



Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries™

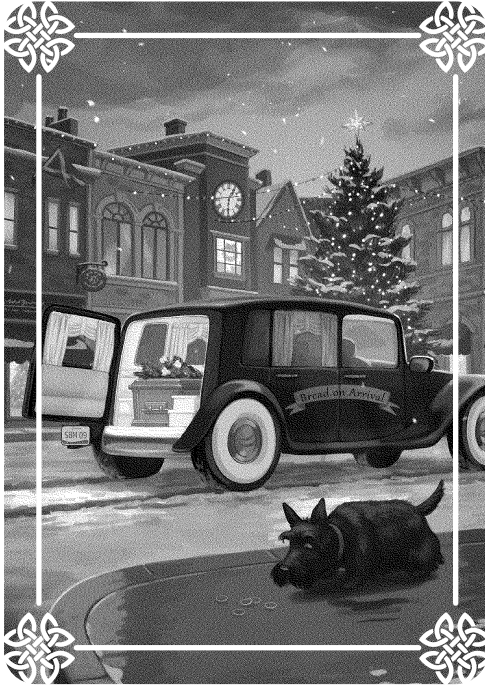
Yule Be Sorry



Sandra Orchard



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Books in the Scottish Bakehouse Mysteries series

The Jig Is Up
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Lass and Found
Silence of the Clans
Shepherd's Lie
A Faerie Dangerous Game
Tartan Feathered
Yule Be Sorry
Of Ice and Men
Reign of Terrier

... and more to come!

Yule Be Sorry

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At the faint sound of her name being shouted from the bakery below, Molly Ferris closed the folder on the advertising copy she'd been preparing for Bread on Arrival's Yule Festival specials. She stood up from the desk and walked through her cozy apartment toward the front door, which opened to the staircase that led down to the bakehouse kitchen. The delicious aroma of fresh baking wafted in through the crack under the apartment door, reminding her she hadn't had breakfast yet. Waking to fresh baking each morning was an added perk of living in the apartment above the bakery she'd cofounded with her friends Laura Donovan and Carol MacCallan in Loch Mallaig, Michigan.

Angus, Molly's Scottish terrier, danced excitedly in place, clearly eager to sample whatever smelled so yummy.

"Okay, you can tag along for a few minutes," Molly said to her beloved dog. "But once it's time to open, you're coming back up here."

His tail wiggling in agreement, Angus surged down the steps as soon as Molly opened the door. She followed at a slightly slower pace but soon met up with Laura, who had been the one calling for her and now waited at the bottom of the stairs.

"What's up?" Molly asked.

"I know you wanted to work on that ad copy, but it's almost time to open and Carol's not here yet." Laura sounded as off-kilter as her chef hat, hanging askew over her auburn ponytail. "Can you watch the counter until she gets here?"

“Of course.” Molly hurried to the front counter and donned an apron embroidered with their business logo, a shortbread cookie with a Celtic knot design that succinctly summed up the theme of their Scottish bakehouse. “It’s not like Carol to be late, especially on a Monday. Did she call?”

“She texted me that she’d been delayed,” Laura explained, “but she didn’t say why.”

“That’s odd.” Molly noticed the time and realized that she’d better corral Angus before customers arrived. “Angus, come.”

Angus was snuffling around the Northwoods-style café furniture for scraps. Unfortunately for him, the bakery staff kept the eating area clean as a whistle, and any remaining morsels had been swept away Saturday afternoon at closing time.

“I’ll unlock the door while you get him,” Laura said.

As she approached the front door, Laura glanced out the window and, seeming to relax a little, grinned at the Christmas tree Molly had set up on the porch. Sometime between closing Friday afternoon and Laura’s early arrival the next morning, someone had added several dozen pear ornaments and a life-size stuffed partridge to it.

“Did two turtledoves happen to show up yesterday morning?” Laura asked with more than a hint of amusement in her tone.

“Not that I noticed,” Molly said nonchalantly, not about to admit she’d slipped outside the moment she awoke Sunday morning to check.

The truth was that she’d secretly suspected her friend Fergus MacGregor might have been the mastermind behind the pear tree prank. Granted, he’d likely long since forgotten the summer in their teen years that “The Twelve Days of Christmas” had become their special song.

Molly had been vacationing in Loch Mallaig with her parents that summer, as she often had while she was growing up. Fergus, who’d lived in town all his life, had invited her to spend the day hiking with him.

They'd gotten lost in the dense woods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. After an hour of wandering through the forest, Molly had started to get scared, but Fergus had assured her he'd lead them to safety before she could finish singing "The Twelve Days of Christmas."

She chuckled at the memory of the brave face he'd put on when he'd probably been just as anxious as she was. But as she recalled, after she was a couple of verses into the song, he'd stopped her repeatedly to argue over whether she was singing it correctly, then made her start over until she got the words right. For how many times they'd repeated the verses, it was no wonder he'd managed to find the trail back to civilization before she finished the song. Since then, she'd always thought of him whenever she heard it.

The ring of the bakehouse phone snapped Molly out of her reverie. Forgetting Angus for the moment, she went behind the counter and grabbed the receiver. "Good morning, Bread on Arrival. How may I help you?"

"It's Carol." The third bakehouse partner sounded nearly frantic. "I'm sorry I'm late. It's my chickens. All three are missing, and I can't find them anywhere."

The bell above the door jingled and two older women sauntered in, laughing. "Your sleigh display is adorable," one of them said to Laura.

Molly exchanged a questioning glance with her friend.

"What sleigh?" Laura asked.

"The one with the three French hens in it," the other woman explained.

"Carol, hang on a minute." Molly hadn't set up a sleigh display. Confused by what the women were talking about, she and Laura peeked out the door.

A miniature sleigh sat on the porch opposite the pear tree. Inside, three hens clucked contentedly, happily pecking at a pile of grain. A sign on the back of the sleigh said, *France or Bust*.

Molly covered the receiver with her hand and whispered to Laura, “Do you think those are Carol’s hens?”

“Are hers missing?”

“Yup.” Molly pressed the phone back to her ear. “The hens you’re missing wouldn’t happen to be, oh”—she shifted into an exaggerated French accent—“Evette, Monique, and Chantelle, would they?”

“What? This isn’t funny,” Carol said, her voice tight.

“I’m sorry.” Molly bit back a chuckle. “You can relax. I think we’ve located your French hens safe and sound.”

“They’re not French,” Carol said. “What are you—”

Angus squeezed past Molly’s legs and barked. The chickens erupted into a flurry of squawks and flapping wings.

“Angus!” Molly shoved the phone at Laura. “Explain,” she blurted and lunged for her dog’s collar.

But Angus dodged her and continued his pursuit of making new feathered friends. Alarmed, the birds waddled off the porch and across the yard.

“Angus!” Molly chased after him. “Silly dog.”

Bridget Ross, the bakehouse’s college-aged helper, pulled up at the curb and hopped out of her blue Honda Civic just in time to stop the chickens from risking an ill-advised sprint across the street. Molly caught Angus by the collar and scolded him gently while Bridget herded the birds back toward the porch.

Laura and the two customers stood on the porch, smothering their giggles over the spectacle. “Carol and her husband will be here in a few minutes,” Laura said. “They’re bringing cages so Harvey can take the hens home.”

“Such a shame,” one of the women said. “They really were adorable in that sleigh.”

Molly would’ve agreed if Angus weren’t straining to sniff them

again. “Bridget, could you stay outside until Carol gets here?” she asked.

“You bet,” Bridget said in her typical agreeable manner. “I’ll make sure they don’t escape again.”

Molly escorted Angus to the fenced backyard with strict orders to behave. The doggy door installed in the office was open, so he could get back into the apartment when he was cold—though she suspected he’d stay outside to keep an eye on the chicken-related excitement until the hens had gone home.

She hurried back inside to take up her place at the front counter. Their usual flow of Monday morning customers began to trickle in, most of them chuckling over the clever depiction of three French hens. Molly, busy filling orders, gave up trying to explain that the display wasn’t actually theirs, and Bridget followed suit when she joined her.

Eventually, Carol tromped into the bakehouse and shrugged out of her coat, having apparently finished retrieving her chickens. “Whoever’s behind this ‘Twelve Days of Christmas’ prank has gone too far this time,” she growled as she strode toward the hallway that led to the kitchen.

A diminutive man with dark hair and a kind face who’d been watching the chicken-collecting antics from the window stepped up to the counter. “Do you mean to say the partridge in a pear tree, two turtledoves, and three French hens weren’t a publicity stunt on the bakery’s part?”

Molly cocked her head. “You saw two turtledoves? Where?”

“They were roosting in the eaves at Neeps and Tatties yesterday, according to my waitress this morning.” He gestured toward the Scottish restaurant across the street. “She said the owners figured they’d flown over from your Christmas display.”

“It’s not our display,” Carol said hotly. “Someone added the partridge and pears to our tree. And although *that* was cute, kidnapping

a person's chickens isn't, even if the intention is only to transplant them to her place of business."

"Oh, I don't know," Bridget chimed in from behind the counter, where she was boxing new orders for the morning's deliveries. "I thought the whole French hens in a sleigh thing was pretty cute."

"But what if they'd run away before I arrived?" Carol argued. "They could've wandered into the road and been struck by a car."

Or been scared off by Angus. Molly ducked her head. And Laura, who'd been setting a tray of freshly baked Scottish yule bread in the display case, mouthed for Molly's eyes only, "I didn't tell her."

"Thank you," Molly mouthed back, then returned her attention to the customer.

"Interesting," the man was saying. "Sounds like I picked the right town to stay in."

"How's that?" Molly failed to understand the connection between Carol's chickens and this man's choice of vacation destinations.

"Name's Lloyd Gretsinger. I'm a journalist." He handed her his business card, which was for a travel website. "My editor asked me to do a series on the Christmas celebrations of small towns in Michigan's Upper Peninsula." He rolled his eyes, clearly not enthused by the fluff assignment. "Since Loch Mallaig is famous for its Scottish Yule Festival, I decided to make this my base for a week or so while I tour the region."

"You don't say." Doreen Giobsan, owner of the Thistle and That gift shop next door, sprang up from her nearby table. "I've been a business owner in Loch Mallaig for years. I'd be happy to give you a tour of the town and answer any questions you might have."

"I appreciate the offer, ma'am, but I was actually hoping for a more unique angle to my story." Lloyd addressed Molly. "Mind if I interview you about your anonymous 'Twelve Days of Christmas' prankster?"

"I wouldn't call him a prankster," Bridget interjected.

"No?" Lloyd raised an eyebrow. "What would you call him?"

Bridget pressed her lips together as if straining to contain a smile. "A secret admirer."

"How do you figure?" Lloyd pressed.

"Because that's what the lyrics say. On the third day of Christmas, *my true love* gave to me, remember?"

Feeling her face heat, Molly turned away and straightened a tray of mincemeat pies. Bridget had to be speculating, especially considering Molly had never told her friends the story about Fergus and the song. Besides, he was hardly a secret admirer, merely a good friend. Unless . . .

Molly spun back to face Bridget. "Is there a fellow in your life we don't know about?"

Bridget's cheeks turned beet red, matching the colored streaks in her glossy black hair, but she merely shrugged.

"You certainly stand to see a boost in sales from all the publicity it could generate," Lloyd prompted.

"Are you implying we did this ourselves?" Molly asked, taking offense.

"We've already got a holiday promotion," Laura protested. "Our Christmas advertising campaign is centered on our yule bread surprises."

"That's right," Molly said. "We even ran an ad in Saturday's paper." She motioned to a sign at the counter that explained the promotion along with an artist's rendering of yule bread, a braided, circular loaf with candles in the center.

"Traditionally, whoever found a surprise in their yule bread would have good luck in the coming year," Laura explained to Lloyd. "So, I'm baking treasures into a random selection of loaves. Whoever receives one can redeem it at the bakery for a gift certificate."

"Clever," Lloyd said, though he didn't sound particularly intrigued.

Maybe the notion of milking the pranks for free publicity isn't such

a bad idea after all. Molly stepped around from behind the counter. "I'd be happy to chat with you, Lloyd. Would you like to come up to the office?"

He glanced at the customers sitting at the café tables, not even bothering to pretend they weren't listening in. "No, I'd prefer to talk here."

Evan Boyle, a white-haired retiree who'd been surveying the display cases, suddenly snapped his attention to Molly. "How do I know you won't report me if I buy a loaf of that yule bread?"

"Report you?" Molly repeated, mystified. "To who?"

"That's to *whom*," Evan corrected, his Scottish brogue quite pronounced. "To the coppers of course. I dinnae suppose you ken that for many years back in the old country it was against the law to celebrate Christmas. If a bakery customer ordered yule bread or mincemeat pie, the baker was required to report him."

"Seriously?" Bridget screwed up her face with the indignation of youth.

The elderly man nodded solemnly. "'Twas before my time, but me granddad told the tales."

"My grandmother told me stories like that too," Carol chimed in as she returned from hanging up her coat in the kitchen. Her paternal grandparents had emigrated from Scotland. "Christmas didn't even become a public holiday in Scotland until 1958."

"I can't even imagine not being able to celebrate Christmas," Bridget said, her eyes wide.

Evan turned to Lloyd. "I hail from the old country, but have lived here since I was ten. Oh, the tales I can tell. And now that I reside at the senior home with all the other old-timers, I've got even more."

Lloyd grinned. "I'd like to hear them. Let me *tear the tartan* with"—he motioned to Molly, and she supplied her name—"Molly first, and then we can sit down and have a *right blether*."

Evan chuckled. "Aye, that we will."

"Are you Scottish?" Molly asked Lloyd as they settled into seats.

He shook his head. "I'm staying at Two Scots Guesthouse, and the owners gave me a quick tutorial this morning on a few of the Scottish expressions I might hear about town."

Molly smiled, thinking of kind B&B owners Ewan and Myra Loganach. "Good for them. Our local historical society offers free Gaelic classes too."

"So I've heard." Lloyd dug a notepad out of his pocket. "Now, tell me about your prankster's gifts."

Molly recounted the surprise appearance of the partridge and pears on Saturday and the hens earlier that morning. "To be fair, this isn't the first spate of lighthearted pranks we've experienced since opening the bakery," she said in closing. "Though it is one of the more creative ones."

"What made you and your friends decide to start up a bakehouse in Loch Mallaig?" Lloyd asked.

"We were college roommates thirty years ago and kept in touch while we were off raising families and developing careers. I don't remember which one of us actually pitched the idea, but it really began to take shape when Carol announced she was retiring from teaching in Pittsburgh. She and her husband, Harvey—he's a retired investigative journalist—wanted to move here to be closer to their daughter, Jenny, and her family. Laura had been working as a chef in Manhattan, and the idea of a slower pace in a quaint town like Loch Mallaig instantly appealed to her. I was an event planner in Chicago, but my daughter had taken a job at a veterinary clinic in Milwaukee and my husband had passed long before, so I had nothing tying me down."

"And that's how Bread on Arrival was born," Lloyd surmised. "It's an unusual name."

Molly laughed. "This old Victorian house was a funeral parlor before we bought it, and the name just kind of came to us. Our delivery vehicle is a LaSalle hearse."

Lloyd's eyes lit up as he scribbled notes. "Very unique."

Molly hid a smile. This was definitely going to be great publicity for the shop. If she ever found out who had brought the "Twelve Days of Christmas" to their doorstep, she'd offer them free scones for a month.

As if summoned by her thoughts, the words to the Christmas carol in question drifted softly across the room.

Molly glanced toward the counter to see who was singing and startled at the sight of Carol in an intense conversation with Officer Greer Anderson. Her attention was drawn back to the singing as many of the customers in the bakery chorused, "Five golden rings—"

"With fingers," Bridget added in a comically deep bass. "Four calling birds . . ."

"Okay, stop," Carol blurted. "With fingers? That's morbid."

Greer chuckled. In her early thirties, she was closer in age to Bridget than to Carol. "I'm afraid it's how I grew up singing that song too. At the time, I suppose we thought it was funny."

"It *is* funny," Bridget countered.

"Could you excuse me for a moment?" Molly asked Lloyd, then hurried to the counter. "You called the police about the pranks?" Molly whispered to Carol.

"No," Carol replied. "Greer came in for cookies, and I took the opportunity to report what happened this morning. Our prankster, or secret admirer, or whatever you want to call him, kidnapped my chickens after all. What's next? Is he going to bring a high school band in for the drummers drumming and pipers piping?"

"Oh, you know what would be funny," Bridget said. "If four people

dressed like birds came calling. You know, like Big Bird from *Sesame Street*, times four.”

Molly couldn't help but chuckle at the mental image.

Carol grimaced. “You wouldn't think this was so funny if the prankster had snuck in here and kidnapped Angus.”

Molly's mirth faded and she shuddered at the thought of her pup disappearing. “You're right. I'm sorry.”

“It's not that I think our prankster actually meant any harm,” Carol said with a glance at Bridget, “but clearly he lacks the maturity to know when a joke goes too far.”

Officer Anderson turned her attention to Bridget, along with Carol and Molly.

“Why's everyone looking at me?” Bridget asked. “I don't know who's doing this!”

Greer shrugged. “Well, I can write a report,” she offered. “Perhaps suggest whoever's on duty overnight keep an eye on the place.”

“We'd appreciate it. Thank you.” Carol plated Greer's order of a cranberry scone, then moved on to the next customer in line, a young woman whose blonde hair peeked out from beneath a wool cap.

“Do you do wedding cakes?” the newcomer asked.

“We certainly do,” Carol answered, a gleam in her eye. Cake decorating was her specialty. “Are you getting married? Let me show you our design book.”

With Carol and Bridget handling customers and Lloyd now absorbed in a conversation with Evan, Molly decided to go back upstairs to finish the copy for their newest ad. But she stopped in her tracks when she saw a pile of bakery boxes with order slips taped to them sitting on the counter.

“What are these orders still doing here?” Molly collected the boxes from the counter, inwardly grumbling about the ill-timed vacation

of Hamish Bruce, their handyman and frequent delivery driver. The opportunity for Hamish and his wife, Joyce, to visit friends in Arizona had come up suddenly, and Molly and her partners hadn't had nearly enough time to train Shawn McKenzie, the nineteen-year-old filling in as Hamish's temporary replacement. "Shawn knows he's supposed to double-check the delivery list before he heads out."

"He must have been here," Bridget said. "The hearse wasn't in the back when I parked."

Molly carried the boxes to the kitchen to put in the cooler until they could be delivered. "Did you see Shawn this morning?" she asked Laura. "He left behind some of the orders."

Laura was leaning forward over a chocolate silk pie, piping bag full of whipped cream in hand. "He hasn't come in yet, as far as I know."

"That's weird." Molly entered the walk-in cooler. Sure enough, that morning's other deliveries, which required refrigeration, were still inside piled on a cart. She set down the boxes from the front and returned to the kitchen.

"Where is he?" she asked Laura. "All these orders should have gone out half an hour ago. Bridget said the hearse wasn't in the garage when she got here."

Laura, who was concentrating on piping perfect dollops of cream onto her pie, merely shrugged.

Molly strode out of the kitchen and down the hall to the back entrance. She opened the door and a chilly wind swept in. She peered toward the garage to check for the LaSalle, but the bay door was closed, blocking her view. Bracing herself against the nip in the air, Molly dashed to the garage and peeked through the window. The hearse was gone.

But if Shawn hadn't come in to work, then where was the car? Had it been stolen?



Molly went back inside. Shivering from her brief time in the cold, she paused in the hallway and punched the listing on her cell phone for their new delivery boy. It went straight to voice mail. She groaned in frustration.

Apparently overhearing Molly's outburst, Carol peeked her head into the hallway. "What's the matter?"

"Our hearse is missing," Molly said, joining Carol out front. "And so is our delivery boy."

"How strange," Carol said as she went back to refilling Greer's coffee cup at the urn set up behind the counter. The young bride Carol had been helping sat at a café table, engrossed in the album of cake examples.

"Did he have keys to it?" Greer asked.

"Yes," Molly answered. "But why would he steal it?"

Greer smiled appreciation as Carol handed her back her coffee cup. "Did anyone else have keys?" the officer asked.

Molly shook her head. "Hamish might have another set, but he's halfway to Arizona by now."

"The spare set is still on its hook in the kitchen," Carol said. "I noticed it when I hung up my coat."

Greer raised dispatch on her radio and requested a BOLO. "A hearse with your logo on the side should be easy to spot."

Carol reached for the phone. "I'll call Shawn's mom and find out if and when he left for work."

Molly thought about the orders going undelivered, her tension rising. “Our clients are going to be fuming. I’d better load the boxes into my car and deliver them myself.” She actually enjoyed driving the hearse, but the idea of dropping off bread, rolls, pies, and cookies with her Honda Fit did not particularly appeal to her.

After a brief conversation, Carol disconnected her call. “Shawn’s mom says he left the house before five o’clock this morning. Apparently he delivers newspapers before his shift starts here. His girlfriend’s family got an eviction notice and he’s trying to earn all the extra money he can to help her out.”

“Would he borrow your hearse to deliver papers?” Greer asked.

“I doubt it,” Carol said. “He rides a motorcycle, which would be a whole lot more maneuverable.”

“Until it snows,” Greer headed toward the back door. “I’ll take a look around the garage, see if your thief left behind any clues.”

Before Greer reached it, the back door burst open and Shawn, a lanky redhead with bright freckles splashed across his nose, lurched inside. His gaze skittered over his bosses’ gaping mouths and he paled. “I’m sorry I’m late. I can explain.”

“Our customers expect their deliveries on time.” Molly jabbed her finger at her watch. Typically easygoing, she wasn’t prone to lectures—but sometimes being a boss meant doling out reprimands. “The restaurants especially count on them. If you can’t be here on schedule, we’ll have to find someone else to fill in for Hamish while he’s away.”

“No, please,” Shawn begged. “It won’t happen again. I promise. I need this job.”

“You best get started then.” Molly waved toward the kitchen. “Everything is in the cooler waiting to be loaded. You’ll have to use my car. The hearse is missing.”

A voice erupted from Officer Anderson's radio. "Just spotted the hearse turning into Bread on Arrival's driveway."

Greer spoke into the radio. "Thanks, I'm on the scene. Tell dispatch to cancel the BOLO."

All eyes went to Shawn, and his pronounced Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. "Uh, I'm sorry. I kind of borrowed it this morning."

"What do you mean borrowed it?" Molly asked, reminding herself that he deserved a chance to explain himself before she fired him on the spot.

Shawn squirmed. "My girlfriend's family is being evicted. A barkeep friend of her dad's told him he overheard someone say the landlord was showing up with police first thing this morning to kick them out. They could've lost all their stuff if we didn't get it out of there in time. I rented storage space for them in a friend's garage and used the hearse to help them move. I would've asked permission, but there wasn't time."

Molly put fingers to her temples. "We'll talk about it later. Right now, you need to get those orders delivered."

"Yes ma'am." Shawn hurried to the kitchen, clearly grateful for the reprieve.

"Can a landlord do that?" Carol asked Greer.

"It's complicated." Officer Anderson sighed. "Although we only have one in town who'd be heartless enough to threaten an eviction two weeks before Christmas."

"I think we should let Shawn's infraction pass this time," Carol told Molly. "His heart was in the right place."

Molly begrudgingly agreed. "Okay. But from now on, he leaves the keys to the hearse here after his shift ends. And let's hope his tardiness doesn't cost us any customers, or we won't be able to afford to give him a job at all."

A familiar deep laugh carried over the din of customers to Molly's ear. She glanced around the café and noticed Fergus at a table with his son, Neil, who helped manage his father's golf resort and restaurants. They must have arrived while she was checking for the hearse. Bridget stood beside the table, animatedly recounted the "Twelve Days of Christmas" pranks that had befallen the bakehouse.

The twinkle in Fergus's eye as his gaze shifted to Molly told her he also remembered their summer escapade. She approached the table just as Bridget was finishing her story.

Bridget's mouth dropped as she glanced from Fergus to Molly and back to Fergus. "Are you behind the gifts?"

He laughed. "I wish I'd thought of it. Did Molly tell you how the song saved us from all-out panic when we were lost in the woods as teens?"

Bridget's eyebrows lifted inquisitively, her gaze tilting toward Molly. "You've been holding out on us."

Molly resisted the temptation to cover her heating cheeks and somehow managed to tell the hiking story without giving the impression it had occupied her mind for the past three days. She hoped.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it wasn't you, Fergus," Carol interjected as she joined them. "I didn't appreciate my chickens being part of the prank."

"What do you think the four calling birds will be?" Bridget asked.

Neil stroked his whiskers contemplatively, then grinned. "Maybe your prankster will find talking bird plaques." He turned to his dad. "Like that talking big-mouth bass Blair gave you one year at Christmas. Remember?"

"Blair is my daughter," Fergus explained to Bridget. "She was about your age when she gave me a mounted fish that lifts its head and sings 'Take Me to the River.'"

“Oh yes, I’ve seen those,” Bridget said.

Carol didn’t appear amused, and she excused herself to return to the front counter.

“Good luck trying to solve your mystery,” Fergus said as he and his son stood to go.

“At this rate, I’ll need all the luck I can get,” Molly answered before joining Carol at the register.

Carol was refilling a coffee mug for Lloyd, who smiled smugly as he announced, “I’ve decided the twelve days theme and your search for the bakery’s—or one of its owners’—*true love* will make a good angle for reporting on the town’s Yule Festival.”

“Awesome!” Bridget exclaimed.

Molly appreciated their young employee’s enthusiasm. Since Fergus didn’t appear to be the mastermind behind the grand gesture, Molly hoped it proved to be a secret admirer of Bridget’s.

“He’s expecting the gifts to continue,” Carol hissed to Molly as Lloyd took his coffee and stopped at another table filled with customers in his apparent quest for the big scoop.

Molly was about to say the incidents were harmless enough, but she bit her tongue since Carol clearly didn’t agree—not that Molly blamed her, considering her hens had been kidnapped as part of a prank.

“Look on the bright side,” Molly said instead. “He writes for a travel website. This will be great publicity for the bakery.”

Carol sighed. “I suppose.”

Molly finally returned to the office and quickly finished the copy for the next morning’s advertisement, then headed out to the newspaper office to drop it off and negotiate which page it would appear on. She could’ve just e-mailed the copy, but if Lloyd was going to write about their mystery gift giver, she decided it might be prudent to do some digging herself, just in case the reveal proved embarrassing.

She took Angus along for the walk and, after dropping the copy at the *Crown Press News* and securing the top of page three for it, she stopped at the local pet store, Barking Plaid. While the friendly, young cashier made a fuss over Angus, Molly detoured past the birdcages to grab a fresh bag of dog food. There were a pair of lovebirds, a trio of budgies, and a lone cockatiel. If their gift giver was hoping to acquire four calling birds, he was going to be disappointed—unless he'd already done his shopping.

Setting the dog food on the counter, Molly plied the employee for information. "Has anyone recently bought four birds?"

The young woman, whose name tag read *Eve*, shook her head. "I've never seen anyone buy more than two at a time. Why?"

"Have you sold any birds recently?"

Eve walked around the counter and inspected the birdcages. "Doesn't appear so. These are all the birds we had here the last shift I worked."

"When was that?"

"Friday. But to be honest, I haven't sold a bird in months, and I'm pretty sure the owners haven't had any birds in stock other than what you see there."

Molly paid for the dog food. "Okay, thank you. I appreciate your help."

She visited several more stores, but not a single owner admitted to selling anyone pear ornaments, a sleigh, a stuffed partridge, or birds of any description. It was beginning to seem like the prankster had either shopped out of town or online for their props.

As they passed *Dressed to Kilt*, Angus let out an enthusiastic woof. Molly peered at the window display and through to the clothing racks beyond. "They wouldn't sell anything like the gifts we've seen." Still, she tilted her head, studying the mannequin dressed in a rakish kilt, holding a bagpipe to his molded lips. "Then again, one of the later gifts is pipers piping, right?"

Molly opened the door, but hesitated on the threshold, not sure if Angus would be welcome in the store. Many shops in Loch Mallaig were pet-friendly, but she'd never brought him here.

"He can come in," a friendly male voice called. A man of about thirty emerged from behind a mannequin he was adding to the display window. "Your Scottie suits the store."

"He's always happy to be wanted," Molly said as she led a prancing Angus inside and let the door close behind them.

The man hoisted the kilt-clad mannequin onto a riser, then turned his full attention to Molly. "How can I help you this morning? I'm Luke, by the way. Also known as Lucas Jr."

"You must be Lucas and Ava's son," Molly said, noticing that Luke had his dad's brown eyes and his mother's kind smile. "Are your folks away?"

"Are they ever." Luke grinned. "I sent them on an extended vacation to Scotland to celebrate forty years since they became Mr. and Mrs. Murray."

"Wow, that's fabulous. Although I can't believe your dad would leave the store for that long, even to celebrate a landmark wedding anniversary."

Luke nodded. "It took some convincing. But my folks aren't spring chickens anymore. It's time they had a taste of what retirement could feel like. Of course they're likely using the vacation as a buying trip." He shook his head, as if trying to get his parents to slow down was a hopeless cause. "I think telling them my fiancée, Della, would help me run the store in their absence finally tipped the scales."

"Good for you. Are you planning to take over the shop permanently someday?"

Luke shrugged. "I'm not sure how well Della would handle our winters on an annual basis."

Molly chuckled. "They're not for everyone."

"Is there something in particular I can help you find?" Luke asked.

Now that Molly thought about it, her gift giver wouldn't go out and buy eleven kilts and hire bagpipers—he'd just rally volunteers from The Piping Yoopers, the local bagpiping group. And since she was a member, she should be able to scout out who'd been fishing for volunteers. "You don't happen to sell any ornaments, do you?" she asked instead.

"Nope, strictly Scottish clothes and accessories."

Molly thanked him and headed back toward the bakery. On the way, she ducked into The Knit Hoose. In addition to yarn, needles, and patterns, the knitting shop carried a variety of other craft supplies—maybe even pear ornaments.

At the sound of the shop's door opening, Aileen Morrison bustled out from the back room and cheerfully welcomed Molly. Like the majority of Loch Mallaig townsfolk who claimed Scottish ancestry, she had flaming red hair and hazel eyes.

Angus trotted at her side as Molly meandered through the store. Near the register, she spotted a toy sleigh filled with yarn. It was similar to the one the chickens had been occupying. "Did you happen to sell a sleigh like this to a customer recently?" she asked Aileen.

"That's just for display," Aileen said.

"You do come up with some creative ones," Molly said, recalling some of the cute seasonal vignettes Aileen had done previously. Actually, that reminded her . . . "You had plastic fruits and vegetables on display in a cornucopia in the front window a few weeks ago, right? Were there any pears in there?"

Aileen's eyes narrowed, but the twitch of her lips betrayed her amusement. "Are you asking me if I sold a certain prankster the pears that showed up on your Christmas tree?"

"I am."

"Now, if I had—and I'm not saying I did, you understand—it wouldn't be right to spoil his or her surprises by giving away his or her identity."

"I understand that, but did you hear what he did with Carol's chickens? She was really upset and I just want—"

Aileen held up her hand. "You're wasting your breath. I didn't sell anyone any pears or a sleigh." She solemnly held up three fingers. "Scout's honor."

Molly deflated and gave Aileen a glum goodbye before returning to Bread on Arrival. Back at the bakery, Molly filled Carol and Laura in on the results of her fact-finding mission.

"You know," Laura said, tapping her index finger on her lips, "we were talking about the Yule Festival at our Fair Knitting Ladies meeting last week. Aileen mentioned being one of the shopkeepers on the festival committee. Maybe they orchestrated the prank as a publicity stunt. It would explain why Aileen acted a little cagey."

"And now that that reporter has picked up on it, the committee certainly wouldn't want to give themselves away." Carol expelled a frustrated sigh. "I suppose we'll have to resign ourselves to the prankster's identity remaining a mystery."

"Unless," Molly said hopefully, "we can catch him in the act of delivering four calling birds."

Shawn, who'd been piling a stack of new orders on the rolling cart, held up a hand. "I could mount a trail cam outside the front door."

"What's that?" Laura asked.

"It snaps pictures when it detects motion," he explained. "Even in the dark. If your gift giver comes back, it would take his photo."

"Where would we get one of these trail cams?" Carol asked.

"My dad has two," Shawn said. "I bet he'd lend you one."

"That would be perfect." Molly felt gratitude chase away any

remaining annoyance she had at Shawn's earlier behavior. "If our prankster heard we bought one locally he'd be on the lookout for it."

Shawn nodded. "I'll stop at home and pick it up after I finish these deliveries. I can mount it for you before I leave for the day."

Molly's mood lifted further with a fresh idea. "We have Christmas lights in the attic. Maybe I'll bring those down for you to mount along the edge of the porch roof at the same time. That way, no one will suspect what you're really up to."

Two hours later, Molly was elbow deep in tubs of Christmas decorations when Laura found her in the attic. "Shawn is back with the trail cam."

"Great," Molly said. "Can you send him up to help carry down these boxes, please? I found a bunch more decorations for the shop that I must have overlooked when I decorated after Thanksgiving."

"Sure," Laura said. "Fergus and Neil are here again too. Want me to ask them to give you a hand as well?"

"That'd be helpful. One of them could carry that yule log down." She pointed to a pristine white birch log fitted with candles. "I was thinking it would work perfectly on the fireplace mantel."

"Sounds good. I'll send them up."

By the time the shop closed and Bridget, Carol, and Laura had cleaned up, Molly had finished adding more decorations to the interior, and Shawn had the Christmas lights and trail cam mounted. Now all they had to do was wait.



Molly shook the cobwebs from her brain at the sound of her clock cuckooing—then jackknifed to a sitting position. *I don't own a cuckoo clock!*

She sprang from her bed and searched for the source of the faintly muffled sound, which grew louder as she approached the door to the steps leading down to the bakehouse. Her pulse escalated as she unlocked the door and opened it a crack. She walked onto the landing and peered into the dim early morning light.

A brightly colored cuckoo clock, its bird still chirping the time at a deafening level, was hanging on the stairwell wall. The clock hadn't been there when she went to bed . . . at least not that she'd noticed.

"How did that get here?" Molly asked aloud.

Angus, who had joined her on the first step, didn't answer.

Shuddering at the thought of someone creeping around Bread on Arrival in the middle of the night, Molly was about to retreat when another bird cuckooed, this time a few steps further down the stairs. Startled, Molly froze in place as yet another bird went off, replacing the now-silent first clock. She remained motionless until the cacophony of cuckoos had finished.

At her feet, Angus whined. "It's okay," Molly whispered. "It's just our prankster's four calling birds. That's all." She shivered. Except that had only been three birds . . .

She waited, but the hallway was silent.

Concluding that she must've slept through one of the cuckooing birds, she decided to go down to the kitchen. "I bet Laura rigged this," Molly said to Angus. "She's always in before dawn to get the baking started."

As Molly started her descent, a sudden, terrifying screech startled her. With a yelp, she lost her footing and tumbled down the staircase in the dark.