



Scottish  
Bakehouse  
Mysteries™

# Tartan Feathered



Jan Fields



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*If Looks Could Kilt*

*A Reel Threat*

*Lass and Found*

*Silence of the Clans*

*Shepherd's Lie*

*A Faerie Dangerous Game*

*Tartan Feathered*

*Yule Be Sorry*

*Of Ice and Men*

*... and more to come!*

*Tartan Feathered*

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Without taking her eyes from the book in her hand, Molly Ferris tugged the knitted afghan from the back of the couch and pulled it over her lap. She wasn't sure if she needed to raise the temperature in her apartment or if the shivers were from the mystery. When Grizela Duff had practically forced the book on Molly, the Scotland-born librarian had insisted it was a *braw* tale. Now that she was reading it, Molly wasn't sure about brilliant, but it was certainly scary.

Though she had no proof, she suspected Grizela had chosen this particular novel as a lesson. Like several other residents of Loch Mallaig, Michigan, Grizela thought Molly's curiosity sent her and her best friends—Laura Donovan and Carol MacCallan—into danger a bit too often, much like the amateur sleuth in the story whose clue following had steered her into a terrifying climax.

Molly jumped as something fuzzy touched her foot. She peered over her book to see her beloved Scottish terrier, Angus, with one paw on her leg and his beloved toy, Woolie, held carefully in his jaws.

"You want up here?" she asked.

The little Scottie shifted excitedly, his black eyes shining. Angus could make the jump onto the sofa normally, but the stuffed sheep was clearly enough of an encumbrance to make him hesitant.

Molly leaned over to scoop him up and deposit him beside her. "Luckily for you, I can use the company while I read this."

Angus snuggled into the afghan with Woolie and closed his eyes.

“Be glad you don’t read,” Molly told her pup. “I doubt I’ll be able to close my eyes tonight.”

If Angus felt sorry for her, he showed no sign. Molly returned to the book. The current scene had the main character being chased across the Highland moors by a shadowy villain. Within moments, the world had fallen away around her, and she was practically holding her breath as the threatening figure closed the gap. Bony fingers caught in the young woman’s auburn curls. At the exact instant the heroine screamed, Angus burst into a frenzy of barking, making Molly shriek in surprise.

Angus leaped from the sofa and rushed out of the apartment’s sitting room. Molly tossed the book onto the afghan and followed him, her heart pounding. She found Angus barking at the door that led to the building’s interior stairs. “What is it, Angus?”

If the little dog had an answer, he didn’t offer it. He merely put his front feet up on the door and pawed insistently, as if he could scratch the door open.

“If you’ve nearly given me a heart attack over a mouse,” Molly warned, “you won’t get a scrap of Thanksgiving leftovers.”

But when she opened the door, Molly heard banging on the back entrance of Bread on Arrival, the Scottish bakehouse she lived above and co-owned with Laura and Carol. The grand Victorian house was formerly a funeral parlor—hence the bakery’s name—and featured the kitchen and café downstairs with Molly’s living quarters and the bakery office upstairs.

Wondering who could be pounding on the door this late in the evening, Molly hurried down the steps with Angus close enough to make him a tripping hazard. When they reached the downstairs hall, Angus rocketed toward the door. Even over his wild barking, Molly could recognize the voice calling from outside. “Mom!”

Molly fumbled with the lock in her excitement, then flung open the door. “Chloe!” She threw her arms around her daughter and hugged her tightly over the threshold. “What a wonderful surprise! I thought you couldn’t come until after Thanksgiving.”

With Chloe working as a veterinarian in Milwaukee and Molly living in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, they didn’t get to spend nearly as much time together as either would have preferred.

Chloe laughed at her mom’s excitement and Angus’s dancing around them. “I didn’t think I could either, but the clinic had to close down.”

“What happened?” Molly reluctantly released Chloe from the hug, but kept her gaze on her. The beautiful young woman’s appearance was a fifty-fifty blend of her parents, but in this light, she looked so much like her father that tears nearly sprang to Molly’s eyes. Her late husband, Kevin, had suffered a fatal reaction to antibiotics more than ten years earlier, but occasionally she still felt the sting of his passing.

“There are bats in the belfry,” Chloe said as she lifted her suitcase from the stoop. “Or rather, the attic crawl space. I didn’t want to wake the whole neighborhood, but you weren’t answering your phone.”

“I’m sorry. It was in the other room.” Once Chloe was inside, Molly shut the door and flipped the lock into place. “Come on up and tell me all about the clinic.”

“We heard scabbling noises overhead and called animal control,” Chloe explained as she followed her mother upstairs. “That’s when we discovered bats had decided to winter over in the clinic’s attic. We aren’t sure how they got in, but a couple of the bats tested positive for rabies. We had to clear out all our patients until it is dealt with and we can be sure no bats will reenter. I’m free for at least a week, probably a couple days more with the holiday.”

“I’ll hope for the extra days since it’s exactly a week until Thanksgiving,” Molly waved Chloe into the kitchenette. “Can I make you dinner?”

“No thanks. I stopped on the way.”

“As cold as it is outside, you should at least have a hot drink. I could fix hot chocolate.”

Chloe smiled. “With marshmallows?”

“Homemade marshmallows even,” Molly said with a grin. “I bought some at a fall bake sale last week. I’d never had them before, but they’re delicious.”

“Sounds perfect.” Chloe peered around the tiny kitchenette. “This is cozy. Maybe too cozy. I should get a room somewhere nearby. Do you have any recommendations?”

“Of course, if you need your own space,” Molly said. “But you’re welcome to stay here. You can have my room, and I’ll sleep on the pullout.”

“I am not taking your bed,” Chloe insisted. “But the pullout is perfectly fine.”

Molly showed Chloe around the apartment, regaling her with tales of the cow-themed wallpaper and mauve paint that had decorated it when she, Carol, and Laura had bought the place. Now it featured a serene blue-and-white color scheme with Molly’s tasteful, comfortable furnishings, and there wasn’t a cow in sight.

Molly left Chloe in the cozy den to settle in, then returned to the kitchen and poured milk into a pot to start their hot cocoa. As she was stirring the milk in the pan, Chloe walked in holding the book Molly had been reading. “Is this any good?”

“If you don’t mind nightmares,” Molly said.

Chloe blinked in surprise. “I didn’t think you cared for scary books or movies.”



“The head librarian here forced it on me. And when I return books, sometimes there’s a pop quiz. No one wants to get a scolding from Grizela Duff.”

Chloe chuckled. “Trust my mom to be afraid of a librarian.”

Molly pointed at her with the spoon. “You scoff, but if you met Grizela, you’d understand.” She watched Chloe read the cover of the novel and wondered if the lighting in her kitchenette was making Chloe’s face shadowed. “Have you been getting enough sleep?”

Chloe glanced up and raised her eyebrows. “I’m not the one who wakes before dawn every day because she opened a bakery with her college best friends thirty years after graduation. Or who makes a habit of skulking around in the dark searching for clues.”

Molly frowned. “It’s not a habit and don’t avoid the question.”

Chloe shrugged. “The practice has been busy, and we’ve added more night hours to accommodate clients who work. As the junior member of the staff, I pick up a lot of those hours. When you add a limited social life to that, I’m not surprised I look a little tired. Especially to my eagle-eyed mother.”

“You can sleep in every day here if you want. The only thing that will wake you up is the smell of Laura’s cinnamon rolls wafting up through the ventilation system.”

“That sounds wonderful. Both the sleep and the cinnamon rolls.”

Chloe glanced toward the pot. “The milk is about to boil.”

“Yikes.” Molly spun around sharply and quickly added the ingredients for hot cocoa.

While she worked, Chloe sauntered over to the small table and chairs and sank into one, setting the book on the table. “Honestly, I’m grateful for the time off,” Chloe said. “And, of course, I’m glad to see you.”

Molly grinned at her as she dropped marshmallows into each

mug. “Good save.” She carried the mugs to the table and took the seat across from Chloe. For a moment, they both sat quietly, enjoying the hot, rich beverage and gazing out the window.

“I won’t press you on it,” Molly said finally, “but I hope you’ll eventually tell me what’s bothering you.”

Chloe set the cup down. “Are you that good or am I that transparent?”

“You never were one to hide your feelings. Besides, it’s a mom’s job to know when something’s up with her daughter,” Molly said before taking another sip of cocoa. She let silence fall between them and resisted the urge to push. When Chloe didn’t speak, Molly broke and added, “If you’re having trouble at work, I think Loch Mallaig could use another vet.” *So much for not pressing her.*

Chloe gazed at her mother over the rim of her mug. “It’s not the practice, though that definitely keeps me on my toes. I’m glad for the break, but I love the clinic. My coworkers are great, and I love every single one of our patients.” She rolled her eyes. “Now their owners can be a handful sometimes, but I like them anyway.”

“If it’s not your work life . . .” Molly let her words hang in the air.

“Fine, it’s my love life. I went out a few times with a guy named Camden Landry,” Chloe said, her expression glum. “We met when I treated his dog, a sweet schnauzer. Poor Jake has developed some food allergies.”

Molly felt a pang of worry at Chloe’s countenance. “I take it you’re not dating anymore.”

Chloe spun her mug slowly on the table, her eyes on the marshmallow melting into the dark liquid. “We only went out three times, but I like him. He’s funny and smart. And I thought he was a nice guy.”

“But he did something that wasn’t nice?”

“No, but it was confusing,” Chloe said. “We went to a movie on our first date, then to a gallery opening the next time, and apple picking

the last time. Nothing serious. I thought we were getting to be good friends, possibly something more. But then he suddenly called the clinic and told our receptionist that he was taking Jake to a new vet.”

Molly gaped. “Did he give a reason?”

“No, which makes the whole thing much weirder,” Chloe said. “I tried to call him, but he didn’t return my call. I am not going to beg the man for an explanation, but it’s left me confused. I thought we were having fun.”

“And you can’t think of any rough spots the last time you were out together?” Molly asked. “No arguments or weird reactions on his part to something you said? Sometimes people can be offended by things you never expected.”

“That’s the problem. We had a great time, and he seemed happy when the evening ended. He even suggested some upcoming events we might attend together, including something at his business. Then nothing.” Chloe threw her hands in the air. “It doesn’t make a speck of sense.”

“I wish I had better advice, but this is probably one you’ll need to write off.”

“Probably,” Chloe said, disappointment clear in her tone. “But I did hope we could be friends. It’s rare to find a guy you can hang out with. Speaking of which, how’s Fergus?”

Molly hoped her cheeks weren’t as red as they felt at the mention of her handsome friend, Fergus MacGregor, who owned the Castleglen golf resort and lodge. They’d met when Molly had visited Loch Mallaig on family vacations in her youth, and they’d reconnected since she had moved to town. “He’s as well as always.” She raised her eyebrows. “In fact, we’ll be having Thanksgiving dinner with him.”

Chloe sat up straight. “Oh no, am I crashing plans?”

Molly laughed. “Not a bit. Fergus is hosting a special Thanksgiving dinner for his staff. He invited everyone from Bread on Arrival to attend since we provide the desserts and breads for the resort.”

“That’s kind of him,” Chloe said. “Are you sure he won’t mind me coming too?”

“I’ll ask him, of course, but I’m sure he won’t mind,” Molly said. Fergus was nothing if not welcoming and generous. “Carol and Harvey passed since they’ll be hosting their own family Thanksgiving, but Laura and I are going. I have no doubt Fergus will be glad to have you too.”

“That sounds good. As long as it’s not a date or anything.”

“Nope. Fergus and I are just friends.” As she said the words, Molly almost completely believed them. She and Fergus had known each other since childhood. Of course, Fergus had also been her first crush. But that was long ago, before they’d both grown up, married, and had families of their own. Now they were single again, but some foolish attempt at romance wasn’t going to ruin their friendship, Molly was determined about that.

Chloe yawned widely, then clamped a hand over her mouth. “Sorry. It’s been a long day of driving.”

“Are you sure you don’t want my bed?” Molly asked.

Chloe shook her head. “Only a little help getting the couch pulled out.”

They made fast work of setting up the bed while Angus supervised. Molly retrieved a few extra pillows from her bedroom and set them on Chloe’s bed. “I’m going to clean up the kitchen and head to bed myself.”

“Don’t forget your book,” Chloe said sleepily.

“I think I’m done reading for the night,” Molly said. “I’m hoping to sleep, after all. I’ll be up early in the morning because of the bakery, but you should sleep as long as you want.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Chloe said before giving her a hug.

After holding on a little longer than usual, Molly released her and headed to the kitchen. She cleaned up quickly, then carried her novel to her room to get it off the table. On the way, she peeked into the sitting room and saw Angus had joined Chloe on the mattress and lay curled up at her side. Molly wasn't surprised, since Chloe had always had an amazing way with animals. Even when she was tiny, she had befriended shy dogs and grumpy cats that no one else could get near.

Molly carried her book into her room and set it beside the bed as she changed. She didn't intend to read any more of the eerie story, not even to find out what happened to the woman racing across the moors in the dark. She stuck to her decision, though her eye was drawn to the book several times. "No," she told herself firmly. "No more spooky reading for one night."

She climbed into bed and fell asleep almost immediately, only to find herself dreaming of the moors where she wandered in a long wool cape that dragged the ground and snagged constantly on brush. Though no one chased her, the annoyance with the cape only grew until suddenly she heard wild barking.

Molly sat up in bed. "Angus?" She scrambled out and found Angus and Chloe standing near the door to the interior stairs.

Chloe stared at her in confusion. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"I wasn't even expecting you," Molly said. "But if Angus thinks there's something we should check on, we'd best do it."

"Right." Chloe glanced around. "I don't suppose you have a baseball bat."

Molly shook her head. "We'll count on Angus to protect us. Besides, it's probably a raccoon in the trash cans."

Chloe bobbed her head. "Right. The quiet life in the country."

Molly opened the door and Angus rushed out, barking wildly as he raced down the stairs. Molly followed him with Chloe right

behind her, her hand touching Molly's shoulder. When they reached the first floor and headed toward the back door, Angus kept up the barks of alarm.

“Mom,” Chloe said anxiously. “I smell smoke.”

Molly sniffed. “I do too.”

They reached the back door. Molly flipped the locks and flung it open, only to be met by a wall of flames.



Molly and Chloe jumped back in shock, bumping into one another and nearly tripping over Angus, who had fortunately backed away from the door before Molly had opened it.

Molly quickly realized the inferno was contained to a bundle of corn shocks set in a metal bucket filled with bundled newspapers. The kitchen had a shiny fire extinguisher mounted on the wall and Molly quickly put out the flames, though the smell of smoke lingered around the doorway. The blaze had been alarming and potentially dangerous with so many dry leaves blowing around, but thankfully it hadn't had a chance to spread to anything.

With the force of the fire extinguisher's spray, the corn shocks crumpled down around the bucket, and Molly frowned at the sodden heap. "That was the display from our front porch. I guess this is someone's idea of a joke."

"I'm not laughing," Chloe replied as she knelt to examine the newspapers in the bucket. "Were these newspapers originally in the display?"

Molly shook her head. "Laura put miniature gourds around the base when she set it up. It was really cute."

"I'm sure it was." Chloe reached out to poke the mess and came up with a piece of charred string. "These papers were tied up."

Molly took the string from her. "That doesn't make much sense. I remember when your grandfather was teaching me how to set a campfire, he said you had to crumple paper because a bundle won't burn well. The oxygen can't get to all the pages."

“I guess the kids who set the fire could have used some lessons.” Chloe rubbed at the char on her fingertips. “You should probably call the police.”

“The police?”

“What if the flames had gotten high enough to reach the roof?” Chloe gestured to the small overhang above the door, then the fenced-in area where Angus loved playing in the dry autumn leaves. “And that’s not far away. A single drifting ember could have set a fire. What if Angus had been out here?”

That wasn’t likely in the middle of the night, but Molly understood her daughter’s concern. “I suppose I should get a report on the record. It’s possible this is part of a string of pranks. Kids get bored quickly in the cold months.”

Angus came forward and snuffled at the burned papers, making himself sneeze in the process. Molly tugged him inside and closed the door.

Chloe scooped up Angus and snuggled him. “If you point me in the right direction, I’ll put on coffee while you make the call. Judging from the way the sky is turning a little pink, I don’t think we’ll be going back to bed.”

*And that means this is going to be a long day.* Molly showed Chloe the coffee setup, then headed for the phone. She already had the faint headache that signaled insufficient sleep, but hopefully coffee would help with that.

Soon Molly and Chloe were sipping coffee and staring out the front window of Bread on Arrival as they waited for the police to arrive. Behind them, Angus took advantage of one of his rare romps through the customer areas of the bakery, sniffing every chair leg with glee. Though Molly reminded herself over and over that the newspaper fire was surely a prank, she still didn’t feel comfortable putting Angus upstairs where she couldn’t see him. Not yet.



Chloe offered her mother a weak smile. “You sent me all the photos of the bakery, but it’s even more impressive in person.”

Molly knew Chloe was trying to distract them, but her gaze swept the customer area anyway. She loved the rustic, Northwoods-style furniture with rough Celtic knots carved into the chairbacks and on the braces. They always reminded her of the Scottish community where she had made her home. Some of the people were a bit rough around the edges as well, but extraordinary in their own way. “Sometimes I feel like we’ve always been here.”

“I can imagine that.” Chloe sipped her coffee, her eyes turning toward the shadowy street. “How are the police around here?”

“Kind,” Molly said. “And competent. I almost wish I hadn’t called, though. I’m not certain it’s a police matter.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s something they’ll want on record,” Chloe insisted. “Though I suppose we may have been able to catch another hour of sleep if we hadn’t bothered. Hopefully you can get a nap in later.”

“Only ten hours to go until closing time.” Molly groaned and smacked herself in the forehead. “I can’t believe I forgot. It’s Friday. Tonight is *The Wandering*.”

“The *Wandering*? Is that a play or something?”

Molly shook her head. “It’s a community event, a kind of progressive dinner hosted by different businesses around town. It celebrates the movement of Scots to Loch Mallaig. Well, to America really, but mostly to Loch Mallaig.”

“Sounds nice. Are you going to go?”

“In a way. Bread on Arrival is the last stop. We’re going to serve hot beverages and small dessert nibbles. The plan is to have them out on the porch since the weather is unseasonably warm.” She grimaced, thinking about the hole left by the now-charred corn shocks.

Chloe gaped at her. “This is warm?”

“You grew up in Chicago and work in Milwaukee,” Molly teased. “I thought I raised you to think any weather that doesn’t freeze your nose off is warm.”

“I work indoors mostly,” Chloe said. “Though I feel for the large-animal vets. I’d freeze to death in some of the weather they take in stride.”

Chloe and Molly perked up as a Loch Mallaig police car parked in front of the shop. Officer Greer Anderson got out of the car and waved at them as she headed toward the bakery door. The blonde, thirtysomething officer was petite, but with her athletic build and confident manner, there weren’t many people Greer couldn’t handle.

Molly was glad to see her. They played together in a bagpiping group, The Piping Yoopers, and they’d become friends. She knew Greer wouldn’t scold her for calling the police over a silly prank. In fact, Greer often scolded her when she didn’t call over minor things.

Molly opened the door as Greer reached it. “Sorry to get you out this early.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Greer said. “I was on duty, catching up on paperwork, which is the bane of my existence. You saved me.” She sniffed. “At least you can’t smell the fire in here.” She thrust out her hand toward Chloe. “You must be Chloe. I’m Greer Anderson.”

Chloe shook her hand. “Pleased to meet you. I had to twist Mom’s arm to get her to call.”

Greer smiled wryly at Molly. “I’m shocked.” She rubbed her hands together. “Let’s go examine the evidence.”

“It’s out back.” Molly led the way to the rear entrance and opened the door.

After donning gloves, the officer squatted to study the mess carefully. She even lifted a newspaper bundle to sniff it. “I think some kind of accelerant was poured on these. I’m guessing paraffin. With

an accelerant, this would have burned hot. You're lucky you caught it before it could spread." She stood and studied Molly. "Annoyed anyone lately?"

Molly shook her head. "Not as far as I'm aware. I figured this was some kind of prank."

Greer stared at the jumble of papers and corn shocks. "It's a little early for the teens around here to be getting cabin fever. I'll take some samples, but there isn't much more I can do."

"I didn't expect you to do anything about it," Molly said. "But I figured you may want to see it in case this is the beginning of a trend."

Greer grinned at her. "Spoken like a true investigator."

Chloe, who'd been unusually quiet since they'd reached the back door, yawned widely, then grimaced apologetically. "Phew, sorry. Mom, if you don't need me, I think I'll take Angus up and sleep some more. If there's going to be an event tonight, I need a nap."

Molly patted Chloe's arm. "Go ahead and take the bed. Flip the latch on the doggie door in the office before you settle down. That way Angus can let himself out if he needs to."

"You got it." Chloe tipped her head at Greer. "Nice to meet you."

Greer had knelt down to collect her sample and waved at Chloe with the evidence bag. "You too." Once Chloe was gone, Greer stood and tucked the evidence bag in her pocket. "Is there any chance someone could be playing a prank on Chloe?"

Molly shook her head. "She only got here last night after supper."

"I see. Well, let me snap some pictures of this, and I'll be on my way. Once I get a report written up, I'll drop by for you to read and sign it."

After Greer left, Molly retreated to the kitchen. She was pondering how to clean up the soggy, charred mess without getting it all over herself when Carol and Laura arrived to get started on the morning's tasks before opening the bakery. Alarmed by the mess out back, they

immediately demanded an explanation. They listened with concern as Molly explained about all the excitement they'd missed, including Chloe's arrival and the burning corn shocks.

"How terrible," Carol said with a shudder after Molly described the scene. "Sounds like a burning effigy."

"Now that you say that, it was pretty gruesome." Molly grimaced. "I still haven't figured out how to clean it up without wearing it."

"Leave it for Hamish," Laura suggested. "His feelings would be hurt if you didn't, and he'll have an exact strategy to take care of it."

"And it'll be the right strategy," Carol added. "As it always is."

The three women laughed. Hamish Bruce was a dear friend and a huge help at the bakery, but he was also prone to thinking his way of doing things was the only one.

Laura pulled slips of paper from her pocket. "We don't have time for cleanup anyway. With *The Wandering* tonight, it's going to be a busy day. I made to-do lists for everyone."

Usually the partner with the plan, ever-organized Carol raised an eyebrow, but took her list and nodded approval as she read it. Molly didn't mind being told what she should do. After the limited sleep she'd had, she would probably need a lot of direction.

They were equal partners at *Bread on Arrival* and dear enough friends that they mostly made room for each person's idiosyncrasies. Laura had previously been the head chef at a trendy NYC restaurant, but she'd left the frenzied pace and late nights behind for early mornings whipping up shortbread and Selkirk bannock. Carol, a retired high school math teacher, had made wedding cakes on the side for years, and she brought both her baking talents and her knack for organizing to the bakehouse. Since Molly's background was event planning, she bowed to both of her other partners when it came to baking, and focused more on marketing the bakehouse and serving up smiles in

the front of the house. As she read through the list Laura had made her, she was glad to see that today's tasks were fairly disaster proof. It was as if her friend had known she'd be a zombie today.

"I had a thought," Carol said as she began gathering ingredients to mix up a batch of buttercream frosting. "I wonder if the fire on the doorstep could be about *The Wandering*."

Molly cocked her head in surprise. "Why would it be?"

"Some people don't appreciate opportunity," Laura said as she opened one of the coolers to grab the carton of heavy cream for scones.

"What are you talking about?" Molly asked.

Carol grabbed a wrapped brick of butter and took it to her station. "This is why you shouldn't have skipped out on the planning meeting. It was a rowdy one since not every business owner in town thought *The Wandering* was a good idea."

"Oh?" Molly was surprised. "This is the first I've heard about it. Usually everyone around here is gung ho for community events, especially those that celebrate our Scottish heritage."

"You should have heard Grizela Duff." Laura launched into a brogue. "The history of the Scots in America is sacred and not to be used to peddle sausages and cider!"

That did sound like something the feisty librarian would say, and Molly wondered if Grizela's annoyance at *Bread on Arrival* explained her recommendation of the book that had scared Molly senseless. But it didn't explain the prank. "It's not like Grizela would have burned corn shocks in effigy on our back stoop. That's not exactly her style."

"But Grizela isn't the only one annoyed," Carol said. "She got the entire historical society fired up about it."

"I don't see the problem," Laura put in. "The timing of *The Wandering* gives businesses a chance to showcase different Scottish-inspired specialty

foods or beverages. We hope customers will think of us as a place to buy delicious bread and desserts for upcoming holiday dinners, but how does that sully the Scots?”

Molly didn't know, but if there actually was some feud over the event, it could make the evening interesting. Since there was nothing for it but to take the occasion as it came, she focused on the list in her hand and got to work.



Surprisingly, Chloe didn't come down all morning. Molly knew her daughter was tired, but Chloe had always considered Laura and Carol to be family, and Molly kept expecting her to show up in the kitchen to hang out with them as they worked. By lunchtime, Molly was actively concerned, so she slipped upstairs.

A refrigerator magnet held a note from Chloe explaining that she was window-shopping with Angus. *I didn't want to get in the way downstairs. Everyone must be busy with the event tonight. Please tell Carol and Laura that I'll pitch in when I get back. I'm not a baker, but I can wash dishes or cut brownies. Or be a taste tester!*

Molly chuckled. At least she knew Chloe was okay. Molly drew a quick heart on the bottom of the note and went downstairs, feeling relieved and able to focus on the new to-do list Laura handed her at the base of the steps.

Molly glanced over the list, then joined Carol in filling mini tarts for The Wandering. As she scooped delicious-smelling apricot filling into the tarts, she noticed Carol staring at her. “What?”

“You're clearly exhausted,” Carol said. Molly knew she was serious when she used her no-nonsense tone, perfected over years of teaching boisterous teenagers. “We could probably manage for a while if you

want to run up and take a power nap. Sometimes even a short snooze makes a world of difference.”

“I suspect if I put my head down, you wouldn’t see me again before dark,” Molly told her. She gently bumped shoulders with her old friend. “Thank you for the offer, but I’m fine. I’ll be glad to get to bed tonight, though.”

Carol peered at her for another moment, then relaxed the tight line of her mouth. “If you say so, but remember we’re not all twenty anymore. Losing sleep hurts more now.”

*Don’t I know it.* But Molly only smiled and focused on the tarts. The next few hours blurred as she moved from one task to the next, staying busy enough that her weariness never had a chance to catch up with her.

When Molly walked to the front of the bakery to grab another cup of coffee, she found their part-time employee Bridget Ross as bright and cheery as always. Molly marveled at Bridget’s bottomless well of energy. *Of course, she is nineteen.* Then Molly gave herself a mental shake. *What is it with me and age today?*

“Something wrong?” Bridget whispered as she joined Molly at the coffee station. “I heard about the fire. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. A little tired.”

“I bet,” Bridget said sympathetically. She snapped her fingers. “Oh, someone came by asking for your daughter earlier.”

Molly lifted her eyebrows in surprise. How many people could possibly know Chloe was in town? “Who?”

“I didn’t know her, and she didn’t give her name. Honestly, I didn’t immediately recognize the name Chloe.” Bridget’s cheeks pinked as she spoke, nearly matching the raspberry streak in her glossy black hair. “We were busy, and I wasn’t thinking. Anyway, I told the woman that no one named Chloe worked here.”

“That’s odd. I didn’t think Chloe knew anyone around here.” Molly considered the possibilities. “Maybe it’s someone she met while shopping this morning. She tends to make friends wherever she goes.”

“When I meet Chloe, I’ll be sure to let her know I’m sorry for telling the woman she wasn’t here.”

“She wasn’t here,” Molly said. “She’s been out shopping. What did the woman look like?”

“Tall, sharp features, expensive clothes. Oh, excuse me. I’m needed.” Bridget hurried away to wait on a customer who had just arrived at the counter, leaving Molly by the coffee station.

Molly sipped her coffee and observed the bakery, enjoying the view as she always did. Most of the tables and chairs were empty since they were near closing time. The few customers who remained were seated near the stone fireplace where the room was warmest, which made Molly suspect the temperature must be dropping outside. Though it was barely three o’clock, the window showed a world slipping quietly toward dusk. It wasn’t dark by any means, but neither was it the bright, clear day they’d enjoyed earlier.

“Tonight should be fun,” Bridget said once her customer had been served. “Thanks for letting me go on *The Wandering*.”

Molly waved dismissively. “Of course.”

“Needs and Tatties is the last stop before we come here,” Bridget went on, referring to the wonderful Scottish restaurant across the street from Bread on Arrival. “I’ll only stay there a few minutes so I can be over here before the crowd.”

“Don’t feel you have to rush. Hamish should be here right around closing. We’d appreciate your help with serving, but I think we have setup covered.”

Bridget beamed at her. “I have the best bosses in the world.”



Molly appreciated the young woman's enthusiasm and managed a grin of her own before she headed into the kitchen. Carol was rolling Scottish snowballs in coconut while Laura was moving melting moments cookies from a pan to the cooling rack. Their dessert selection was going to be simple, leaning toward handheld desserts so they could avoid a crowd of visitors wondering what to do with a plate when they finished.

"Everyone has clustered around the fireplace out in the café," Molly told her partners. "Do you think it's warm enough for us to serve on the porch?"

"I checked a few minutes ago when I was rearranging our front porch display," Laura said. "It is cold, but we'll be serving hot coffee, cider, and cocoa. And the customer area will be open to anyone who wants to warm up by the fire."

"Ourselves included," Carol said with a slight shiver. "I do not enjoy the cold."

"Even though you're the one who keeps chickens," Molly reminded her. "A hobby that puts you outside every day of the year."

"On the frozen days, I can usually talk Harvey into doing the chicken chores."

Before Molly could respond, Chloe bounded into the kitchen. "I'm home!"

Carol and Laura both abandoned their desserts to hug Chloe, fussing over her like family. Chloe's fair coloring, a trait she'd inherited from Molly, tended to show exhaustion clearly, and Molly was glad to see that Chloe's nap had eased the dark circles under her eyes.

"Did you get some holiday shopping done?" Molly asked.

"A little, but I was mostly admiring," Chloe said. "I enjoyed watching Angus charm everyone we met. He's quite a little celebrity around here. You wouldn't believe how many people recognized him."

“Angus does tend to make an impression,” Carol said with a chuckle.

“I put the star upstairs so he can recover from greeting his adoring public.” Chloe glanced around the kitchen, then grabbed an apron from a nearby hook. “So how can I help?”

Laura assigned Chloe a few simple tasks, and soon they were all working together to prep treats for serving.

Bridget popped her head in just after closing time. “The door is locked,” she announced. “I just need to change clothes for tonight. I brought the cutest outfit.”

“Bridget, have you met Chloe?” Molly asked.

“I introduced myself on the way in,” Chloe answered.

“Oh good.” Molly gestured toward the ceiling. “Bridget, you can use my apartment to change if you want.”

With a chipper thank-you, Bridget popped back out of the kitchen. Turning back to the preparations underway, Molly was pleased to see they were nearly done. She could almost believe she would have time to sneak off for a quick nap before everyone arrived.

Then the back door slammed and heavy footsteps thudded toward the kitchen. “What is that mess outside?” Hamish demanded as he stomped into the kitchen.

Molly realized she’d totally forgotten about the charred corn shocks and sodden newspapers. “Someone’s idea of a joke, I imagine,” she explained. “I completely forgot about the bucket. Would you be able to clean it up?”

“Aye,” Hamish said. “The bucket’ll take me only a minute, but what do you intend to do about the paint?”

“Paint!” Molly, Laura, and Carol yelled in unison.

“What are you talking about?” Laura asked.

Hamish’s lips quirked dourly beneath his snow-white beard. “You best come and see.”

They all hurried outside to the yard, then turned to view the house. Someone had thrown bright red paint on the creamy yellow siding near the back door. It ran down the wall, looking horrifically like blood. A puddle had formed near the sooty bucket of newspapers, and someone had dipped into one of the red pools to write a missive on the stoop. *Stop now!*

Molly stared at the carnage, her hand at her throat, barely believing what she was seeing. Who could be so angry with them? “Stop what?” she whispered. “The Wandering?”

“We don’t have that kind of power,” Laura said.

“Perhaps someone thinks we do,” Carol said, one eyebrow raised in apprehension. “And they seem to be eager to get us to use it.”