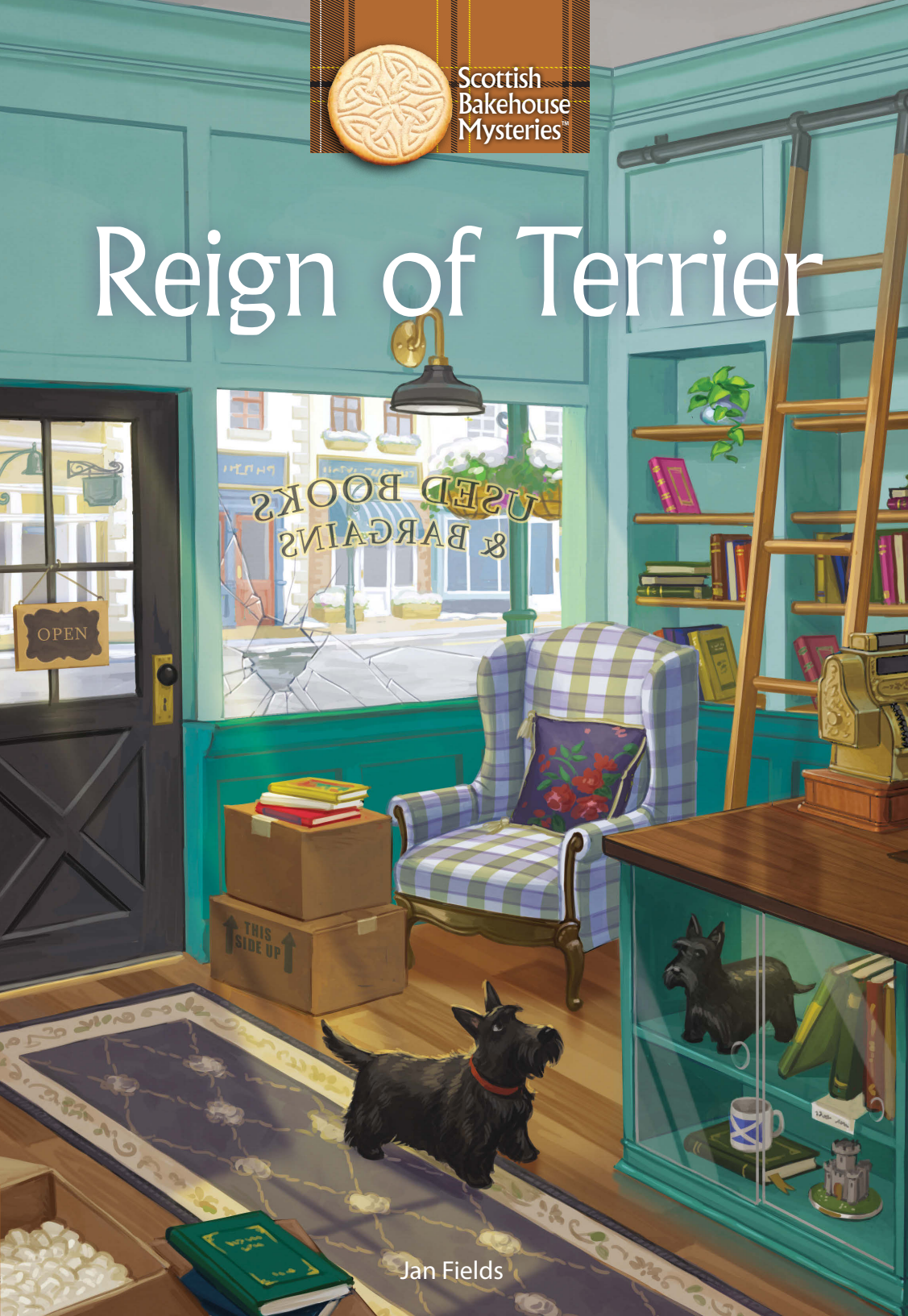




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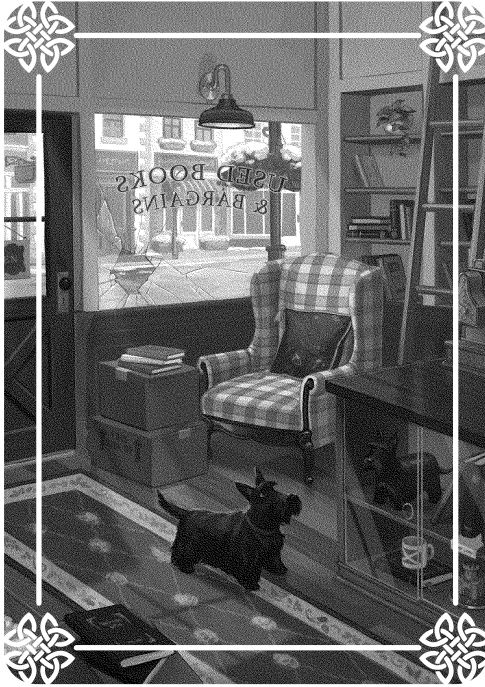
Reign of Terrier



Jan Fields



Reign of Terrier



Jan Fields

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Reign of Terrier

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Series Creator: Shari Lohner

Series Editor: Elizabeth Morrissey

Cover Illustrator: Kelley McMorris

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As Molly Ferris scanned the empty front room of Bread on Arrival, she marveled afresh at how the bakehouse was transformed daily from the lively bustle of morning to the quiet of closing time. Some days the last customers faced closing time reluctantly, nursing a coffee and perhaps a scone, cranachan, or Abernethy biscuit at one of the rustic café tables beside the softly crackling fire in the stone fireplace. Today, the room had actually emptied well before it was time to lock the front door.

As always, the sight of the cozy grouping of tables with their engraved Celtic knots made Molly happy with the choice she had made with her best friends and business partners, Laura Donovan and Carol MacCallan, to open a bakery together. The chairs reminded Molly of the people of Loch Mallaig, Michigan—a little rough, but wearing their background and heritage proudly. The beautiful wood-and-glass displays went well with the tables. They weren't rustic, but they had an aura of well-maintained age that felt right for the old Victorian-turned-bakehouse.

Across the room, Bridget Ross flipped the sign on the door from *Open* to *Closed*, then approached Molly, her face concerned. "I could stay a little longer and help clean up," she offered. "I hate to bail early." The young woman's shoulder-length black hair was pulled into a high ponytail that barely showed off the streak of lavender running through it. Molly thought of it as Bridget's one wild streak.

Though an only child, Bridget Ross was far from the spoiled,

self-indulgent stereotype Molly sometimes heard people grumble about. Of course, Molly's own twentysomething daughter, Chloe, was an only child, and Molly couldn't think of anyone who worked harder. Bridget had been an asset to Bread on Arrival from the day they hired her. She took her part-time job seriously, and the customers adored the pleasant young woman.

Molly came around the counter with Bridget's backpack and heavy raincoat. "Go," she said. "You'll be late for your class if you keep lollygagging around here, especially in this weather." All day, the weather had shifted between snow and icy rain, making any time outside miserable. "I can sweep and wipe tables with no problem. And you said this professor doesn't appreciate latecomers."

Bridget rolled her eyes. "He definitely doesn't. One time, he actually threw chalk at a guy for coming in halfway through a lecture. Who even uses chalk anymore?"

"Then you'd better go," Molly said. "You don't need to duck chalk on our behalf. Have a good class."

Bridget grinned, her normal cheerfulness restored. "If you're sure. I do love these Monday afternoon forensic science lectures. They're fascinating."

Molly opened the door. "Best be on your way then."

Bridget went, while Molly watched her fondly. Working around Bridget's college schedule was never a problem, but sometimes it was clear Bridget worried she was being too demanding. Molly shook her head. *That girl couldn't be demanding if she tried.*

Molly hummed softly under her breath as she walked to the doorway that led from the front of the bakehouse into the back hallway. She'd tucked a broom right behind the doorframe so it would be handy while out of the customer's line of sight.

Laura often said that cleaning was something customers imagined being done by elves in the night, so it was best to keep it out of their

sight. That was something Laura had picked up as head chef of a trendy restaurant in New York. Molly wasn't sure the Loch Mallaig residents were quite as picky as that, but she was happy enough to follow Laura's greater experience.

She had finished sweeping and was carefully wiping down the last of the tables when she heard the scamper of claws on the wood floor. Molly glanced up to see her Scottish terrier, Angus, dashing toward her with Carol right behind him.

"I took out the kitchen trash, and Angus rushed down the outside stairs from the apartment and gave me *the look* from the other side of the fenced yard," Carol said. "You know full well that I'm a sucker for the look. I can't even resist it when my chickens do it."

Molly laughed. She couldn't imagine chickens managing the winsome expression that her Scottie excelled at. "You're a soft touch."

"Maybe." Carol grinned at her. "I'm done cleaning the kitchen, so I'm heading out. Laura should be proud of us. We managed to survive today and Saturday with her gone, even with Valentine's Day looming."

"I'm still not sure Laura wants to hear about how much we didn't need her," Molly said. Laura had taken a rare break to spend the weekend with her family in Marquette. In addition to visiting her parents, now in their seventies, and her brother, Brody, and his family, she was also going to do some shopping and check out a new organic fruit wholesaler. Bread on Arrival bought as much locally grown produce as possible, but February in the Upper Peninsula was not a time for local bounty. "We should probably tell her that we struggled a bit."

"Maybe." Carol pulled her phone from her pocket. "I'd better let Harvey know I'm going to be late since I've got to stop and pick up something for supper. Maisie and Gavin were over a lot this weekend, and the cupboard has a bad case of Old Mother Hubbard. I'm constantly amazed by how much children can eat."

Molly felt the smallest pang at not having anyone who would miss her if she were coming home late, nor a rush of grandkids to eat her out of house and home. But then Angus plopped his warm little body down on one of her feet and gazed up at her expectantly. She knew he was waiting for his dinner and she mentally amended her thoughts. *I always have you, don't I?*

"Ooh, Beverly Scott sent me a text about that new bookstore outside town," Carol said. "What's its name again?"

"The one selling used books?" Molly asked. She struggled to conjure the name for a moment, then it finally popped into her brain. "Books & Bargains."

"Ah yes, that's it. Beverly popped in there on her lunch break and found a book of unusual knitting patterns." Carol held up the phone to show off a photo of a slightly worn book with a beautiful blanket on the cover. "We were talking about this very thing at the last Fair Knitting Ladies meeting."

"It was nice of her to think of you."

Carol nodded and continued reading the text. "She says she put it on hold for me with the owner. She would have bought it for me, but she didn't want to presume I'd want it. I definitely do." She glanced at the time. "And I bet they're still open."

"I've been meaning to check out that bookshop," Molly said. "But it's rather off my beaten path."

"Why don't you come along? If the weather doesn't bother you, that is. I can't believe it's actually raining this time of year instead of snowing. I imagine the blizzard is waiting in the wings."

"Bite your tongue," Molly scolded mildly, but Carol had a point. Living in Michigan's Upper Peninsula meant February was wall-to-wall snow, so the rain had been an unseasonable surprise that no one expected to last.

Carol went on as if she hadn't heard Molly's scolding. "Actually, I'd appreciate having your extra set of eyes in this mess. The roads can be dark early at that end of town with all the trees. I'd ask Harvey, but the conditions are only going to get worse if I waste time driving home first."

"I'm game." Molly glanced down at Angus. "Sorry, dinner will have to wait."

As if he understood, the little dog drooped visibly before aiming his shiny black eyes toward her again.

"Nope," Molly said. "I am immune to the puppy eyes. I promise you won't starve, and I'll give you a little treat before we go."

At the word "treat," Angus perked back up.

"Let me get Angus settled and grab my coat," Molly said. "Then I'll be ready to go."

The new bookshop was in a residential neighborhood outside Loch Mallaig's business district. It was far from the cheery storefronts whose displays mixed the Scottish plaids and bagpipes that heralded the Scottish town's heritage with the moose, bear, and wolf motifs popular throughout the Upper Peninsula.

"Why would anyone put a business out here?" Molly asked as she watched for the address, finding it difficult to see in the rain and early darkness.

"I imagine it'll do fine," Carol replied. As Molly had done, she leaned forward as if closeness to the windshield would help cut through the gloom. "The owner was smart putting the word 'Bargains' in the name of the shop. It'll draw folks like bees to honey. Assuming there actually are bargains. Which we are about to find out." Carol pointed ahead.

They had reached the old farmhouse that now held a bookstore. Molly peered through the windshield at the cold drizzle and hugged

her raincoat around her before hopping out and racing with Carol from the parking lot to the farmhouse's wide front porch.

Once under the shelter of the porch roof, Molly and Carol shook off as much rain as they could. Carol leaned her umbrella against a wicker chair to avoid taking it inside and dripping on the floor. As they went in, a jangle of bells announced them, and a stork-like man with a shock of snow-white hair came around a corner. "May I help you ladies?"

"I'm Carol MacCallan and this is Molly Ferris," Carol said. "We're from Bread on Arrival."

"Ah yes, I've heard your bakehouse has the best scones this side of Scotland," the man said. "I'm afraid I haven't had time to drop in yet. I've been quite busy getting my shop set up."

Molly glanced around the foyer, which had several doorways leading off of it. The cozy farmhouse was a warren of small rooms, perfect for a used bookshop, and she spotted comfy chairs here and there. "It's quite an undertaking, but you've done a wonderful job so far."

The man's smile brightened his otherwise somber face. He held out his hand. "I'm Edgar Richardson. Call me Ed. And welcome to Books & Bargains." They all shook hands, then he peered at Carol. "Carol MacCallan, you said? Beverly Scott asked me to hold a book for you earlier. I have it up at the register."

"Thank you," Carol said. "Though I wouldn't mind poking around a bit before I check out."

"Certainly. You may find more knitting books in the craft section." Ed gestured to a doorway. "Through there and to the right."

"Go ahead, Carol," Molly encouraged. "I'll be happy to browse."

"I'll try not to get lost," Carol said with a grin before following Ed's directions into the next room.

Molly scanned the entryway, which boasted two narrow bookshelves,

both reaching up to the high ceiling. “How does one shop up there?” She pointed toward a high shelf full of books.

“Those are the books that are waiting for a little TLC,” Ed said. “I took some book restoration classes in Detroit as I dreamed of this place. So far, I haven’t had time to get to them, but I will.”

“That’s probably a valuable skill for a used bookseller.” Molly glanced around again. “Is the shop just the downstairs, or do you have retail space upstairs too?”

Ed chuckled. “The second floor isn’t fit for public viewing, I’m afraid. I recommend staying down here unless you want to see the collection of moving boxes that still takes up most of the living area up there. Actually, it’s a lovely apartment . . . or will be when I finally unpack.”

“Well, at least you won’t have a long drive home,” Molly said. “I have the same situation at Bread on Arrival, and it’s very convenient.”

“It was part of the draw when I bought this house.” Ed gestured to an arched doorway. “If you’re not browsing for anything in particular, I’d recommend starting up this way. Follow me.”

Molly trailed him through the arched doorway, then through another room before reaching one filled with cardboard boxes and wooden crates. A few stacks of books surrounded an antique shop counter and equally vintage cash register. In the center of the room was a large table piled with books on stands.

Molly’s gaze swept over the boxes. “Are those full of books?”

“I went to an estate sale and bought the late owner’s whole book collection,” he said, a hint of amusement in his voice. “Practically sight unseen. Now it’s like opening presents from distant relatives. Some are marvelous, and some are rather disappointing. Case in point.” He pulled a small statuette of a hula girl from a box. The tiny dancer wiggled as he set it on a shelf.

Molly chuckled. “One man’s trash . . .”

“Indeed. These boxes are supposed to be all books, but I keep unearthing surprises. I shouldn’t complain, though. I was lucky to find an estate sale this time of year, and I probably wouldn’t have if Lochside Realty hadn’t sold me this place.”

Molly found that remark a little confusing, but brushed it off, eager to explore the shop. She left the owner to his unpacking and wandered through the maze of rooms. Clearly Ed hadn’t done any remodeling on the old farmhouse beyond adding lots of shelves, and the effect was charming. Many of the rooms were small, and Molly would have appreciated them being a little bit brighter, though she could see the house had a lot of windows. During the shop’s normal hours, the windows probably offered sufficient light for browsing and reading. On this rainy late afternoon in February, it made them almost spooky.

Molly walked around another corner and found herself in a medium-size room with windows facing the road. A lovely brick fireplace on one wall had a small gas insert that flickered pleasantly. The glow from the fire offered more light, as did what appeared to be vintage wall sconces. Slightly worn wing chairs clustered around the fire in a cozy, inviting way. Molly thought she’d love to spend some time there with a good book.

The room also included a mishmash of bookshelves, some barely above waist height while others held books well out of Molly’s reach, though none of the shelves were actually floor to ceiling. Along the fireplace’s thin mantel, a row of china cats all stared at Molly.

Edging away from their feline scrutiny, she walked over to peer out one of the large windows, wondering if the rain had let up. With the light behind her, the glare made the window nearly a mirror, so Molly had to lean close to make anything out.

To her absolute shock, what she saw was a man standing near the window and glaring at her, his face contorted with rage. In the gloom beyond the man, a huge, dark, hairy creature crept toward him, and Molly's stomach plummeted.

She slapped her hand against the glass and shouted, "Behind you! It's a bear!"



Molly spun and ran for the door, desperate to get help for the man outside. She ran into Ed Richardson in the hall, and he caught her by the shoulders.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Molly pulled free, still determined to get to the man but unsure of the closest route to reach him. “There’s a bear outside,” she said. “And a man.” She darted around the bookseller, moving toward the foyer . . . or at least that was where she thought she was going.

He followed her, though he didn’t touch her again. “A balding man?” he asked. “Medium height? And was the bear all black?”

Molly froze, baffled by the amusement in his tone. “Yes.”

“That was Myron Webster,” he said. “And the bear was his dog, Bernie. He’s a Newfoundland. In the poor light and the rain, I could see mistaking Bernie for a bear. He’s definitely a big dog.”

“It was a dog?” Molly said weakly as she struggled to reconcile what he was saying versus what she’d believed she had seen through the window. She’d been so sure. Then she reminded herself of how strange it would be to see a bear anywhere in Michigan’s UP in February when they should be tucked away hibernating.

“Yes, ma’am.” Ed smiled slightly. “Myron walks Bernie by the shop a couple times a day so he can glare at me. I don’t know why my bookshop works him up so much, but I’m sure that was Myron you saw.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Carol popped out of

a doorway down the hall and hurried toward them. “Molly, did I hear you shouting?” She raised an eyebrow at Ed. “You should post maps around this place. All the little rooms are confusing.”

“I’ll consider that,” he said agreeably.

“It was a false alarm.” Molly could feel the heat rising in her cheeks about having been so wrong. “I thought I saw a bear outside.”

Carol tapped a finger on her chin thoughtfully. “Well, that wouldn’t be impossible, though not exactly likely in February. Unless the rain fooled it into thinking spring was here already.”

“Maybe,” the bookseller agreed, stretching the word into a drawl. “But in this case, I’m pretty sure it was Bernie.”

“Bernie?” Carol echoed.

“A dog,” Molly admitted.

“A huge dog,” Edgar said supportively.

Molly waved away the effort to mitigate her mistake. “I feel foolish, so can we talk about something else? Did you find something for Maisie and Gavin?” Molly gestured toward the load of picture books tucked in Carol’s arm.

“Oh yes.” Carol showed them the stack of books one by one. Some of them Molly remembered from her own daughter’s childhood, and she knew the seven-year-old twins would enjoy them. “I’m ready to check out.” Carol gestured pointedly at Molly’s empty hands. “Did you not find anything you wanted?”

“I got distracted by the false bear alarm and didn’t do much shopping,” Molly said. “But I enjoyed wandering around. This is a fascinating old house.”

“Thank you,” Ed said. “I feel the same way about it. Let me get you checked out.” He led them to the room with the cardboard boxes.

Molly stood to one side as Carol paid for her books, but she hardly heard Carol’s cheerful chatter about the fun classics she’d found. Molly

was still feeling a little foolish about her mistake. *How could I have thought I was actually witnessing a bear attack?*

She was so deep in her own thoughts that she jumped when Carol squealed her name. Carol thrust both arms into one of the cardboard boxes and pulled out a life-size ceramic sculpture of a Scottish terrier. “This is adorable!” Carol gushed. “It could be Angus’s twin, don’t you think?”

Molly had seen the statue’s head-tilted stance many times in her little dog. “It’s certainly cute.”

“You should buy it.”

Carol thrust the dog into Molly’s hands. The sculpture was a bit heavier than she’d expected. Molly wondered if that was a sign of a better piece of ceramic, one that was poured heavy in the mold. Of course, a life-size dog sculpture probably should have some heft to it. Now that she held it closer, the painted eyes seemed to beg for her attention. “I’m not sure I need two begging Scotties in my life.”

“You could use it for a doorstep,” Ed suggested. “You’d be doing me a favor by taking it off my hands since it’s another of the unexpected bonus items from that estate sale.” He waved a hand around. “I don’t have the shelf space for it.”

Molly laughed. “I’m not sure I do either.”

“It would be adorable sitting next to the fireplace at the bakehouse,” Carol said. “You could tie a bandana around its neck. Customers would love it.”

Molly realized Carol’s idea was a good one. Patrons would probably enjoy the little dog, and since Angus couldn’t hang out in the bakery, it would be a nice tribute to him. “You’re probably right, though I’m not sure I have a scarf that will work. It should be plaid, I think,” Molly said. “A nice Highland tartan.”

“Tartan would be perfect,” Carol agreed.

Molly set the dog on the counter and patted its head before pulling out her credit card. "I'll take it."

"Excellent." Ed suggested a price that was more than reasonable, reassuring Molly that she'd made the right decision. After he'd rung up her purchase, he glanced at her. "If you don't mind, I'd like to add you to our e-mail list. That way you'll get notices of any specials." He picked up a pen and held it over his copy of the receipt, then peered at her expectantly.

"I gave him mine," Carol said.

"Sure." Molly told him her e-mail address, and he wrote it down along with her name and the word *bakery*, probably to help him remember her.

"Do you want me to wrap the dog?" Ed asked as he put the receipt in his cashbox and reached under the counter for paper.

"No, I can carry him." Molly had to admit she was already getting attached to the dog. It must be the strong resemblance to Angus. "And I promise I'll be back to buy books soon."

"You do that," Ed said. "In the meantime, take this one on me." He held out a novel that he'd retrieved from under the counter. "I finished reading it about an hour ago, and I think it's the perfect companion for the little dog. If you enjoy it, I have a few more in the series."

Molly flipped the book over in her hands. The cover was worn and slightly faded, but it featured a smiling man. "What's it about?"

"It's a mystery," Ed said. "You seemed like someone who would enjoy a good whodunit."

"She does," Carol assured him.

Molly raised an eyebrow. "As if you don't?"

"I'll read it after you," Carol offered. "If it's good."

"It is," Ed assured them as he slipped the book into a bag. "The main character plays the bagpipes, so he'd probably approve of this little dog."

“Perfect,” Carol crowed. “Molly plays the bagpipes too.”

Ed raised his thick eyebrows. “Now that I would never have pictured.”

“She didn’t say I played them well,” Molly said. She nudged her friend. “And with that, we should be going. Harvey is going to tell you not to hang out with me anymore if you don’t get home and feed him soon.”

“Oh please,” Carol said with a flap of her hand. “Harvey is perfectly capable of feeding himself. But I am starting to get a little hungry.”

Once again, the bookseller thanked them for coming in and wished them a safe drive home. Molly tucked the book into her purse and hefted the Scottie into her arms before following Carol out into the darkness. To Molly’s surprise, the icy drizzle they’d arrived with had become snowflakes.

“Oh no.” Carol frowned up at the sky. “I hope the road doesn’t get too slick.” Then she snorted. “I used to make fun of people who fretted about driving in the snow, and now I’ve become one of them.”

“You and me both.”

The women walked carefully to the car. The snow had not yet begun to stick, and the steps and pavement didn’t feel slippery under Molly’s feet. She was glad for that, as she had had enough embarrassment for one evening without wiping out in a new business’s parking lot.

As they approached Carol’s car, Molly was startled by movement in her peripheral vision. To her surprise, she saw the same man who’d glared at her through the window, Myron Webster. As Ed had said, the man had a huge dog beside him. Molly felt a fresh wave of embarrassment that she’d confused the shaggy canine with a bear.

“Evening, ladies,” Myron said. The smile he offered with his tip of the head transformed his face. He no longer seemed as dangerous as he had when Molly spotted him through the window. Now he was clearly a pleasant, middle-aged man with a dog.

“Evening,” Molly said, tipping her own head.

“What a beautiful dog,” Carol said, her tone almost teasing. “He reminds me of a bear.”

“A teddy bear maybe.” Myron reached out to pat the dog’s head. “Isn’t that right, Bernie?”

Bernie wagged his tail at the attention.

“You ladies drive carefully now,” Myron said. “I heard the snow is only going to pick up.”

“Thanks. Have a nice evening,” Carol said as she hurried on to the car.

Molly followed her, but continued to sneak peeks at Myron and Bernie. The man had turned to stare at the farmhouse so Molly couldn’t see his face, but his tense stance suggested he might be scowling again. *What an odd man.*

“Molly?” Carol asked, breaking into her thoughts. She already had the driver’s side door open. “Are you coming?”

“Sorry.” Molly hurried to get into the car. “Woolgathering.”

“I thought that was *my* hobby,” Carol said with a laugh.

As she drove, Carol leaned close to the window again, though her concern for the driving conditions didn’t affect her willingness to chat. “I can completely understand why Beverly called me about that book. I’ve never seen another one that covered Fair Isle knitting so comprehensively. It not only has patterns, but stories behind the designs.”

“Beverly made the find of the week, it seems,” Molly said.

“She sure did,” Carol agreed. “Her next order at the bakehouse is on me.”

Molly didn’t linger when Carol pulled up in front of Bread on Arrival. She knew her friend wanted to get home, so she hopped out with the dog statue in her arms. It took some juggling to get the front door open, but Molly managed it without dropping her new purchase.

She eyed the fireplace in the darkened bakery, wondering if she should leave the statue there. However, she didn't want to unveil it until she found a little scarf for its neck, so she decided to keep it upstairs in her apartment until then.

She passed through the bakehouse without flipping on any lights. One bonus of living upstairs was that no one knew the building better than she did. She'd walked through the downstairs rooms in the dark more than once. By the time she reached the steps, she knew Angus had heard her since he was barking from inside the apartment.

"I'm coming," she sang out and the barks stopped.

She shifted the hefty dog statue to one arm as she opened the door. Angus danced around her feet, clearly glad to have her home.

"I love you too," Molly assured the little dog, "but we'll both be happier if you don't trip me." Angus retreated a few feet, then resumed his excited prancing. Molly set the statue down on the apartment floor so she could shrug out of her jacket and hang it up.

At the sight of the statue, Angus stopped his welcome-home ritual and sniffed the imitation dog before growling deep in his throat.

"It's okay, Angus," Molly said. "It's only a decoration."

Angus didn't even glance at her. He'd locked eyes with the statue and continued to growl as the hair rose on his back. Molly worried that Angus would try attacking the statue—that could lead to one or both being damaged, so she scooped the statue up again. Apparently a spot downstairs near the fireplace, where Angus rarely went, was the safest place for the newcomer.

Molly walked to the nearest closet and quickly settled the statue on the top shelf. *I'll get it down when I find a scarf for it, maybe sometime when Angus is out in the yard.*

As soon as she closed the door, Angus stopped growling, though he eyed the closet door with some suspicion.

“It’s okay,” she told him. “Let’s go get some supper.” That grabbed Angus’s full attention. He dashed for the kitchen, leaving Molly chuckling as she followed in his wake. She dropped her purse off on one of the kitchen chairs and felt a thrill when she caught sight of the book tucked inside. *Oh, that’s right. A new book!*

After Molly and Angus finished their supper and took a quick walk in the falling snow, they settled together on the sofa. Pressed against Molly’s side, Angus gave a deep sigh and was asleep within a minute. Molly opened the book with a smile. A cozy seat, a warm puppy, and a new mystery series—how could life get any better? Molly was soon completely engrossed in the exploits of the bagpipe-playing detective and read far later into the night than she should have. *I’ll feel that in the morning*, she thought when she finally headed off to bed. *But it was worth it.*



Tuesday morning broke with the promise of better weather, or at least that was how it seemed to Molly as she peeked out her bedroom window at the crystalline blue skies above Loch Mallaig, the town’s namesake lake. Molly had overslept a little and by the time she was ready to head downstairs, she already heard sounds of movement. Carol and Laura had beaten her to work.

When Molly walked into the bakehouse kitchen, her partners aimed almost identical grins at her. “Morning, sleepyhead,” Carol said. “Up late reading?”

Molly gaped at her in surprise. “How did you know?”

Her friends both laughed. “We’ve all fallen hard for new novels before,” Laura said. “And Carol told me the one you got from the bookstore sounded like a winner.”

“A bagpipe-playing detective?” Carol grinned. “How much more on the nose can a book get?”

“Adair Abernathy, the main character in the book, plays much better than I do,” Molly said as she began prepping the shipping area. With Valentine’s Day close, she knew packing mail orders would be nearly a full-time task. Bread on Arrival sold a surprising amount online, especially around the holidays, and Carol’s decorated cookies were particularly popular right now. “And he’s a detective, which I am not.”

“Sure you’re not,” Carol agreed pleasantly.

Molly narrowed her eyes. She suspected she was being teased, but her friend’s face was the picture of innocence.

“I still need to frost the next batch of cookies and let them set, so you don’t have anything to pack yet,” Carol said.

“I’ll stock the front displays then.” Although not as talented in the kitchen as Carol and Laura, Molly happily filled in wherever needed in the bakehouse. Her greatest gifts came in marketing and publicity, but she also handled much of the office work. She didn’t mind that her skills as a baker weren’t often called upon since her friends never let her doubt the importance of her contributions.

By the time Bridget arrived to open, Molly had all the front displays full again. “How was your class?” she asked.

“Terrific,” Bridget told her with wide-eyed enthusiasm. “My professor is amazing, even if he is kind of cranky. Some of my friends are amazed that I’m not intimidated by the man’s growling, but I work with Hamish Bruce. I am not easily cowed.”

“Good for you!” Like Bridget, Hamish worked part-time, but the two couldn’t have been more different. Where Bridget was enthusiastic about everything, Hamish was a proud curmudgeon who never saw a situation that didn’t warrant at least a little grumbling. The one

trait they both shared was absolute loyalty to their friends, and Molly appreciated them tremendously.

Movement outside the front window drew Molly's attention, and she saw two Loch Mallaig police officers heading for the bakery door. Since the sign on the door was still flipped to *Closed*, Molly expected the police officers to simply stand and chat as they waited for the bakery to open. Instead, there was a firm rap on the doorframe.

Bridget spun around to face the door. "Someone's here early."

"It's two police officers," Molly said. "And I'm pretty sure one of them is Greer Anderson. You'd best let them in."

"Police officers?" Bridget raised her dark brows before heading to the door to let them in.

Greer Anderson entered first, followed by another officer that Molly recognized as well, Michael Drummond. In her early thirties, Greer was substantially younger than Molly, but they'd become friendly, mostly from their time in the local bagpiping group The Piping Yoopers.

Although short and blonde like Molly, Greer had a more athletic build and a steady nature. Officer Drummond wasn't easy to rattle either. He was a few years older than Greer, nearing forty in fact, with the fair skin and dark red hair that was common in Loch Mallaig.

"Good morning." Molly noted the professional way both of them scanned the room. "What brings you by so early?"

"Molly," Greer said. "We need to speak to you and Carol."

"Is something wrong?" Molly asked, a sudden tightness in her chest. For an instant, her mind flashed to her daughter. *Is Chloe all right?* But then reason pushed the idea aside. They wouldn't want to talk to Carol if it involved Chloe.

"It would be best if we spoke to you and Carol at the same time so we don't need to repeat ourselves." Greer's voice was professional

and serious. Molly found her tone disconcerting, since she and the officer had shared coffee and laughter together here in the bakery so many times.

“I’ll get Carol,” Bridget offered before practically running for the kitchen.

“I’m happy to speak to you about whatever you need,” Molly said. “But can you give me some idea of what’s wrong?” If they weren’t in the building right now, Molly would think there must be some problem with the bakehouse, but that didn’t make any sense. With all the logical guesses discarded, Molly felt completely clueless.

Carol walked into the front room and Molly caught sight of Laura lingering in the doorway leading toward the kitchen. “Can I help you?” Carol asked.

“Were you and Molly at Books & Bargains last night?” Greer asked.

“Yes,” Carol said. “We went right after work so I could buy a knitting book.”

“Has something happened to the shop?” For some odd reason, the image of the scowling man and the bear that Molly had seen through a window came back to her. But she knew what she’d seen wasn’t a bear. What was going on?

“The owner, Edgar Richardson,” Greer said. “Did you see him?”

“Yes, of course,” Carol answered. “He sold me the book. He seems nice.”

“He was unpacking boxes from an estate sale,” Molly volunteered, though she felt silly immediately after saying it. What difference could that make? “Is he all right?”

For an instant, Greer’s professional demeanor broke and her expression grew sad. “No, I’m afraid not. Edgar Richardson is dead.”

Molly thought of the genial bookseller and felt her eyes fill with mournful tears. He was so nice. At a guess, she would have put him

around seventy, but he certainly hadn't appeared sick or frail, though maybe a little thin. "He seemed okay when we spoke with him. Was it a heart attack or something?"

"No." Officer Drummond gazed solemnly at them. "We can't be altogether sure, but the signs point to murder."