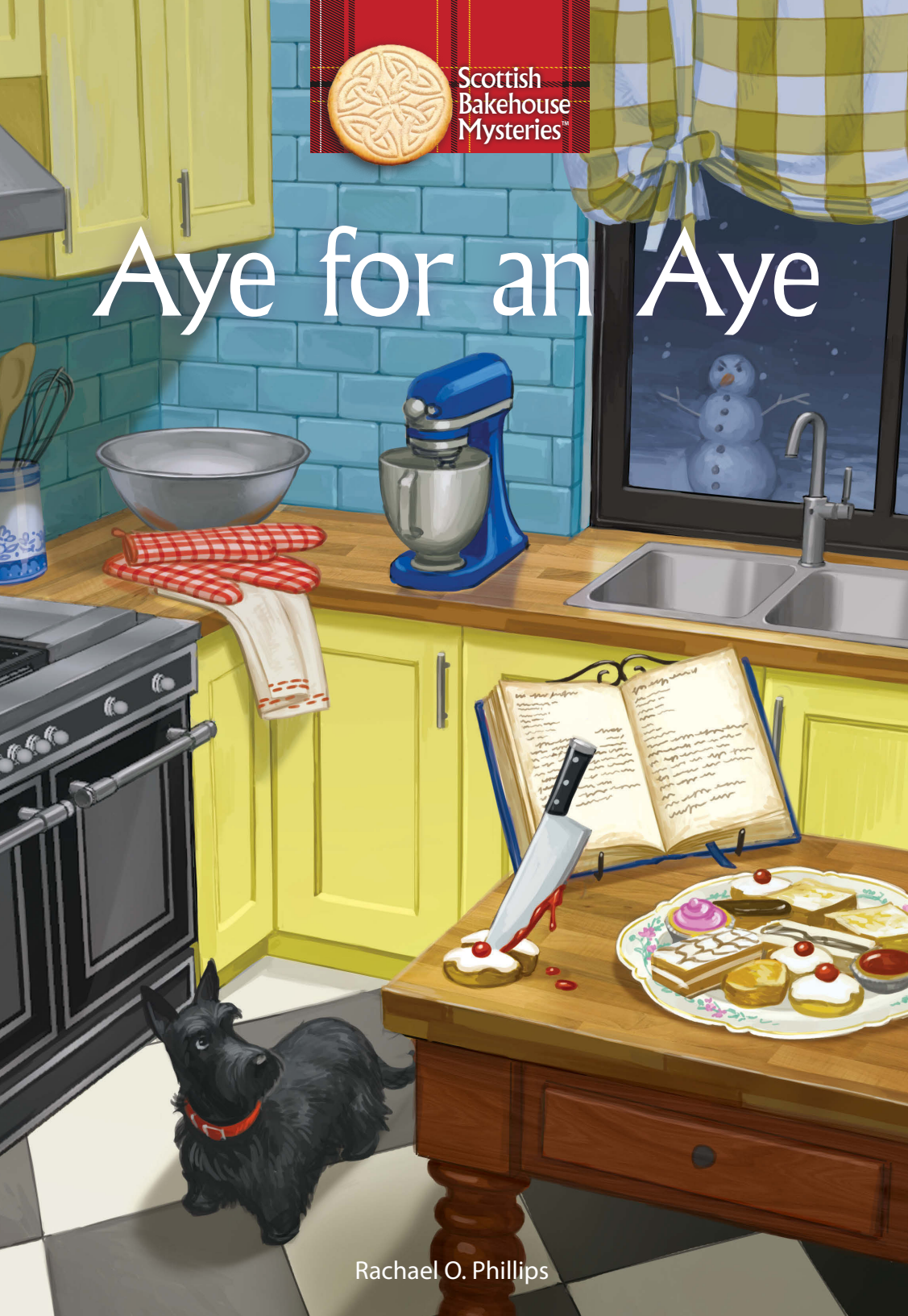




Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries™

Aye for an Aye



Rachael O. Phillips



Aye for an Aye



Rachael O. Phillips

Annie's[®]
AnniesFiction.com

Books in the Scottish Bakehouse Mysteries series

The Jig Is Up
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
Reign of Terrier
Aye for an Aye
From Plaid to Worse
Quill the Messenger
Under Loch and Key
Paying the Piper

... and more to come!

Aye for an Aye

Copyright © 2020 Annie's.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews. For information address Annie's, 306 East Parr Road, Berne, Indiana 46711-1138.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

Library of Congress-in-Publication Data

Aye for an Aye / by Rachael O. Phillips

p. cm.

I. Title

2020943311

AnniesFiction.com

(800) 282-6643

Scottish Bakehouse Mysteries™

Series Creator: Shari Lohner

Series Editor: Elizabeth Morrissey

Cover Illustrator: Kelley McMorris

10 11 12 13 14 | Printed in China | 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



“Hold on!” Neil MacGregor called as the sleigh he drove whipped around yet another sharp, snowy curve.

Laura Donovan, who often bristled at being told what to do, readily obeyed. “Neil, are you crazy?” she shouted over her friends’ shrieks.

Apparently Neil and the big horses drawing the vintage sleigh interpreted their cries as encouragement. They sped even faster through the Castleglen resort’s snowdrift-covered golf course.

When Laura glanced behind them, the sleigh’s tracks in the snow reminded her of buttercream curlicues she drew on cupcakes in the Scottish bakehouse she co-owned with Molly Ferris and Carol MacCallan—both of whom were risking their lives right alongside her in Neil’s sleigh.

She didn’t fear for her safety when she was whipping up scones and bannocks in Bread on Arrival’s warm, cheerful kitchen. But it also lacked quite this much excitement, even during their busiest rushes.

As the sleigh skated and leaped, Laura gripped the seat with one hand and Carol’s arm with the other. Laura prayed they’d survive the ride. That was, if God could hear her pleas over the manic jangling of the horses’ bells.

Having grown up in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula and moved back in her early fifties, Laura loved snow, and she’d readily agreed to the sleigh ride. She hadn’t agreed to put her life in danger, however, as seemed to be the case with Neil guiding the sleigh toward the lakeside cliffs that bordered the golf course.

Neil wouldn't drive too near the edge, would he?

On this Sunday afternoon ride, their friend Fergus's otherwise levelheaded son seemed to have lost his senses. The approaching panorama of glittering, icy lake under blue sky had taken away Laura's breath before, but hurtling toward it at breakneck speed added a thrill of adrenaline to the experience.

Her gaze moved across the sleigh to her other partner, Molly, who was seated beside Fergus. Laura was tickled by their grins and hoots of delight. She nudged Carol and nodded toward Molly and Fergus.

Carol smirked and whispered in Laura's ear, "Just friends, my foot." This was Molly's standard defense whenever Laura and Carol teased their long-widowed friend about the amiably divorced Fergus.

Laura managed to hide a chuckle by clapping a mittened hand over her mouth.

Fergus noticed the movement and seemed to mistake it for one of fear. He tugged on Neil's coat and said something inaudible over the bells and the pounding of hooves. Neil immediately pulled back on the reins, and the horses slowed from a dead run to cantering, to trotting, then to a stop a few yards from the drop.

While Laura struggled with the inertia from the change in speed, Neil jumped out and flung blankets over the horses' sweating backs. Then he lifted his arms as if to embrace the diamond-encrusted scene far below.

"Awesome." Neil shook his head. "God really outdid Himself today."

Mollified somewhat by his reverent tone, Laura joined Fergus, Molly, and Carol as they all clambered from the sleigh and shared the view. Laura felt a frisson of envy that both Neil and Fergus, whose family had owned and run the Loch Mallaig, Michigan, resort for decades, could claim this spot as their own.

Neil flashed Laura a grin. "Ride a little much for you, Laura?"

She gave a haughty sniff, knowing the twinkle in her eyes belied it. “You should have more respect for your elders, young man. We’re delicate, you know. Compared to you, taxi drivers in New York City are snails.” Having lived there for years working as the head chef at a trendy Manhattan restaurant, Laura had never thought she’d say that.

“But I thought you said that March lasts forever here,” he teased. “That you needed a little excitement in your life.”

Laura snorted. “Remind me never to say that again, at least not where you can hear it.”

“All right, you two. Enough bickering.” Carol, a retired high school math teacher, assumed her usual role as voice of reason. “First, thank you, Neil, for taking the time to give us a fun ride. However . . .”

“However,” Molly said, picking up where Carol had trailed off, “please try not to break the sound barrier on the ride back.”

“Yeah,” Laura agreed. “One of the reasons I moved here was to slow down.”

“I promise to make the return trip as boring as possible.” Neil bowed deeply, then went on in a sincere tone. “Sorry if I scared you, Laura, but I thought some fun would cheer you up.”

“We’re forever at your service, ladies.” Fergus echoed his son’s gracious bow.

“Of course you are,” Laura said wryly. Granted, it was true. A year ago, Fergus had helped Molly, Carol, and her—now known around Loch Mallaig as the Bakehouse Three—find the old funeral home they’d converted into Bread on Arrival.

Tugging on her parka’s hem, Laura dipped in a curtsy. “I, too, thank you for past and present service. With that in mind, my gentle companions and I anticipate arriving back at the lodge in one piece.”

“The horses probably agree with you.” Fergus helped Neil remove

their blankets. “We’d better start back soon, though, especially if we’re going to slow down.”

“I need to get back before sunset.” Neil’s smile dimmed a little. “Can’t leave the restaurant too long.” As part of his duties as Fergus’s right-hand man, Neil managed King’s Heid Pub at the golf resort.

With the reduced pace, Laura relaxed as the sleigh took a straighter, more leisurely route. Now she appreciated the silvery scenery, washed with gold by the sinking sun. Blue shadows lengthened, then deepened as the sleigh traveled the last stretch back to the resort’s main building. Castleglen’s lodge, with its many gables and tall, lighted windows, offered a warm welcome through the growing twilight.

Neil’s earlier craziness had admittedly jolted her out of the long-winter doldrums—and made her forget, temporarily, the imminent anniversary of her beloved grandmother’s death, which loomed like a dark cloud in her heart.

Keeping thoughts of the sad occasion at bay, she smiled brightly and announced, “Don’t forget we’re having supper at my house.” Her stomach rumbled, and she was glad that the beef-and-mushroom stew she’d slow cooked all day would need only tasting and a final seasoning before it was ready.

“I wish I could come.” Neil pulled up to the back door, where he regretfully handed the reins to Fergus.

“We’ll miss you, but my husband will gladly take your place,” Carol said. “Laura’s cooking will definitely hit the spot for Harvey after he gets back from ice fishing.”

A short while later, the tired group reunited, minus Neil but with the addition of jovial Harvey. They gathered around the dining table at Laura’s stone crofter’s cottage to eat Sunday supper together.

“Delicious,” Carol enthused. “The stew’s perfect with your herb bread.”

During dessert, raves also accompanied Laura's cranberry pecan pie, the crust of which came from her grandmother's cookbook. Laura glanced toward the living room, where the faded blue heirloom, with its yellowed, pasted and handwritten recipes, sat in its place of honor on a high shelf filled with family photos. Nana would have loved this gathering, so like the hundreds she'd hosted.

So many memories of Nana evoked melancholy in Laura's eyes and heart. Instead, this fun evening had brought a smile.



Unfortunately, Laura's happiness didn't last. With more snow the next morning and a major storm threat all day Monday, her winter doldrums returned.

"Tell me again why we didn't open our bakehouse in Hawaii." Laura paused while spreading frosting on a pan of cinnamon rolls to wave a threatening spatula at the fresh snowflakes floating outside Bread on Arrival's kitchen windows. "If one more inch of snow falls out there—"

"It will cover the dirt on the last batch and make it pretty again," Carol finished.

"Not what I need on a Monday morning." Laura hunched her shoulders in the thick-knit fisherman sweater she wore under her chef's coat, hoping she could disappear into the warm depths.

"C'mon, don't hibernate. You grew up in the UP. You love it here." Molly gave Laura an encouraging nudge with her shoulder as she crossed the kitchen.

"Besides," Carol coaxed, "isn't Loch Mallaig better than Manhattan in March?"

"True. The Big Apple is more like the Big Slushy this time of year." Although she'd loved living in NYC, Laura didn't miss its

infinite dingy streets or, at this point in her life, its nonstop pace. Their picturesque little Scottish town certainly did outshine her former home in many ways. “It is lovely here. But winter seems to stretch on forever and ever.”

“Maybe you need another sleigh ride to liven things up?” Carol teased.

“No thank you.” Laura laughed, then returned to her cinnamon rolls.

“The community game night we’re hosting here tomorrow ought to cheer you up,” Molly said brightly. “Plus there’s our first anniversary celebration coming up. We’d better start planning that.” She snapped her fingers. “Speaking of Hawaii, what if we held a luau? You’re not the only one in town who’s sick of snow. I bet everyone would love it.”

Carol hummed appreciatively. “Sounds wonderful to me. Harvey and I even have matching shirts from a themed birthday party he threw me when I turned twenty-nine. Again.”

“You don’t look a day older than that,” Molly told her with a wink. “So Laura, if you want to transport your brain to Hawaii, you can help brainstorm what we’re serving.”

Laura smiled. Maybe a luau wasn’t an obvious choice for a Scottish bakehouse’s first anniversary party, but Molly’s previous experience as an event planner had made her Bread on Arrival’s marketing guru. If she thought a luau was the way to go, Laura was on board. “I’m sure I can come up with plenty of bite-size coconut- and pineapple-inspired treats.”

“I’m sure you can.” Molly grinned. “Any thoughts on decor?”

Ordinarily, imaginative Laura would have jumped at the chance to brainstorm creative decorations for a party. Right now, though, transforming their big Victorian house and snow-laden yard into anything resembling the tropics sounded like *Mission: Impossible*.

“Maybe it should be less elaborate this time.”

Carol and Molly stared at her, then at each other. Ignoring them, Laura slapped more frosting on the cinnamon rolls.

“I know what you need.” Uh-oh. Carol was using her take-charge voice.

“Of course you do.” Laura rolled her eyes heavenward. Unfortunately, she couldn’t argue that Carol usually knew what was best.

Carol grabbed Laura’s spatula. “I’ll finish this. You need to work on new recipes.”

“Carol’s absolutely right.” Molly pointed toward the bookshelf containing a handful of volumes from Laura’s enormous collection of cookbooks. “We’ve been so busy that you haven’t gotten to experiment in ages. Now’s the perfect time. Dig in.”

“Surprise us.” Carol gave Laura a little push.

“Creativity on command? That’s a recipe for success.” Laura added more than a pinch of sarcasm to her tone. Nevertheless, her fingers tingled as she reached for the new hors d’oeuvres cookbook she hadn’t had time to open. Reading others’ recipes often nudged her into new cooking frontiers. Laura scanned the book’s table of contents. Her mouth began watering as she reached the list of summer recipes. Mango scallops and chicken. Grilled pineapple and melon salad. Crab deviled eggs.

Suddenly, sunshine broke through thick, gray clouds outside the kitchen windows, defying weather predictions. Playing with recipes in her head, Laura could almost hear the mellow twang of steel guitars and feel a tropical breeze.

She didn’t recall sitting down at the table where they took lunch breaks. But when Carol, wearing a pleased smile, brought tea in Laura’s favorite mug, she realized she’d been sitting and scribbling notes about luau possibilities for quite some time.



Leave it to Molly to bring together Loch Mallaig's liveliest citizens—or at least those suffering most from winter boredom—for a community game night in Bread on Arrival's café area, and on a Tuesday. Along with the sweet, homey scent of fresh-baked breads and cookies, the fragrance of coffees, teas, and hot chocolate warmed the main room almost as much as the crackle of flames in the huge stone fireplace.

As a precursor to the actual games, discounted baked goods were being offered during a happy hour of sorts, and a continuous line at the front counter kept the partners hopping. They were assisted by their lovably gruff handyman and part-time helper, Hamish Bruce, whose family had shown up in force.

Hamish was joined by his wife, Joyce, and their son, Logan. Logan had brought his wife, Tanya, and their four adorable redheaded daughters ranging from toddler to school-age. The Bruces were only a few of the many townsfolk filling the café. Locals such as pharmacist Cameron MacPhee, who owned MacPhee's Family Drugstore, and Beverly Scott, the real estate agent who had sold the Bakehouse Three their building, seemed to welcome a chance to mix with friends and acquaintances they hadn't seen much in these dreary winter months.

Reverend Stuart Findlay and his wife, Bonnie, took advantage of the evening's sale prices to buy a red velvet cake. "I could eat this whole thing in one night," the pastor joked as Laura boxed up the cake. He raised his eyebrows toward Bonnie. "Why don't we have Laura deliver a few dozen? She might need a special vehicle for that, though."

Along with most of Loch Mallaig, Reverend Findlay knew that Laura had originally had strong feelings about their delivery vehicle, a

1939 LaSalle hearse that had accompanied the funeral home purchase. She took the reverend's teasing in good grace, though. "You know perfectly well that I do my best to avoid driving that creepy old car, Reverend Findlay."

"He also knows this *one* cake will go into the freezer until our daughter and granddaughter visit," Bonnie said. "A few dozen? Only in his dreams."

They all laughed and joked a bit more, and Laura felt a surge of gratitude that she'd come to call Loch Mallaig home, that its wonderful residents were her friends and neighbors.

As the Findlays finally moved away, Laura realized Marci and Oliver Fitzgerald, owners of the town's remaining funeral parlor, had been in line behind them. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Thought I'd die of old age before I got my cream puffs," Oliver quipped. His quirky grin indicated he wasn't bothered, and Marci shrugged off the delay as well.

"We'll eat the cream puffs here," Marci said, "but would you mind boxing up an assortment of cookies to go? Oliver's cousin is visiting, and I'm afraid I don't know what he'd like."

"I'm sorry he didn't join you tonight," Laura said. "He would have been quite welcome."

Oliver's grin tightened. "He's a bit of a homebody."

"Many of us are in the winter, aren't we?" Laura chuckled. "It's lovely to see you two, at least."

As she gathered the couple's order for them, Laura fleetingly wondered why the Fitzgeralds hadn't joined her chat with the Findlays. She didn't have time to mull that over for long, however, because the bell on the front door jangled a continuous announcement of arriving customers. Business remained brisk as folks bought up Scottish treats like Selkirk bannock and oatcakes, as well as shortbread, Abernethy

biscuits, and snowballs filled with jam and rolled in coconut. Loch Mallaig had been founded by Scottish immigrants in the early 1800s, and its residents maintained their ancestors' tether to the old world—especially to the country's culinary traditions.

To Laura's surprise, fishermen and farmers from surrounding areas showed up, as well as several elderly members of the Loch Mallaig community. Vernon Pennycook, a crotchety fisherman who owned The Auld Crabbit bait shop, came, as did Laura's landlords, Alastair Thomson and his sweet, talkative wife, Jane.

"Great to see you all," Laura called to them. "I'm glad you could come out on such a snowy night."

"We wouldn't have missed it," Alastair said. "We're tough up here in the UP. Cave in to a little snow? No way."

"Aye." Vernon stuck out his grizzled chin. "Never did let weather bother me. Won't let it now. I walk the shore every day, makin' sure no hooligans are about, troublin' our town."

"Well, we're happy to have you here tonight." Laura offered the territorial old man a deck of cards. "Are you feeling lucky this evening?" She gestured toward Fergus, who had volunteered to run a game table. "I believe Fergus is hoping for more Euchre players."

Vernon's blue eyes gleamed, as did those of several customers around him. Before long, four tables of players were slapping down cards, groaning, and laughing.

Without a line at the counter, Laura did a sweep of the café to clear away any used plates and napkins. She paused at another Euchre table that included Harvey, the Findlays, and a scholarly-looking man she didn't recognize.

"Everyone having fun?" Laura fixed a smile on the stranger, who appeared to be in his late fifties. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Laura Donovan."

“Ken Bronson,” he answered, his neat brown mustache twitching with the hint of a shy smile. “I just moved to town.”

“And he insists he’s not a good Euchre player,” Harvey added, then chuckled. “But I never believe guys who say that.”

“Believe it.” Ken’s face remained solemn, but his eyes twinkled. “I always have rotten luck at cards.”

“We trust you wouldn’t fib to a minister.” Reverend Findlay grinned as he motioned to his wife to join them. “Come on, Bonnie, here’s our chance to win big.”

Glad to see a newcomer being welcomed as graciously as she herself had been, Laura wished them all luck and moved on to another table, this one headed up by Hamish. The participants here were playing Maw, a Gaelic game popularized centuries earlier. Laura assumed that Hamish, who claimed Robert the Bruce as his ancestor, would keep everyone on track with his astute knowledge of the rules—one of the seemingly endless array of topics he was well versed in.

Younger players, mostly in their twenties, teamed up for newer Scottish games such as Haggis, named after the national dish, and Lords of Scotland, in which competitors battled furiously to win the Scottish throne. Neil was among the participants, as were a handful of students from Superior Bay College.

Rounding out the crowd was a boisterous group of parents and children playing Candy Land, Chutes and Ladders, and other classic games borrowed from Carol’s daughter and son-in-law, Jenny and Craig Gilmore. The couple’s seven-year-old twins, Maisie and Gavin, were currently battling Courtney and Alannah Bruce in a game of Hungry Hungry Hippos.

“Molly aced it with this idea,” Laura said to Carol as she returned to the front counter to assess what needed to be restocked. “Even the losers are having fun.”

Carol started to respond, but as the front door bell jingled, she stopped short. Her expression soured as she took in the new arrival.

Laura lifted her gaze, and her joy at the evening's success curdled. The last person she wanted to see had strolled into the bakehouse.



Even before he removed his wool peacoat, fortysomething Gabe Marchand, King's Heid Pub's head chef, was scanning the crowd with dark, smoldering eyes, his gaze flitting from woman to woman.

When Gabe's wandering glance rested on Laura, she tried not to grit her teeth. Gabe had been one of a few qualified applicants when his predecessor quit. He was an exceptional chef, Neil said. In Laura's experience, however, that didn't mean he was a good person.

Before Laura could move, police department receptionist, longtime widow, and Loch Mallaig gossip queen Wilma Guthrie stopped chatting on her cell phone long enough to intercept Gabe—or try anyway. She tossed her high-teased red hair and offered a flirty smile. Despite her calling his name, however, Gabe ignored her entirely and strutted toward the counter. Apparently Wilma wasn't his type, and her face fell at his rude dismissal.

Carol immediately stepped in front of Laura and muttered, "Go to the kitchen."

Laura didn't argue. She darted through the door toward the stainless steel sink full of dirty dishes. Though she might have enjoyed telling Gabe what she thought of him to his face, here she could mutter every word without half of Loch Mallaig hearing her.

Gabe *was* strikingly attractive, she admitted as she plunged her hands into soapy water. He could have been the poster boy for tall, dark, and handsome. At that Christmas party last December, his flashing smile had melted every woman in the room, though he'd focused its attention on Laura.

Learning of their mutual interest in cooking, Laura had hoped they might hit it off. And they had—for the first two minutes. The following eight minutes had felt like an eternity, during which she was forced to endure his revolting arrogance before making her escape. Yet even though she'd contradicted every insensitive, insulting, and clueless thing he'd said—tactfully at first, but with increasing bluntness—he still seemed to believe at the end of their conversation that she'd be interested in a date. Her response was a firm, "Absolutely not."

And that hadn't changed. She'd rather scrub greasy pans all night than spend it fending off his massively overinflated ego, which came complete with an utter disregard for anything Laura might contribute to the conversation.

Listening to Carol in action through the kitchen door, Laura chuckled. She could picture her friend. Polite. Smiling. Icy as the UP itself as she told Gabe Laura was *very* busy in the kitchen and couldn't talk.

Sneaking to the doorway to spy, Laura watched his dark head move toward the seating area. She doubted the games Gabe wanted to play included Scrabble or Euchre. Hopefully other women, having witnessed his rudeness to Wilma or heard about his reputation, would brush him off, and he'd eat his chocolate éclair at home. Alone.

Assuming that would be the case, Laura returned to her dishes. Before long, Carol slipped back to the kitchen, a wicked expression on her face. She lowered her voice. "All clear. I haven't seen Gabe for a while. He must have taken the hint."

"That was more than a hint," Molly said wryly as she joined them. "You all but tossed him out the door."

"Now that's something I'd like to see." The thought warmed Laura all over.

Carol's mouth twisted. "When he sat down at Bridget's Scrabble table, I almost did."

Laura steamed at the idea of Gabe hitting on their part-time counter girl and her college-age friends. Thinking about it, however, she said, "I imagine Bridget could handle him."

"She didn't have to." Molly, blue eyes twinkling, lowered her voice to a whisper. "Hamish got a sudden urge to play Scrabble too."

If Carol had iced Gabe's intentions, Hamish was an arctic freeze. Gabe might not thaw until June.

Laughter bubbled up from Laura's toes at that thought, and she and her partners clung to each other, cackling.

"Hush," Carol ordered, then smothered a fresh bout of giggles. When she finally calmed down, a tinge of guilt colored her whisper. "I suppose it's not fair to assume Gabe's nothing but a womanizer. He's only lived here six months. We should give him a chance."

"Why?" Laura demanded. "When I see a skunk, I know it stinks."

"I have heard he's been spending time with Robin Willis, the Castleglen office manager," Molly said. "But who knows what 'dating' means to a guy like Gabe?" She grimaced. "Neil didn't seem happy to see him either. I don't think they're meshing at work. Even the Findlays gave him a *look*, and they get along with everybody."

The customer bell on the front counter sounded, interrupting their conversation. Molly hurried out, and Carol ducked into the walk-in refrigerator to retrieve more cupcakes.

Realizing she hadn't completed the task she'd been doing when she had headed for the hills, Laura refilled a tray with Scottish treats and headed for the display cases. Plump raspberry buns and Empire biscuits frosted and topped with a cherry typically outsold the miniature clottie dumplings, which were traditional boiled puddings with brown crusts. Customers with deep Scottish roots, however, delighted in the dumplings.

Mr. MacDougal, who was eighty if he was a day, purchased several to take home. “As tasty as my mum’s. Almost.” He winked. “Thank you, lass.”

Such smiles made Laura’s day. “You’re very wel—”

Her response stuck in her throat. Gabe stood behind the elderly gentleman, his toothy smile making her stomach churn. Apparently he hadn’t left like Carol thought. Had he been hiding in the bathroom?

She hoped Mr. MacDougal would linger, but with a jaunty touch to his woolen cap, he made his way to the door.

Gabe stepped forward and swept his arm to indicate the room, the case’s contents, and Laura in one gallant gesture. “Beautiful place you have here. Run by a beautiful woman.”

Laura could see Wilma watching them from the other end of the room, which did nothing to ease her discomfort. “Thank you,” she said shortly, her gaze fixed on the neat rows of lemon, blueberry, and almond scones inside the display case.

“I’ve wanted to continue our first conversation for a while now.” He leaned forward. “It’s rare to find a woman who shares my interest in fine cuisine. You know, I actually stopped by your home earlier to—”

Revolted by the realization that Gabe knew where she lived, Laura took a step back. “May I get you something *to eat*?”

“I already ate an éclair.” He shrugged. “It was fine. The filling was a little runny. I always bring my eggs to room temperature when I whip—”

Laura bristled. “Did you buy one to take home to Robin?” She wasn’t about to let him hit on her then insult her éclairs. Her *perfect éclairs*.

Gabe’s face froze in an expression she couldn’t read. A moment later he flashed her that white smile. “I don’t think I need to try anything else here tonight.” He winked, then disappeared into the crowd before the bell on the door celebrated his departure.

How had she ever been attracted to him, even for a minute? Fueled by mortification, Laura began washing service areas behind the counter, a prelude to closing.

Hamish arrived at her side and patted her hand. “You needna scrub so hard, lass.” In a lower tone he said, “Only God Almighty can wash the blather from that lad’s mouth. And even He might need a whole crock of my grannie’s lye soap.”

Laura had to laugh. “Perhaps you can make Him some.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Hamish intoned, but even as he grinned, his steely eyes glinted.

After ushering out the remaining revelers and locking the door behind them, they began cleaning in earnest. While Laura floated between front and back of house, Carol tackled the kitchen with the help of Neil, Harvey, and Ken Bronson, who, in a pleasant surprise, had felt welcome enough to stay behind to assist his new friends.

“You folks must be magic,” Ken said, grabbing a towel to start drying the metal trays Harvey was washing. “I can’t remember the last time I won at cards.”

“Oh sure,” Reverend Findlay teased as he and Bonnie headed for the front to retrieve another batch of dirty dishes. “I knew all that bad-luck talk was a smoke screen.”

Once the tables were cleared, the Findlays collected trash and wiped down tables in the big front room while Molly and Joyce covered leftover baked goods and cleaned cases. The Bruces’ daughter-in-law, Tanya, took their girls home, but Logan stayed to help his father. Together he and Hamish shoveled new snow off the bakehouse’s wraparound porch and sidewalks. Once done in the kitchen, Harvey and Ken joined them in clearing the driveway so the next morning’s accumulation would require less work.

With everything else cleaned up, Laura carried the empty coffee

and hot chocolate carafes to the kitchen sink. “For you, Carol. Because I love you.”

“You’re *so* sweet.” Carol elbowed her. “Just for that, you can dry.”

“My pleasure.” Laura grabbed a fresh towel without a second thought. Though they’d played hard during college and still did, she, Carol, and Molly had always shared the same work ethic. After only a year, their bakehouse was going strong.

Molly buzzed into the kitchen, a smile on her face. “Other than Gabe Marchand darkening our doorstep with his smoldering ego, I thought our first community game night went well.”

Laura began wiping down prep tables, her mood tarnished by the mention of that man. “Everyone seemed to think so. Except Wilma.” She frowned. “Even if she’s not Gabe’s type, he shouldn’t have completely ignored her. Talk about rude.”

“I won’t argue with that,” Carol said. “I wonder if she’d be interested in that Ken Bronson fellow. Harvey said he’s recently widowed and retired. Seems stable.”

“More stable than Gabe, that’s for sure,” Molly noted. “But maybe not quite as exciting. In the long run, Gabe did her a favor. She’ll avoid him forever.”

“I wish I could,” Laura grumbled. “Do you think Fergus would notice if I never ate at King’s Heid Pub again?”

“He might.” Molly went to the stove and began preparing fresh hot chocolate for the men shoveling snow. “You have to admit Gabe is awfully handsome.”

“More like awfully awful,” Laura grunted. “Did I tell you that in the one conversation we had, he managed to insult my favorite outfit, the restaurant I worked at in Manhattan—which is Michelin-starred, I might add—and my nana’s best recipe?”

“You did,” Carol said.

“And tonight he had the nerve to imply the pastry cream in my éclairs was runny.” Laura felt a hint of satisfaction at the horror on Molly’s face.

Carol shrugged. “Maybe he’s one of those guys who never says the right thing off the bat, or hides insecurities with bluster. It could be worth a second chance.”

Laura thumped the prep table. “If you have such a soft spot for him, why don’t you go out with him?”

Molly’s grimace deepened, and Carol shook her head. “I don’t think Harvey would like that.”

“What wouldn’t Harvey like?” The man in question stuck his head inside the kitchen door.

Carol raised an eyebrow at her husband. “My dating Gabe Marchand.”

“I thought you had better taste than that,” Harvey said.

“Certainly Carol has excellent taste in men.” Hamish set down the trash cans he’d emptied. “I trust Laura and Molly do too, enough to avoid that—”

“Enough.” Laura stopped her ears. “I’m tired of talking about Gabe Marchand. I’m tired, period. We had a great evening. Let’s leave it at that. I’d like to finish up and go home.”

Laura’s friends exchanged quizzical glances, then Molly announced that she’d made hot chocolate and ushered everyone out to the café to serve them.

Remaining behind, Laura felt heat in her cheeks as she laid out plans and utensils for tomorrow’s baking. Why had she made such a big deal over Gabe? She’d dealt with plenty of obnoxious guys in New York. She’d handle him too if he dared approach her again.

Despite her resolution, a rebel tear surprised Laura when she tried to don her parka. She felt blindly for her coat zipper.

Coming up behind her, Carol whispered, “I know it’s a tough time for you.”

Molly, who stood beside Carol, fixed a gentle, knowing gaze on Laura. “What can we do?”

Laura bit her lip. “It’s been two years. I’m being silly.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re over losing your nana,” Molly said, putting a sympathetic arm around Laura’s shoulders. “Not getting over a lifetime of love in two short years is not silly.”

Carol joined the embrace. “If it will make you feel better, we’ll put up an unwanted poster banning Gabe from the bakehouse.”

Laura couldn’t help but laugh. “That might actually make me feel better.”

“What are friends for?” Molly said cheerfully.

“I appreciate the offer,” Laura said. “But I can handle Gabe.”

“Of course you can.” Carol gave a reassuring squeeze. “Why don’t you go home this weekend? Molly and I will handle things here. You can spend this time with your family.”

Laura bit her lip and shook her head. Two weeks earlier, she’d written a guest post for a friend’s blog about her grandmother’s cookbook, thinking that sharing the emotional connection with a wider audience would relieve some of her grief. Instead, a fresh sense of loss had triggered a gray fog that wouldn’t go away. Visiting her family in Marquette would make the anniversary of Nana’s death even worse, because she wouldn’t be able to avoid her grief by working. “I’d rather not.”

Carol said no more, simply squeezing Laura’s shoulder.

Molly, who had lost her husband, Kevin, more than a decade before, could have lectured Laura on dealing with grief. Instead, she too remained quiet. But her calm face assured Laura that despite loss and pain, she could make it.

With the help of God and her friends, she *would* make it.

Laura wiped her eyes, raised her chin, and savored a final group hug before they turned out the lights and said good night.



Friday mornings in March drew especially large crowds to the bakehouse. Everyone was inclined to celebrate the end of another dreary week with pastries and coffee they hadn't made themselves. With the day's baking done, Laura was working the front counter in the hopes that human interaction might improve her state of mind.

"I heard you had quite a party here Tuesday night," Doreen Giobsan said, tucking a strand of her sleek, dark red bob behind her ear. As the owner of the neighboring gift shop, Thistle and That, Doreen was a regular fixture at the bakehouse and had a keen ear for local news.

"We're living the wild life these days," Laura answered with a grin as she dispensed Doreen's hot cider. "Where were you? You missed out on a dangerous game of Euchre."

"I was helping my cousin in Lake Linden." Doreen made a face. "Love her little kids, but when all five have colds, even Euchre can't get that dangerous."

"The game night was great fun." Jane Thomson, who had come in with Doreen, leaned across the counter toward Laura, green eyes gleaming behind her glasses. "And not only because of the games. I saw you talking to that handsome chef from Castleglen."

Laura shrugged. "Was I?"

Both customers snorted in unison.

"Don't try to act all innocent," Doreen said.

"My eyes might not be the best," Jane declared, "but even without my glasses, I could see the sparks flying between you two."

"Okay, okay." Laura tried to laugh it off. "We were talking shop about my chocolate *éclair*s."

"But we heard you two are an item," Doreen insisted.

“We are not.” Laura tried to keep irritation out of her voice. “I spoke to him at the game night, like I’m speaking with you now.”

Jane lowered her voice. “I’m not one to spread rumors—”

Laura nearly choked on that one. Jane and Doreen were sweet and kindhearted, but they were also two of the biggest gossips in town.

“—and I’d never, ever imply you’d cozy up to a fellow chef just to extract secret recipes from him—”

“What?” The word exploded from Laura’s lips. Customers at a nearby table whipped their heads up at the sound. Laura gripped the counter. “Who—what—?”

Carol materialized beside her. “Hello, Jane, Doreen. You ladies look cold. I’ve saved you a table next to the fireplace.”

Molly, bearing a carafe of fresh coffee, hustled the two away while Laura took deep breaths.

“Are you going to be okay?” Carol asked. “Or do you need to take a break?”

“Not sure,” Laura muttered. It was one thing for her and Gabe to become the focus of the town’s “marry-’em-and-bury-’em” gossips. But to suggest she needed his recipes? That she would stoop to—

“Go for a walk in the park. Throw snowballs.” Carol gave her a little push. “Now.”

Without comment, Laura obeyed. Trudging along Dumfries Park’s still-frozen shoreline and firing snowy ammunition at the occasional pine tree cooled her inner fire. Soon, though, she’d track down and confront the source of that revolting rumor.

Laura paused.

Her memory promptly recalled a vivid mental photo of big red hair and heavily mascaraed blue eyes scrutinizing them across the bakehouse. Had they turned green with envy at Gabe’s conversation with Laura?

Wilma Bell Guthrie claimed ties to Alexander Graham Bell as the reason for the attachment she felt to her cell phone. As the police department's receptionist, Wilma knew and dispatched everything about everyone in Loch Mallaig. Had her penchant for gossip taken a turn for the worst?