slapped at his hand. “Don’t talk nonsense. I’m not done with my tea.” She raised a gray eyebrow. “What kind of emergency? Did your pa lose one of his fancy tools? Or are your uncles arguing again?”

“It’s a *real* emergency,” the boy said. “Please, Gram, I’ll make you a fresh cup of tea when we get home.”

“And do what with this one?” she asked sharply. “Is that the kind of waste your mother taught you? I dinnae raise her to throw away good food.”

Molly could see the teenager was growing increasingly upset, and Kathleen was clearly not going to be moved by his urging. She grabbed a fresh scone from the display and slipped it in a bag, then grabbed a to-go cup and lid.

"I'll be right back," Molly told Bridget, then walked to Kathleen's table. "Here, Kathleen, I've brought you another scone. On the house." Molly held out the bag. "And we can put your tea in this to-go cup so you don't have to leave it behind and waste it. Obviously something is going on at home that you need to attend to."

Kathleen glared at her. "And what business is it of yours?"

"It's not," Molly said. "But your grandson is upset. Can't you see that?"

The elderly woman frowned at her grandson. "Gus is a teenager. Aren't they always fussing over something?"

"No, Gram," Gus said. "I'm not, and you know it. You need to come with me."

Kathleen held out for another moment, then exhaled sharply and snatched the bag from Molly's hand. "I don't know how you'll stay in business if you give away food every time some lad kicks up a fuss." She stood with effort and pointed at her mug. "Pour my tea in that wasteful paper cup, and Gus can carry it."

Molly quickly decanted the tea and snapped on the lid, and Gus gave her a grateful grin as he took it from her.

Kathleen shoved the bags of scones at him as well. "You might as well carry these too, since Miss Busybody is giving things away." Then she took the boy's arm. "I suppose we best get going. It's a bit of a walk."

"You don't have to walk, Gram," Gus said as they headed toward the door. "I brought the car."

"Och! Your parents must be made of money," she said. "Whoever heard of taking a car when you've got the two good legs God has given you?"

"It's only because it's an emergency," Gus said as he pulled open the door.

"Emergency," Kathleen grumbled. "Rubbish."

The door closed behind them, cutting off the rest of Kathleen's grouching. Molly gave the table a quick swipe with a cloth, though the older woman had left no mess behind. She might be grouchy, but she was neat.

When Molly slipped behind the counter, she heard several of the customers chatting about the incident with Kathleen and Gus. "That lad is a good boy," one petite woman said to her companion. "He reminds me of our Davis."

The man with her huffed. "Our grandson should be so polite. His mother is letting him run wild."

Molly shut out the conversation as the couple squabbled in amiable tones. Local real estate agent Beverly Scott stepped up to the counter. "I agree with Martha." She waved at the bickering grandparents behind her. "Kathleen should be grateful for that boy."

"Maybe she is," Molly said. "In her own way."

"Down deep," Bridget said, then giggled. "Really, truly deep."

Beverly chuckled, then shifted the conversation to a tray of biscuits she'd ordered for an open house she was hosting. Never feeling completely comfortable with the casual gossip of such a tightly knit community, Molly was glad to return her attention to business.

But Molly found that the incident with the young man and his grandmother stayed with her long after they left the bakehouse. She felt oddly unsettled by Gus's intensity. Something had obviously upset him. But what?

She had a feeling she hadn't heard the last of the matter, and she was also certain she wouldn't like whatever she learned.



Molly slept in Tuesday morning, though unintentionally. Sometime in the night, Angus had hopped out of her bed and dragged his floor cushion to a new spot beside the nightstand. Unfortunately, he'd tangled himself in the clock's cord, pulling it off the nightstand. The fall must have shut off the alarm.

The sunlight streaming through the bedroom window finally woke her, and she bolted out of bed with a shriek. She rushed through her shower and dressing, all the while knowing she'd be late anyway.

When she finally clattered down the stairs with Angus at her heels, both Laura and Carol were busy pulling bread from the huge ovens. The smell made Molly's stomach growl.

"*Guid mornin.*" Carol offered her usual Scottish greeting—borrowed from her paternal grandparents, who had been native Scots—as she pushed a rack full of fresh loaves toward the cooling area. Even standing next to a steaming oven didn't push a strand of Carol's salt-and-pepper hair out of place. The sight of her tidy bob made Molly long for a hat to cover her still damp blonde locks.

"We were wondering if someone should go up and knock on your door." Laura grinned cheekily. Her own shoulder-length auburn hair was pulled into its usual neat ponytail and her white baker's coat was flawless.

"Angus apparently thought we should sleep in," Molly said. "I need to run him around outside for a minute and then I'll help out front."

"Sounds fine," Laura said as she started bagging a batch of already

cooled bread for delivery to the restaurants at Castleglen. “Hamish can open the doors. He’ll appreciate having something to grumble about.” Laura smirked at her reference to their other part-time employee, a surly but gold-hearted retired history teacher named Hamish Bruce.

While Molly walked Angus around the block, he didn’t dawdle and sniff. “Feeling guilty?” she asked as she let him into the bakehouse’s fenced yard. He could get back into the apartment through the doggy door at the top of a set of exterior stairs. “You should. Now, be a good boy. No sneaking downstairs into the bakery.”

The little dog dashed off to chase a butterfly fluttering around the base of the stairs.

Hamish raised white eyebrows as she hurried in to the customer area and grabbed an apron bearing the Bread on Arrival logo—the bakehouse’s name written across a piece of shortbread bearing a Celtic knot.

“Nice to see you,” he said in his usual gruff tone. “Now that I have finished all the prep.”

His grumpy tone reminded Molly of Kathleen’s odd visit on the previous morning, and she wondered if they’d be seeing the cranky woman. Maybe she’d find out what had upset Kathleen’s nephew.

“Do you know Kathleen Ferguson?” Molly asked.

Hamish nodded. “She’s a true Scot through and through. Born in Glasgow, in fact. She’s going to have a time of it now with those mysterious bones. Poor woman.”

Molly furrowed her brow. “What mysterious bones?”

Hamish visibly cheered. He did enjoy being the first to know something. “The bones found in her house. Apparently the family is doing some remodeling, and human bones were found in one of the walls.”

Molly gasped. *Well, that explains what upset Gus.* “That’s terrible.”



“Agreed,” Hamish replied. “And it’ll come down hard on the family since everyone knows that house was built by Kathleen’s late husband, Thomas. It’ll be tough for them to claim some stranger stuffed a body into the wall.”

Molly fiddled with the stack of cups near the coffee maker, still stunned. “What kind of man was Thomas Ferguson? Did you know him?”

“A bit. Not well, though I always liked him well enough. Some people thought the world of him. Of course, some people can be gullible as sheep.”

Molly wondered if she might have ever met the man. Though she’d grown up in Ann Arbor, she’d spent many summers in Loch Mallaig as a kid and a teen. It was from those idyllic summers that she knew Fergus MacGregor and a few others around town as well, but she couldn’t call a face to mind when she thought of the name Thomas Ferguson.

Laura came through from the kitchen with a tray of bagged loaves for the bread rack. She studied Hamish and Molly and asked, “What? Have I missed something?”

“Do you know Kathleen Ferguson?” Molly asked.

Laura’s lips quirked in a wry smile. “I’ve heard about her. She’s one of Bridget’s favorites. Bridget enjoys grumpy old things, which explains why she works so well with Hamish.”

Hamish harrumphed at that, but the gleam in his eye showed he didn’t much mind being seen as grumpy. Molly suspected that he cultivated his image as a curmudgeon. “I am simply a serious person,” he said with mock annoyance. “You can’t suggest I’m anything other than professional.” Then he marched by them and crossed the room to the front door, standing stiff-backed so that they could not possibly miss his display of artificial offense.

Laura rolled her eyes at Hamish’s drama, then fixed her attention on Molly. “Did you have breakfast?”

Molly raised her eyebrows. “Usually it’s Carol who tries to mother me. She won’t want you taking her job.”

Laura raised both hands. “No mothering. I made a small batch of scones to test a new recipe I dreamed up last night. They’re orange and chocolate, and since there aren’t enough of them to sell, I thought you might want one before I break the rest up to offer as samples.”

“Orange and chocolate? I can’t turn that down.”

“I’ll save you one. You can eat it when you have a moment.” With a wave, Laura headed to the kitchen, and Molly heard the bell on the front door jingle. As waiting customers filed in, she noticed Kathleen wasn’t among them. Not that she’d expected her. Surely the poor woman would prefer not to be in the public eye after such a grisly discovery in her home.

As soon as the customers reached the counter, Molly could tell the discovery of bones in someone’s wall was going to be the hot topic of the day. “You know this means Thomas Ferguson was a killer,” a gray-haired woman said firmly to the younger blonde beside her.

In line behind the women, Alastair Thomson perked up and stepped closer. “A miller?” he said. “Thomas Ferguson wasn’t a miller. He was a handyman, and a good one. I never knew a man who could fix plumbing or patch a wall quicker and better than Thomas Ferguson.”

Molly had to suppress a chuckle, even in the face of such a grim topic. She knew Alastair well since he was the leader of The Piping Yoopers. He was a talented bagpiper despite being somewhat hard of hearing. The white-haired retired tax attorney also owned the cozy stone crofter’s cottage near Castleglen that Laura rented.

The women Alastair had addressed faced him, bristling. “He was a *killer!*” the gray-haired woman insisted, raising her voice.

Alastair’s mustache bristled with offense. “A killer?” he repeated. “Don’t be daft, Magda. He was one of the finest men I ever knew.”

Magda crossed her arms. “His talent for carpentry is hardly a defense. He stuffed someone into the wall of his own home!”

With relief, Molly saw Hamish approach the group. Hamish could be an old bear sometimes, but he had a good heart. He could sort this out. *The bakery should be a place of community, not conflict.*

Unfortunately, Hamish simply threw lighter fluid on the smoldering argument—no surprise considering he and Alastair had an ongoing feud regarding the negative effect Alastair’s bagpiping had on the wildlife that Hamish, an avid bird-watcher, liked to observe in peace and quiet.

“Alastair, you have to admit that it doesn’t sound good,” Hamish said, his tone reasonable if a bit blunt. “After all, Thomas built that house himself, and I don’t think the body crawled into the wall on its own.”

The two women puffed up, clearly happy to have Hamish supporting their argument. Molly tried to catch Hamish’s eye. She intended to wave him away from the group. *Not helpful, Hamish!*

Alastair jabbed a finger into Hamish’s chest. “It’s a sad occasion when the name of a good man like Thomas Ferguson is smeared around Loch Mallaig.” He scanned the bakery, his expression critical. “Especially in a place I’ve considered a quality establishment.”

Molly suppressed a groan before leaning around the person at the counter and calling out, “Alastair, I’m sure Hamish didn’t mean to smear anyone’s name.”

If Alastair heard her, he gave no sign. Instead he left the line and headed for the door.

“Alastair!” Molly called. Then she glared at Hamish. “You fix this.”

Hamish barely took a step before Alastair was out the door and disappearing down the sidewalk. Hamish faced Molly with a shrug, and she scowled back.

“It’s not my fault,” Hamish complained when he returned to the counter. “I think maybe all that blowing into the bagpipe has done something to the man’s brain.”

“You do know that I play the bagpipes as well,” Molly said drily.

“Aye, you might let this be a warning to ye,” Hamish suggested, getting a chuckle or two from the line of customers, and reminding Molly that they should be focusing on the job.

Still, she filed away a mental note to apologize to Alastair when she saw him at The Piping Yoopers meeting on Sunday if she couldn’t catch him before that. The customers continued to speculate about the Ferguson family, but they kept the discussion much quieter, and there were no more arguments that Molly could hear.

Then to Molly’s surprise, Kathleen came through the door around nine. The early birds were gone, but more than half the tables in the bakery were full of people eating pastries and drinking coffee. Kathleen passed them without comment, appearing not to notice the sly glances cast in her direction.

Molly made it a point to focus on the customers, filling orders briskly. She didn’t want anyone in line to start something with Kathleen. She doubted the older woman would simply storm out if offended. She seemed to be made of sterner stuff.

Finally, Kathleen faced her at the counter. “Give me a cup of hot water. And make sure it’s truly hot. You can’t make a decent cup of tea with lukewarm water.”

“The water is always hot,” Hamish snapped from behind Molly. “It comes out of the coffee maker near boiling.”

“So you say,” Kathleen retorted.

“Let me get your water.” Molly quickly filled a to-go cup from the tap on the coffee maker. She placed the cup on the counter with a cover beside it.

“I’ll not be needing a cover,” Kathleen snapped. “No one is dragging me away from my breakfast this morning.”

Molly swept the offending cover off the counter. “Can I get you anything else? A girdle scone maybe?”

Kathleen sniffed. “How much do you think I eat? You gave me an extra scone yesterday. I won’t need another one for days. I suppose you see the mistake you made *now*.” She patted her purse, which Molly assumed meant the older woman was storing the day-old scone inside.

“There’s no charge for the water,” Molly said.

Kathleen’s eyes widened. “I should hope not.” Then she placed a piece of folded paper on the counter in front of Molly, collected her cup of water, and turned away from the counter.

Molly picked up the paper and unfolded it. The paper was covered with careful, cramped writing that Molly couldn’t immediately decipher. “Could you take over the line for a moment, Hamish?”

He agreed without comment, which was almost surprising. Molly backed up to allow herself to concentrate on the paper and decode the cramped writing. She couldn’t imagine why Kathleen would pass her a note when she could have simply told her whatever she wanted to say.

For a moment, the writing baffled her with its shaky tilts and squished-together letters. But as she worked out a couple of words, it was as if her brain learned how to translate it. The note started by thanking Molly for encouraging Kathleen to leave with Gus.

*I guess the lad was right in saying we had a proper emergency at home. Enough with the blather. I assume you know by now that things at my house aren’t well. I know what you’ve done for others, and I need you to do that for me.*

Molly blinked and flipped the paper over, as if the blank back would explain what the old woman meant. She wasn't sure what she might have done that Kathleen was talking about. Certainly it wasn't Molly's skills in event planning and public relations. With her lips pressed together, Molly raised her gaze to Kathleen's table.

The older woman gave a sly wink before dropping her attention to the weak tea she'd made for herself.

Molly slipped around the counter and walked to Kathleen's table. When she sank into the chair across from Kathleen, she received a frown for her trouble. "What do you think you're doing?" Kathleen demanded.

Molly gaped at her for a moment, then shook the folded paper at Kathleen. "I don't understand what you're talking about in this note. Exactly what do you think I can do that you need? I don't even do most of the baking around here. I'm good with event planning and great with handling the technical side of selling baked goods on computers, but it doesn't seem likely that you need either of those."

Kathleen shook her bent head, making the dandelion fluff of her hair wave. "You lot do talk foolishness in this place." Kathleen peered up at her, spearing Molly with her intent gray gaze. "I'll not talk about anything of consequence in this gossip cesspool."

"This 'cesspool' happens to be my place of business," Molly said, letting some of her irritation creep into her voice.

Kathleen snorted. "Well, you make a decent scone here and that's for sure, though you've already admitted you don't do the baking. I don't understand why you're snapping at me like a common fishwife."

Molly didn't want to argue. "Fine. But if you won't tell me what you want, I don't see a way that I can provide it."

"I'll tell you sure enough. But not here. You know where to find me."

"Actually I don't," Molly said, but before she could say anything more, Kathleen raised an eyebrow at her in a clear dismissal. Then the

older woman bowed her head over her tea again and acted as if Molly didn't even exist.

Molly glared at Kathleen for a moment, then shook her head and returned to waiting on customers. *At least that's something I can understand.*