



Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries™

A Faerie Dangerous Game



Rachael O. Phillips



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A Faerie Dangerous Game
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Library of Congress-in-Publication Data
A Faerie Dangerous Game / by Rachael O. Phillips
p. cm.
I. Title

2020935353

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



“Keep quiet, you two! You’re going to get us caught,” Carol MacCallan ordered her friends through gritted teeth. Although retired from teaching high school math, she could still call upon her commanding schoolmarm voice whenever needed—even when the audience was her former college roommates, who were now her business partners.

Molly Ferris, hunkering her petite frame behind a big pine’s scratchy trunk, merely rolled her eyes, but Laura Donovan tossed her auburn head. “Yes, Mrs. MacCallan, oh great and mighty math instructor, Queen of Calculus—”

“Hush.” From the midnight darkness of their forested hiding place, Carol aimed an ear at a nearby Classical Revival-style home. “Do you want Hamish to hear us?”

Laura quieted immediately. The three women may have employed retired history teacher Hamish Bruce at Bread on Arrival—the Scottish bakehouse they ran together in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula—but the prickly older man could nail all three to the wall with a single curmudgeonly glare.

Playing a so-called “faerie prank” on him would bring sweet revenge. Or certain doom. And what better time than this, the Month of the Faeries? The Loch Mallaig tradition was celebrated every October, and the town’s residents always went all out with their lighthearted hijinks.

A single light shone on Hamish’s front porch, and a night-light in the shadowy kitchen cast a dim glow. Carol, watching the upper

story, adjusted the overfilled trash bag in her hand. “Good. He just turned off their bedroom light.”

Before Carol could finish the sentence, Laura slipped past her, zipping through the night quickly despite the bulky load she carried over her shoulder. Tossing their own bags over their shoulders, Carol and Molly followed her to Hamish’s shed, skirting his cherished garden to reach their second hiding place.

Carol didn’t have to see well to know the shed bore not even a speck of dirt on its perfectly painted surface. In the flashlight’s dim beam, she could make out the silhouetted symmetry of sculpted bushes and areas where patches of rich, jewel-colored chrysanthemums surrounded artistic displays of hay bales, cornstalks, and pumpkins. Hamish and his wife, Joyce, had worked hard to create this pretty autumn scene.

Carol readjusted the heavy bag she carried over her shoulder, memories of long-ago student pranks testing her resolve. Should they really spoil such loveliness simply to follow a silly local tradition?

“Yes.” Laura had read Carol’s fidgety mind and fingers. “Yes, we should.”

Molly shifted her bag. “Let’s do this.”

“But I hate to mess up Joyce’s yard.” Carol and the others adored Hamish’s patient, cheerful wife.

Laura smirked. “She’ll enjoy his reaction enough to forgive us.”

She sure will. The thought of the verbal fireworks their prank would elicit fueled Carol’s resolve again. “You’re right. Where do we begin?”

“We can start in the center of the yard, then each work our way in a different direction,” Molly said. “Laura, you go left. Carol, you go right. I’ll cover the center moving toward the house, then we’ll meet at the shed. Just don’t go near Nessie.” She nodded toward the garage that housed Hamish’s pristine green 1955 Studebaker Speedster. “That’s something we’d *never* be forgiven for.”

“Roger that,” Laura said.

After moving to the start point, each woman set down her plastic bag and untied the knot at the top, then reached in and pulled out a handful of cubed bread, grinning wickedly at each other once they were armed.

“I thought Hamish might catch on when we didn’t contribute much to the day-olds shelf, but I don’t think he noticed,” Molly said.

“He’ll certainly notice this,” Carol replied. “Ready?”

“On three,” Laura said. “One, two, three!”

With dramatic gestures, the three women tossed their bread wide in three different directions, then got down to the task of spreading their cubes across the entire lawn. Once she completed a section, Carol toted her bulky sack a few more feet to the right, occasionally stealing glances at the house to make sure neither of the Bruces were peering out the window. As she went, warm wickedness bubbled up, similar to the feeling she’d had so long ago when playing a similar prank on the yard of her unsympathetic driver’s ed teacher.

Hurry, Carol chastised herself. No time for memory lane right now—or for imagining Hamish’s utter shock when he glanced out his window while brewing his morning tea and saw hundreds—maybe thousands?—of geese, ducks, wrens, robins, warblers, and sparrows on his lawn. The avid bird-watcher was used to tracking down his subjects in parks and along hiking trails. *What a surprise it will be for the birds to pay Hamish a visit this time.*

Carol smothered chuckles as she quickly completed her task, then headed for the shed to rendezvous with the others.

Molly had finished first and gone to fetch the pinnacle of their efforts from her Honda Fit, which was hidden on a dirt road in the neighboring forest. She held the small, bulky item in her hands. “I’m glad we took pictures of our masterpiece. Who knows what Hamish will

do when he sees it?” she whispered to Carol once they were reunited. “Want to see the result of all our hard work?”

Molly fixed her own small flashlight on their creation. Though Carol knew perfectly well what to expect, she winced slightly as a multimedia replica of Hamish’s disapproving face emerged from the darkness.

Molly giggled. “You really nailed it with the idea of using a neep as a base, Carol.”

Instead of a pumpkin, Carol had suggested they go with the traditional Scottish vegetable—which resembled an enormous rutabaga—for their jack-o’-lantern inspired caricature. Complete with craft-store sparrows and robins tangled in a beard of fake white hair, it bore an uncanny resemblance to their cantankerous friend.

Joining them to fix an appraising eye on the decorated vegetable, Laura nodded approvingly. “The birds are a nice touch.”

“He’ll hate it,” Carol said.

“He’ll love it,” Molly countered.

“The best kind of prank,” Laura said smugly as she turned off her flashlight. “Now who’s going to put it on his front porch?”

Silence.

Carol frowned. *Oh come on. We can’t back down now.* Her husband, Harvey, had tried to talk them out of the prank. But if they chickened out at this point, he’d never let them forget it—especially her.

“We came up with this idea together,” Carol said, straightening her spine. “And we should finish it together.”

“That’ll increase our chances of getting caught,” Molly warned.

“So what if he does catch us?” Laura challenged. “Will he shoot us at dawn?”

Certainly not, but Hamish could make their life . . . interesting. Carol repressed a shudder, imagining how their sharp-witted friend would retaliate.

Renewed silence told her the others shared her scary imaginings.

Carol shook off her reservations. “Let’s do this. We’ll sneak onto the far side of the porch, away from the light—”

“Let’s put Hamish Junior on the porch swing.” Glee had returned to Molly’s voice. “You know Senior drinks his tea there almost every morning.”

“Can we ring the doorbell?” Laura framed her thought in a question, but her tone left no doubt what she would do.

“If you drag Joyce out of bed, it’s on your head,” Carol warned.

“Nah,” Laura said airily. “She’ll make Hamish check it out.”

Carol peeked at her watch. “Whatever we do, let’s make it fast. We need to get *some* sleep before another early morning at the bakehouse.”

They circled toward the front yard, Laura carrying the neep and Carol leading the way. Apparently, her careful pace wasn’t fast enough. The other two slammed into her from behind, nearly knocking the trio off their collective feet.

“Oof!” Carol tried to steady herself.

“Sorry, but Laura ran into me.” Molly’s whisper echoed in the darkness.

“I thought we were trying to hurry,” Laura growled.

“Is Hamish Junior okay?” Carol asked.

“Loosened one bird’s claw when I slipped, but all good otherwise.” Laura’s exaggerated yawn hinted that she wanted to speed up this operation.

Carol set off again, tiptoeing closer to the front porch. Her caution apparently amused her friends, as barely suppressed giggles bubbled up from Molly and Laura. A smile twitched on Carol’s own lips, and it soon blossomed into a full-blown grin. When a laugh threatened to erupt, however, Carol pressed her lips together. Shoulders shaking, she tried to smother her mirth, but that only increased her partners’ amusement.

They staggered onto the porch, and Laura set the neep down on

the swing. The glare Hamish Junior fixed on them only intensified their merriment. Hand planted firmly over her mouth, Carol stumbled down the steps, leaning on a near-hysterical Molly as Laura hit the doorbell.

Its echoing *ding-dong* cleared Carol's head, and she dashed for the woods, Molly sprinting behind her. At the sound of an opening door and an accompanying roar of wrath, though, Laura passed them both.

The giggles attacked again as all three took flying leaps across a small stream and dove into a scratchy thicket for cover.

Flattened on the cold, moist ground, Carol asked herself if their nighttime raid was worth it. *Oh, most definitely.*

Listening to Hamish's indignant—and fortunately incoherent—tirade before he slammed the door, Carol nestled in the sheer joy of having scored one for their side.

Maybe they'd drop in on Hamish next October too.



Too few hours later, as she dragged her fiftysomething body to the bakehouse in the still-dark early morning, Carol wasn't so sure.

Neither were her partners. For the first hour or so, they spoke in monosyllables and moved in slow motion.

"Why'd we ever listen to you, Carol?" Grouchy Laura dumped flour for apple cinnamon rolls into their giant mixing bowl.

"Yeah, why?" Molly, setting out pie plates, eyed her too.

"Excuse me?" Carol, up to her elbows in cookie dough, raised an eyebrow. "If I recall correctly, this was a group idea. A prank that would carry on the noble tradition of Month of the Faeries."

"But you were the one who came up with the midnight breeding idea," Molly retorted. "Highly out of character for you, I might add."

"And yet you both agreed." Carol scooped another ball of dough

out of the bowl and plopped it on her baking sheet. “Besides, you two were the ones behind Hamish Junior. I merely suggested the neep as a proper medium.” A sudden grin tickled her tired mouth. “I can’t believe we pulled it off. Junior was a perfect likeness.”

A chorus of chuckles brightened the kitchen.

They faded when Molly asked, “Do you think Hamish has seen him up close yet?”

At the sound of a key turning in the back door, Carol grimaced. “I imagine we’ll know soon.”

Sure enough, feet stamping on the floor mat and a familiar harrumph echoed in the hallway.

“Maybe he won’t suspect us,” Molly whispered, ever the optimist. Laura snorted.

Carol exchanged glances with her partners as their handyman entered the kitchen. Hamish simply studied them in complete silence, his steel-blue eyes piercing them. Carol thought she heard Molly gulp.

Finally, he spoke. “My, you’re all looking a bit weary this morning. Perhaps sleep escaped you last night? I’ve heard Month of the Faeries can cause group insomnia.”

Laura kneaded bread dough in silence, focusing as if it would disappear if unsupervised. Molly suddenly seemed overly engrossed in a spreadsheet where she tracked online orders.

Hamish waited.

Carol, realizing she was shifting from foot to foot like a guilty child, forced a smile. “As a matter of fact, I am a little tired today.” She yawned for effect as she filled the cookie press with dough. “But I’ll catch up on my sleep tonight.”

“A good idea. Going to bed early is key to good health.” Hamish leaned over Carol’s workstation and added, “Though it can be difficult to sleep with a troubled conscience.”

“Yes, I-I suppose it can.” With him so close she could smell his aftershave, Carol scooped cookies like a machine.

“Because we all reap what we sow.” He shifted his gaze to Molly and Laura. “Do we not?” Hamish turned and strode out of the kitchen. A faint, menacing chuckle echoed from the hallway.

For a moment, no one moved.

“Gee, I wonder if he knew it was us,” Laura said drily, then glanced at the wall calendar and groaned. “It’s only the third of October.”

“Maybe we should have waited until closer to All Saints’ Day,” Molly fretted. “It wouldn’t have given him as much time to retaliate.”

All pranks had to cease by the first of November, which began a week of good deeds called the Seven Days of Kindness.

“It’s a little late to think of that.” Carol slowly shook her head. “We’re dead.”



Weary after the previous night’s shenanigans and a busy day at the bakehouse, Carol nailed her husband with a suspicious glare. “You didn’t tell Hamish that we were planning to prank him, did you?”

“Of course I didn’t.” Harvey, who was stirring spicy pulled pork in their kitchen’s slow cooker, met her scrutiny without flinching. “He’s on to you, eh?”

Carol sighed. She should have known that Harvey, a retired investigative journalist, would be able to keep a secret. “With a whole town full of his former students and disgruntled fellow citizens, you’d think Hamish would find someone else to focus his suspicions on. But he seems to assume we’re to blame.”

“Which you are.” Harvey pointed his big spoon at Carol. “I told you that targeting Hamish wasn’t a good idea.” He grinned. “Better

you than me on the wrong side of any pranks Hamish might pull. I wouldn't trade places with you for anything in the world."

"Thanks for your support," Carol retorted. Considering Harvey had fixed them dinner, however, Carol decided she'd overlook her husband's gibes.

Harvey encircled her with his strong arms. "Sit down and put your feet up while I finish the salad. It's your own fault that you're so tired, but I still can't find it in my heart to make you do anything."

A few minutes' rest and the delicious supper restored Carol's sense of perspective. She and her partners had spent entirely too much time today wondering how Hamish would repay them. Of course, he'd added to their angst as he worked around the bakehouse with uncharacteristic good humor, occasionally materializing behind them wearing a smile and holding a loaf of bread but saying nothing at all.

Brushing away the image, Carol finished loading the dishwasher, then dropped onto the cushy sofa in front of their log home's fireplace. Harvey sat beside her, and together they savored the crackling fire's warmth.

"It won't be too long until we'll need a bigger fire than this. Cold weather will be here before we know it." Harvey wiggled an eyebrow at her. "Bet you'd love to go ice fishing with me."

"You know better than that." She shivered just thinking about venturing out on frozen Loch Mallaig, the town's namesake lake.

"Ah, come on." Harvey shot her his most charming grin. "A real Yooper doesn't mind the cold."

"Maybe I haven't lived in the UP long enough." *Not that I'll ever have lived here long enough to go ice fishing.*

But Carol heard the note of wistfulness coloring her husband's voice. The bakehouse had kept Carol and her partners busy during summer tourist season. Throw in their involvement solving some recent mysteries in town, and she and Harvey hadn't had much fun

together lately. And, after all, they'd moved from Pittsburgh to Loch Mallaig not only to be closer to their 33-year-old daughter, Jenny, and her family, but also to reconnect with each other after retiring from their respective demanding careers.

She slid her gaze sideways toward Harvey. "Maybe we could go fishing before there's ice involved."

"How about tomorrow?"

Harvey asked the question so smoothly, her wifely instincts shouted what she should have realized from the start: he'd set her up. "All that talk about ice fishing! You were just conning me into going tomorrow."

"Please?" After decades of marriage, he still could melt her with his expert puppy eyes. "You've been working too hard and need rest. Besides, you've only gone fishing with me a handful of times this year."

She really didn't like to miss church, the grandkids might want to come over, and her house to-do list was a mile long. And yet . . .

Carol squeezed his hand. "Of course we can."

"Great." Harvey tugged her to her feet. "We'd better go to bed now. I'm setting the alarm for six."

"Better than my usual time," Carol said with a chuckle.

As they snuggled under the colorful quilt spread over their rustic pine bed, Carol savored the view through the French doors that led to a small, private deck. Stars glowed like miniature lanterns in the dark sky, and the evergreens' spiky tops were silhouetted against the crescent moon.

Tomorrow, brisk breezes would clear her head as she and Harvey drifted in his little boat in the clear, blue water. Tranquil bays lined with scarlet, golden, and russet hardwoods, set against the richness of dark green pines, would ease her tensions. Perhaps they'd catch a few fat lake trout that Harvey would grill for supper.

Carol's mouth watered as she settled her head into the softness of

her pillow. Maybe Harvey was right. A little fishing trip might be just what she needed.



When Harvey's alarm went off the next morning, Carol groaned and covered her head with a pillow.

Harvey tugged warm covers from her grasp. "Come on, honey. Time to get up."

She clung to her pillow for a moment, then relented. Grumbling under her breath, Carol stretched like her indignant cat, Pascal, then pulled on her oldest jeans and flannel shirt.

As she stumbled into the kitchen, the fragrance of sizzling bacon and fluffy pancakes rewarded her reluctant cooperation.

Harvey smiled at her as he flipped a pancake. "We'll have fun today. I promise."

Carol still wasn't sure of that, but when it came to bacon—plus Harvey's winning smile—she was an easy sell.

A short while later, bellies full and brains invigorated by the crisp fall air, she and Harvey carried fishing poles and other gear, plus a big thermos of strong coffee, down the short, forested path that led to their dock.

Gilded rose streaks painted the eastern sky and reflected in the lake's glassy surface, confirming that she'd made the right choice. Carol breathed in the morning's escalating beauty. Maples, like giant bouquets of red and orange, contrasted with creamy white birches and their shimmering, golden leaves. As the sun rose, dark pines, hemlocks, and spruces glowed as if made of green velvet. Harvey's fishing boat bobbed a gentle welcome as Carol, a seasoned fishing partner, stepped into its bow.

Fishing didn't excite her like it did Harvey, but she was beginning to believe today would be a special day, a memory they wouldn't forget—

Carol froze.

Then she screamed loud enough to wake the entire town in time for church.



Harvey grabbed Carol's hand. "Honey, what's wrong? Are you okay?"
She could only point.

Harvey followed her shaking finger and gasped.

A large rattlesnake, coiled to strike, watched them from behind the middle seat, eyes glittering.

"Don't move," Harvey choked out.

As if I can. Carol hadn't realized rattlers sometimes appeared in Michigan's UP until she'd moved to the woods and been warned to watch out for the reclusive but deadly Eastern massasauga rattlesnake. She'd barely given it a second thought—before now, when fear paralyzed her.

Still, she knew better than to think Harvey would rescue her. Her journalist husband, who had intrepidly investigated everything from corporate corruption to the mob, feared snakes like nothing else.

"Back away, Harvey," she murmured. "Call animal control."

"Animal control?" Harvey still hadn't regained his breath. "It's Sunday morning and we're in the woods. It'd take forever to get ahold of anybody. Besides, I forgot my cell phone." He inhaled a shaky breath. "And I won't leave you with that—that thing. Not for a minute."

Loyalty was nice, but . . . Carol slowly reached into her coat pocket and pulled out her phone. The boat wobbled a little.

The snake didn't stir, its eyes still locked on her.

She didn't dare fiddle with searching for animal control's number, yet she couldn't bring herself to call 911. Maybe Yoopers considered rattlesnakes in boats everyday occurrences. Carol tried to calm her

still spastic heartbeat. Jenny and her husband, Craig, had lived here for years. Maybe Craig would know what to do.

Carol willed her hand to hit speed dial. Her fingers fumbled at the phone's screen.

Then the phone slipped from her grip.

Thump. It smacked the bottom of the boat.

Harvey grabbed Carol's hand and yanked her from the boat. It dipped up and down.

The snake still hadn't moved an inch.

Carol's eyes narrowed. *Wait a minute. . .*

"When you stopped by the bakehouse yesterday, did you happen to tell Hamish you hoped to take me fishing today?" she asked Harvey.

Recognition dawned in Harvey's eyes as he slowly nodded.

Carol grabbed an oar and poked the motionless reptile. Instead of striking, it flopped harmlessly in the bottom of the boat.

"Rubber," Harvey said bitterly. "But realistic."

Very realistic. Hamish, a champion of good quality, employed only the best in everything he did.

Carol's flash of anger faded. Now that she didn't fear for their lives, she supposed she may as well chuckle. "I guess we started this."

"What do you mean *we*?" Harvey demanded.

"You're right." She joined him on the dock and dropped a light kiss on his cheek. "Since I'm responsible, I'll take our little friend here up to the back porch. Maybe he'll come in handy for some future Month of the Faeries prank."

"Nope." Harvey shook his head vehemently. "That thing's going into the trash can. Along with any more ideas you may have about pranking *anybody*."

"All right." Carol humored him, though as she retrieved the snake, she couldn't help wiggling its head at him a little.

“You want to end up in the drink?” he growled.

Spoilsport. She deposited the snake in the trash as promised, then kept an eye on Harvey in case he decided to make good on his threat.

As they glided out into the lake, though, Harvey’s mood improved. They caught trout so small they had to throw them back, so he took her to local Scottish restaurant Neeps and Tatties for an early lunch. Carol and Harvey paused at the dining room entrance, inhaling mouth-watering fragrances while they waited to be seated in the cheerful, crowded restaurant.

While they were standing near the hostess stand, a sudden commotion broke out in the dining room. A rail-thin, raven-haired woman wearing a cropped jean jacket had stood up from her chair and was raising her voice at Brodie McCauley, the restaurant’s owner.

“I don’t care what you say, those sausages were inedible and I’m not paying for them!” she shouted, glaring with heavily-lined blue eyes.

“Ma’am, I—” Brodie began, his raised eyebrows nearly meeting his mop of thick, red hair.

“Matter of fact, I’m not paying for anything,” she went on. “At this rate, I’m likely to get food poisoning.” The woman threw her napkin on the table and grabbed a trendy backpack better suited to someone half her age. As she stalked away, the pointed toe of her high-heeled boot caught on the leg of another customer’s chair, and she stumbled slightly. Righting herself, she strode out of the room, past Carol and Harvey, and through the restaurant’s heavy wooden front door.

“My goodness,” Harvey murmured to Carol. “I’ve never heard a bad review of this place.”

“There’s nothing wrong with our food,” Brodie reassured the MacCallans as he approached the host stand. Brodie and his wife, Scotland native and professional chef Catriona McCauley, shared

cooking duties in the restaurant they'd opened after Brodie had retired from his career as a Chicago firefighter.

"I've never eaten a meal here that I didn't love," Carol said.

"Better get you some breakfast, then." Brodie grabbed two menus and led Carol and Harvey to the far end of the room. He pointed to a table by a window. "Is this all right?"

Carol, who loved pleasant views away from the kitchen, said, "It's perf—"

Harvey stiffened and elbowed her.

Hamish, sitting with Joyce at a nearby table, wore a smile so big his face could hardly hold it. "Well, and how are you this fine Sunday? Any luck fishing?"

"Not a lot." Harvey hastily sat in the chair facing away from Hamish.

Say something. Carol opened her mouth, but where was the funny, biting response she longed to throw at Hamish?

Meanwhile, Joyce aimed a sharp glance at her husband.

Hamish appeared not to feel it. "It's a shame the fish weren't interested. Maybe you should have baited them with bread." He shook his head. "You know, I have found that a Saturday excursion, rather than Sunday, brings better results. Perhaps if you hadn't missed church this morning . . ."

Carol dropped into her chair and grabbed her glass of ice water. She hoped the cool drink might put out the heat flaming in her cheeks.



By the next morning, Harvey, who didn't hold grudges, had laughed about their fake-snake encounter.

Carol savored the relief that now flowed through her. She no longer had to fear Hamish's retaliation for her part in the night raid

on his property. His sense of justice had been satisfied—at least where Carol was concerned.

Making the usual predawn drive to Bread on Arrival, Carol pondered whether she'd tell Molly and Laura about Hamish's revenge—and wondered what devilment he'd designed for her partners. But did she really want to know?

Fumbling for the bakehouse's back door key, Carol steered her thoughts toward her to-do list for the morning.

As she opened the door, a scream of agony sent her dashing to the kitchen, where Laura was screeching like a siren.

Carol did a quick scan of the room. No scary intruder. No blood.

"What's wrong, Laura?" Carol put an arm around her hysterical friend.

Molly, with mascara on only one set of eyelashes, burst in seconds later and added her attempts to console Laura as she continued her tirade.

Growing more and more concerned, Carol shot a puzzled glance at Molly. Had there been an emergency in Laura's family? Perhaps her father, Kirk, had had a heart attack. Maybe her teen niece, Adina, had been in an accident. But their friend seemed more angry than fearful.

Carol grasped both of Laura's hands. "You have to tell us what happened."

Eyes boiling in tears, Laura finally gasped, "He—he—oh, how could he do this?"

"Who? Do what?" Molly demanded.

Words failed Laura again. She could only point to the door of the storeroom.

Now that Laura had quieted, Carol aimed an ear toward the door. Was something lapping water?

Molly had already reached the doorway. She perched hands on her slim hips. "Angus, what are you doing here?"

Her lovable Scottie barely acknowledged her presence, greedily licking what appeared to be cream from a lovely pink dish with crimped edges. It was Laura's favorite porcelain tart pan.

Uh-oh. Carol cringed.

Though she eagerly shared her cooking knowledge, Laura was less generous with her hallowed personal cookware. She wouldn't loan it to anyone, even Carol or Molly. Both knew that a few items—including this delicately flowered tart pan Laura had treasured since before her years working as a chef in New York City—had been at the heart of her biggest culinary successes. She swore these special dishes and utensils possessed an almost magical quality that elevated her cuisine above others.

They were not to be touched by anyone else. For any reason.

Red-faced, Molly grabbed her pet and hauled him away from the dish. Licking the last creamy drops from his whiskers, Angus eyed her with reproach.

"Laura, I'm so, so sorry," Molly squeaked out helplessly.

"It's—it's not your fault." Laura blew her nose on the tissue Carol handed her. "Certainly not poor Angus's fault." She straightened, brown eyes snapping. "I don't have to guess who's behind this."

Carol decided to say nothing. If they wanted to accomplish anything today, she'd better wait to mention Hamish's prank on her and Harvey.

Molly remained silent too as Laura gently picked up her tart dish, murmuring comfort as if it were an injured kitten. She disinfected the dish several times before immersing it in a soapy bath, where, Carol figured, it would soak for a whole day—at least.

They had finally begun mixing, kneading, and baking the day's offerings when Hamish arrived.

Rarely talkative during early hours, Hamish wished them a

jaunty good morning. Carol and Molly muttered replies, then buried themselves in cake decorating and cookie cutting.

Laura was removing steaming cinnamon chip scones from a baking sheet when he entered. At the sight of him, she slammed the tray of scones on the counter and folded her arms.

He met the chef's dagger gaze with an innocent one. "Where's Angus?"

"Molly took him upstairs." Carol moved between Hamish and Laura. "He might have gone out his doggie door to the yard by now. Why?"

"I brought him a treat." Hamish held up one of Angus's favorites.

Even Laura couldn't help staring. Though Hamish claimed to dislike Angus, he sometimes sneaked the dog biscuits. Still, he never actually admitted it outright.

Today, however, he waved the treat like a small banner. "Angus is a good dog, you know. He does *exactly* what you tell him."

As if anticipating Laura's next move, Hamish ducked out of the kitchen.

The spatula she hurled never touched him.



A day later, Hamish was still messing with their heads.

"I wonder what he's planning for me." Molly winced as she and Carol arranged Scottish breads on trays in the glass cases. After Laura's traumatic experience the previous morning, Carol had fessed up about Hamish's snake prank, and Molly was now quite on edge. "Do you think he's saved his best—well, worst—trick?"

"Don't let him get to you," Carol advised, though she tried not to imagine what he had in store for her friend. "Maybe he's decided not to prank you at all."

Molly raised an eyebrow at her. “Are we talking about the same Hamish?”

Carol gave her a rueful grin. “Good point.”

Fortunately, they’d kept busy this morning, with lines of customers at the counters. Carol looked up to see Prilla Dunn enter as she had every Tuesday since Bread on Arrival opened. As usual, the tall, sturdily made woman walked as if she were in her sixties instead of around forty.

Though her hair was a pretty shade of blonde and her features were quite pleasant, everything else about Prilla—drab coat, out-of-date clothes, and heavy men’s boots—seemed musty with age. She wasn’t uncommunicative, but her voice was quiet and flat, and she never smiled.

Somewhere inside that emptiness, though, a spark of creativity must live. Carol had seen samples of woodburning art Prilla had created in Thistle and That, the gift shop next door owned by Doreen Giobsan. Doreen said the small, detailed pictures of birds, squirrels, and other forest creatures sold well, and the trinket boxes bearing Celtic designs were a huge hit with tourists.

Despite her demeanor, Prilla had drawn Carol’s attention from the beginning. She wasn’t sure why. Perhaps Prilla resembled someone she’d known a long time ago, but Carol hadn’t been able to figure out who it was.

Now, as the woman shuffled to the counter, Carol’s mental bell rang again. Finally, her brain cells zeroed in on the person from Carol’s past Prilla reminded her of—Birdie Atkins.

Decades before, Carol and Birdie had been young teachers in a large, run-down school in Pittsburgh’s inner city. Though Prilla and Birdie didn’t really resemble each other—Prilla had much lighter hair and eyes—both women had appeared colorless. Neither had much to say. Both bore names that might have been popular with their grandmothers’ generation.

As usual, Prilla didn't greet anyone in line. During her weekly visits to Bread on Arrival, she would haltingly answer the questions Carol posed to get her to open up, but she seldom spoke to other customers, a rarity in Loch Mallaig, where everyone knew everyone.

Today, though, the reclusive woman had brought someone with her.

"*Guid mornin'*, Prilla," Carol said cheerfully, her standard morning greeting as inherited from her Scottish grandparents. "We're glad to see you. And who's your friend?"

Prilla gestured toward the newcomer, who was gazing around the bakehouse with wide, wondering eyes. "This is my neighbor, Blanche Geller."

"Welcome to Bread on Arrival, Blanche." Carol held out her hand to the tiny, elderly woman. She appeared even mustier than Prilla, though she wore a cherry-red, knitted scarf around her neck.

Blanche said nothing, but her strong grip surprised Carol.

"What can I get for you, ladies?" Carol asked.

Blanche twitched and muttered under her breath, but Prilla cleared her throat and ordered two of her usual. "Two baps with cinnamon butter, please. And two coffees."

At the mention of the soft, warm roll, an unexpectedly sweet smile crossed Blanche's wrinkled face. It vanished quickly, though.

"So you live in Oppen Woods too?" Carol asked, making conversation as she plated their breakfast. The forested area covered several square miles that reached all the way to Lake Superior. "What a beautiful place, especially this time of year."

Blanche fiddled with her scarf while Prilla handed over money.

"I think the maples are my favorites," Carol continued, "though I'm so glad the pines stay green all winter. Especially at Christmas."

Blanche muttered something Carol couldn't decipher, though she thought she heard the word *faeries*. No trace of a smile.

Of course Prilla didn't smile either, but when Carol complimented her on the Celtic locket she wore, a bit of the dullness in her eyes lifted.

"It's a Celtic Love Knot," Prilla said. "It belonged to my mother. She told lots of Celtic stories when I was a little girl and gave me the locket when I was a teenager." Prilla fingered the intricate silver pendant. For a moment, she appeared as if she might say more, but her face blanked again. "Mom passed away more than ten years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Carol said sincerely. She had been devastated to lose her father, and she knew she would never stop missing him. "You go on ahead to your table. I'll bring your coffee over."

"Thank you." Prilla lifted the plated baps and started toward a table on the far side of the dining area. Blanche trailed after her.

Carol filled two coffee mugs and soon caught up with Blanche, who had stopped at the side window to watch Angus frolic in the yard. His antics inspired Blanche's smile to reappear. "Sweet doggie."

The Scottie had accomplished what pleasantries couldn't: not only a smile, but the first clear words Carol had heard from Blanche.

"Angus loves to meet new friends," Carol said. "Perhaps after you've eaten your bap, you can visit him."

Carol returned to the front counter, but she kept an eye on the two women. While Prilla took her time, Blanche hastened to eat her breakfast, then went outside. Wincing a little as she slowly knelt, the woman pursed her lips as she reached to pet the dog. Angus, sensing a friend, wagged half his body, closing his eyes as Blanche scratched behind his ears.

Prilla's face softened as she watched them. After she finished her bap, she stood up and put her coat on, keeping her focus on the scene outside the window as she did.

"You've got some nerve, showing your face in here," an elderly woman at a nearby table growled at Prilla. "After what you did."

Prilla froze, fingers stalled on her coat buttons.

“That’s right,” the older lady said nastily. “We all remember.”

Carol didn’t recognize the other customer, who wasn’t a regular at the bakehouse. Although Carol certainly didn’t want to alienate their clientele, she couldn’t resist the urge to defend poor Prilla. She stepped hastily around the counter and surged forward. “Excuse me, ma’am, but your behavior is uncalled for.”

The steel-haired grouch fixed a rheumy eye on Carol. “*Her* behavior is what’s uncalled for.” She jerked a thumb toward Prilla. “Why don’t you ask her what she did twenty-five years ago? Doubt you’d be so quick to serve her once you find out.”

With a reproachful grunt, the woman stood and bustled out of the bakery before Carol could respond.

Carol turned to Prilla. “Prilla, are you o—”

“Fine.” Prilla fumbled with her buttons, then gave up a moment later. She brushed past Carol, clomping out of the bakery in her sturdy boots. She reappeared in the yard and watched Blanche play fetch with Angus, shoulders slumped and hands in her pockets.

Carol frowned as she returned to the front counter. Her Tuesday regular had made progress today, bringing a friend and opening up a little—until that outspoken customer had ruined everything. *Well, maybe not everything.* If Prilla continued her bakehouse visits, perhaps Carol could figure out just what made the shy artist tick and what might make her feel more comfortable around people.

Carol’s heart clenched, as it did every time she thought of her long-ago colleague. She hadn’t done much to help poor Birdie. Maybe she could help Prilla. Was her reclusive nature something to do with whatever happened twenty-five years ago? Carol assumed so, and made a mental note to find out more.

Streams of customers came and went. The bakery phone jangled relentlessly, and Carol tabled her concern for the moment. Later, though,

during a lull, she probed her mind for possible sources of information about Prilla. Did anyone really know her?

Carol frowned when she realized Hamish was her best bet. Right now, she'd rather not approach him, but Hamish's family had lived in Loch Mallaig for generations. If anyone would know Prilla's background, he would. Hamish enjoyed lecturing from his undeniably vast store of local knowledge. Even more, he loved spouting his opinions.

Carol couldn't help grinning. Though she didn't want to admit it, most of Hamish's judgments proved surprisingly astute.

Right now, he was working outside. Perhaps later today she'd approach him—when Molly was absent—and get him talking. Month of the Faeries or not, that shouldn't be hard.

Carol reminded herself to drink some strong coffee before their encounter—because prompting Hamish to talk rarely posed a problem.

No, the real struggle was always shutting him up.



“This is for me?” Molly eyed the huge basket with mistrustful eyes.

Carol, who had answered the knock at the back door, squinted at the gift basket held by a young delivery man. With its gaudy Halloween cellophane and sparkly orange bow, it seemed very un-Molly-like.

The kid shrugged. “You’re Molly Ferris, right?”

“Yes. But who sent it?”

“Nothing on the card.” He shuffled his feet, clearly wanting to be anywhere but in the cramped hall with these skeptical women.

Carol gave Molly a little push. “It’s yours, okay?”

“Yeah, open it.” Laura appeared out of nowhere. “Even if Hamish is behind it, it’s not like he’d send you a bomb.”

Just a snake—even if it wasn't real. As Molly hesitantly accepted the basket, Carol found herself backing away.

The delivery guy did too. Maybe he'd already delivered too many Month of the Faeries pranks, as he left without waiting for a tip.

Molly seemed to consider following him, then straightened. "This is ridiculous." She carried the basket into the kitchen and placed it on a clean work surface. She set her jaw, untied the bow, and pulled away cellophane that littered her and the floor with glitter to reveal a collection of small, autumn-hued packages of every shape.

Molly stared, dumbfounded. Carol and Laura began to laugh. And laugh.

"Hamish must know you better than we thought." Carol wiped her eyes, then touched a tin of pumpkin spice latte mix and a jar of similarly flavored mayonnaise. "How did he know you can't stand the pumpkin spice craze?"

"I've never told him that." Molly stuck her hands on her hips. "Did you?"

"Would we do that?" Laura fixed an innocent gaze on her friend.

"How else would he know?" Molly grimaced as she searched through the basket, her fingers barely touching each item as though they might bite her. "Pumpkin spice air fresheners. Pumpkin spice salsa and hummus. Pumpkin spice cough drops and—ugh—toothpaste. Gah! Even pumpkin spice kale chips."

Carol shuddered. Though she initially thought Hamish had let Molly off easy, pumpkin-spice kale chips sounded almost as scary as the snake.

Laura nudged Molly out of the way and dug through the basket. "How sweet," she crowed. "Hamish didn't forget Angus. He included pumpkin spice dog treats."

"Ugh! I can't stand the smell." Molly pinched her nose as if trying to keep out any hint of pumpkin spice. "It's bad enough that Hamish

dumped all this stuff on me,” she said nasally, “but when he pushes it on my dog . . .”

“You’ve got to admire the creativity,” Carol ventured, then quailed under Molly’s glare. “But I promise Hamish didn’t get the idea from me. I’ve never mentioned your pumpkin spice aversion to anyone.”

“I haven’t either.” Laura double-crossed her heart, and Carol couldn’t stifle a laugh.

“Some friends you are.” Molly surveyed the basket with fresh disgust.

“Seriously,” Laura protested. “I don’t know how Hamish found out—”

“Found out what?”

Hamish, though not a small person, had perfected the art of materializing out of nowhere, especially this week. Now he aimed a calm but curious gaze at the basket. “Pumpkin spice dog treats? Does Angus like those?”

“No.” Molly picked up the package with thumb and forefinger and tossed it into a nearby trash can. “Look, a prank’s a prank, but how could you joke about feeding my dog those disgusting things?”

Their handyman quirked an eyebrow. “What prank? I’ve never seen those treats before. Or this basket.” A hint of wickedness gleamed in his eyes. “Though I must say, whoever sent it knew exactly how to get your goat.”

He or she certainly did. Carol watched Molly’s annoyance give way to confusion. She evidently believed Hamish, who had as good as admitted to his earlier tricks.

Carol believed him too. “Molly, can you think of anyone else in town who knows?”

“Are you kidding? In a town that celebrates the Month of the Faeries?” Molly scoffed. “I’ve never breathed a word to anyone but

you two. Heaven forbid something like this happen.” She slapped the basket in irritation.

“Oh, but someone in Loch Mallaig is out to get you.” Laura mimicked a monster with fangs.

“No, everybody *loves* me.” A tiny twinkle in Molly’s eyes betrayed the possibility her irritation was fading.

“Yes they do,” Carol asserted. “But what about Grizela?”

Grizela Duff, their town’s exacting librarian, had recently given Molly a lecture about an overdue book in front of everyone in Bread on Arrival. Was this her Month of the Faeries version of revenge?

“Maybe.” Molly smoothed a furrow from her forehead. “Though I know lots of people who return their books much later than I do. And Grizela is a penny-pincher. Whoever it was spent a lot of money.”

“What about Doreen?” Laura suggested. “Though I don’t know why she’d pick on you, Doreen’s the creative type. She’d come up with an idea like this. Plus, she always knows everything about everyone.”

“Maybe.” But Molly sounded doubtful.

“Could somebody in your family have sent the basket?” Carol wondered aloud. “Maybe Chloe?”

“No way.” Molly shook her head. “My daughter inherited her dad’s sensible DNA. Even if she thought up this weird pumpkin spice idea, she wouldn’t spend money on something she knew I’d throw away.”

Carol probed her memory files for another possibility. “Don’t you have a cousin in Houghton who likes to play practical jokes? He lives close.”

“You’re right.” Molly’s face reddened again. “Chip knows all about the Month of the Faeries. He is also well aware of my feelings on this silly pumpkin spice trend. It has to be Chip.” She pulled out her phone. “I think I’ll give my dear cousin a call.”

“You might wait till you cool down,” Laura said gingerly.

“As if you ever do,” Molly countered. Still, she slowly pocketed her

phone. “I’ll wait until tomorrow, let him stew overnight, wondering if I’ve nailed him yet.”

Laura gathered up the basket’s contents. “I need this space,” she explained. “I’ll put this in the storeroom for now.”

“That’s as good a place as any until I decide what to do with it,” Molly said irritably. “I don’t want it in my apartment.”

“I’ll clear a spot for it,” Carol offered.

As Laura hauled the basket into the storeroom, she whispered to Carol, “I hope she doesn’t stew too long about this ‘gift.’”

Carol shifted a large tub of shortening closer to the wall. “If Chip didn’t send the basket, who did? Fergus?”

Fergus MacGregor, Molly’s crush from her summer visits to Loch Mallaig as a teen, still lived in town, and he and Molly had rekindled a strong friendship. He was the one who had clued them in to the old funeral home they’d ended up buying and remodeling into their bakehouse.

“But would Molly have told him she hates the pumpkin spice fad?” Carol asked. “Besides, Fergus is such a nice guy—not the type to pull pranks on people.”

“Especially someone he *really* likes.” Laura wiggled her eyebrows toward the kitchen. “Why would he want to upset Molly?”

They couldn’t gab in the storeroom much longer or Molly would come looking for them. As they left, Carol turned her thoughts to the Montrose cakes she had to bake by noon the next day for a clan reunion.

However, as she, Molly, and Laura finished cleaning the kitchen and setting up for the next morning, a clear thought inscribed itself on her mind.

Surely Molly had thought of it as well, and Laura too: whether Fergus, Chip, or someone else had sent Molly the basket of pumpkin spice goodies, Hamish hadn’t.

Molly was still on his prank hit list.