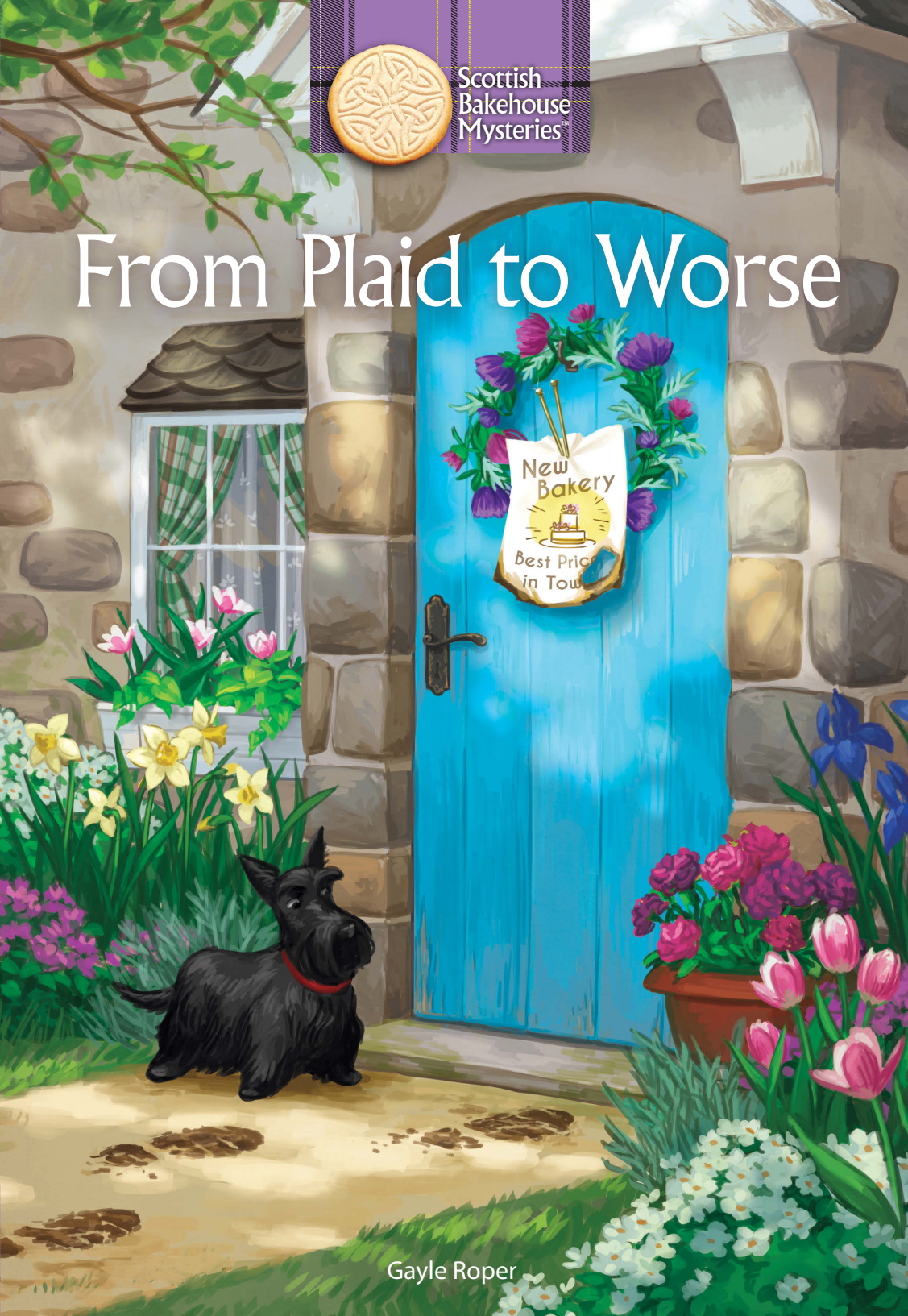




Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries™

From Plaid to Worse



Gayle Roper



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Gayle Roper

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Laura Donovan sat on the edge of her bed that Friday morning and smiled. She glanced out the window, and her grin widened. She had slept in *and* she had awakened to spring sunlight instead of her usual predawn darkness, to clear skies instead of the rain of the last week. Granted, it was simply the weak glow of a barely risen sun, but it was still light that promised more to come. And there was nothing wet falling from the sky.

What a way to start her day. She and her partners, Molly Ferris and Carol MacCallan, had each taken a day of rest before the Easter rush at their bakehouse, Bread on Arrival, and today was Laura's to enjoy.

When was the last time she'd slept so late? Probably not since she, Molly, and Carol had opened their business. As chief baker, she was at the bakery before dawn every day to whip up Scottish treats for the residents of Loch Mallaig, Michigan, who cherished their old-world heritage and adored her oatcakes, scones, Selkirk bannock, and assorted biscuits. Even on Sundays, she usually awoke when it was still dark, and try as she would, she couldn't go back to sleep.

But today she'd managed to stay asleep until the sun was up. After months of short, dreary days and long, gloomy nights, spring was finally coming. Not the calendar announcement of spring, which didn't seem to affect Michigan's Upper Peninsula in any way, but the spring heralded by a change of weather, the real deal.

The poet T.S. Eliot might call April the cruelest month, and it certainly teased everyone who longed for warmth and sun, but today

April showed great promise. This year the month also hosted Easter, now a week away. A week of hard work at the bakehouse. A week of bunny cakes and cookies shaped like flowers and eggs. A week of hot cross buns.

Laura checked the weather and rejoiced at the temperature in the upper forties. It was a bit above average for early April in the UP, and she'd gladly make the most of it with a run outside.

She went to the window and studied a still iced-over Loch Mallaig, the town's namesake lake, whose shore was mere yards from her rental cottage. There were a few holes and weak spots in the surface, and the ice should soon disappear entirely. Soon she'd look out and see deep blue water. One of the phenomena she'd missed while living in New York City and other places far from the UP was the disappearance of the ice. One day it was there. The next day it was all gone. It seemed spontaneous and instantaneous, but of course it wasn't.

People watched the going of the ice with the intensity of women watching for their men to return from war. The release from tension and gloom when the blue lake reappeared was sharp and energizing. Long days would gradually replace long nights. Life burgeoned after the slumber of winter, when dark ruled and cold imprisoned. And locals vied for the honor of being the first one to motor their boat up the lake for the new season.

Today the wind blew from the west, pushing the fragmenting ice against the shore in pointed chunks and long, lovely crystals called candles. When the sun hit the candles at the right angle, the sight inspired with its beauty—but required caution with its dangers.

Humming to herself, Laura dressed in running tights and a long-sleeved tee, then went to the kitchen for breakfast. Once she'd fortified herself with oatmeal, she donned a fleece vest and put a knit cap over her auburn hair to ward off the chill she'd feel until the exercise warmed her up.

Pulling on gloves as she walked outside, she examined the front yard of her 1800s stone crofter's cottage, one of a few built in the area. Crocuses were simply waiting for a couple of days like this to unfurl, and snowdrops bobbed their heads in the breeze off the lake. Emerald spears that would become trumpet daffodils were sticking their tips above ground, and the mostly wheat-hued grass was timidly green in spots.

Sighing happily, Laura made her way down her front walk to the gravel trail that ran between her property and the loch. She loved her cottage's proximity to the lake and the many trails that bordered it, especially the network of paths at the nearby Castleglen resort. Though the trails were maintained by the golf resort for guests to walk, jog, and bike on, anyone could use them. In the summer, Laura always met other town residents enjoying their access. Since it was currently what she referred to as "mud season," Castleglen hadn't quite entered prime golfing season and was relatively low on guests. She expected to see no one, which was fine with her.

She inserted earbuds attached to her phone and pulled up her latest audiobook. Sometimes she ran to music, sometimes to podcasts, sometimes to a good novel or biography. Today it was a novel that had just gotten to the good part, and she was dying to know how it would resolve. She pushed play, then stashed the phone in her vest pocket.

Laura started out running slowly, warming up, letting her body enjoy the sensation of movement. After long hours in the kitchen, either her own at home or the one at the bakehouse, simple exercise always felt sweet. Gradually she picked up her pace, getting lost in the world of her story and the exhilaration of running in such wonderful weather.

She was surprised when, about a hundred yards from her cottage, she rounded a curve in the trail and saw another jogger in the distance. It was a middle-aged woman, and she was moving slowly in the same

direction Laura was headed, not really running as much as loping, taking unhurried, almost slow-motion strides.

Laura gradually picked up speed and gained on the jogger, smiling at the woman's colorful outfit. Her leggings were every color of the rainbow but without the organization, and her pink sweatshirt had a navy-blue band around the hem. Neither of those matched her Fair Isle knit cap, which featured browns and oranges with a touch of yellow.

Suddenly the woman veered off the running path and into the snow and mud in the strip of earth between the path and the lake. Farther along the trail, the edge rose to a cliff that overlooked the loch, but here the land was even with the water. As if the ground wasn't sloppy enough from the snow melt, with the past week's rain it would be like stepping into a shallow, icy pool.

Laura shuddered at the imagined sensation of the melting snow slipping over the edge of the woman's shoes. Then there was the muck beneath the snow sucking at the soles. Mud season was not the time of year to wander off paved surfaces.

As she neared the place where the woman had stepped off the path, Laura glanced over to make sure she was all right. The woman was bending over, holding her midsection.

Laura stopped and quickly paused her audiobook, then called, "Ma'am? Can I help you?"

The woman straightened and whirled toward Laura. As she moved, Laura could see beyond her to the shards and candles of ice pressed against the shore. Standing out against the light gray and white of the ice was the brown of a boot, the argyle of a sock, and the blue of a denim clad leg.

A body was caught in a hole in the ice.



Laura felt the sight like a blow to her middle. She made herself take a deep breath, then another. She reached in her pocket, fingers stiff with shock, and pulled out her phone to dial 911.

“Help is on the way.” The dispatcher’s voice was calming, which Laura needed. Her stomach was churning, and now that she wasn’t moving, the temperature that had seemed so wonderful felt almost frigid. Or maybe it was the circumstances that made her shiver.

She considered the woman still standing in the slushy mud with her arms wrapped around herself. The jogger had to be feeling cold with either shock or the weather. Or both. “Why don’t you come over here on the path and wait with me until the police get here?” Laura suggested.

The woman turned her white face to Laura. “The police?” She seemed startled.

Laura held up her phone. “I called them. They’re on their way. They’ll know what to do. Come on. Let’s get out of the wet.” She extended her hand, her fingers beckoning encouragingly.

The woman glanced at what could be seen of the frozen leg with its boot, sock, and rucked-up jeans, then looked down at her muddy running shoes and shuddered. She walked to Laura slowly, as if in a trance. Finally she stepped onto the path and, with her back to the lake, bent over to take a few deep breaths. After a couple of long inhales, she straightened.

“Are you going to be okay?” Laura asked, concerned by the other woman’s pallor.

The jogger gave a small nod. “I think so. Eventually. Maybe next year. Or in five years. I’ve never seen a dead person like that before.”

Laura understood. That leg and foot weren’t sights she’d easily forget either. “I’m Laura Donovan.”

“Connie Thornton.”

Although vaguely familiar, the name rang no immediate bells, which meant she probably wasn’t a local. Not that Laura was acquainted with everyone in Loch Mallaig, but she knew many residents between customers at Bread on Arrival, her church family, the Fair Knitting Ladies, and the historical society. Then there were the regular joggers, an unofficial club who nodded hello as they passed each other along the various paths near and around the lake.

Something about the name hovered at the edge of Laura’s mind like a memory just out of reach. She gave a mental shrug and, because she couldn’t place the woman, asked, “Are you staying at Castleglen?”

“No. We live in Loch Mallaig.” Connie managed a weak smile. “Donnie and I moved here last month. We’re still getting settled. Moving is about getting used to new people and places.”

Connie and Donnie Thornton. It was the rhyming names that provided the missing clue. Laura’s skin felt prickly as the unfamiliar became all too familiar. “You’re opening the new bakery in town.” She hoped her voice didn’t sound as unhappy to Connie as it did to her own ears. She was used to thinking of Loch Mallaig as belonging to Bread on Arrival, but if this new bakery offered different goods, they could manage as companion businesses. After all, towns frequently had more than one grocery store, and everyone managed quite well.

Connie unwound her arms from her middle and stuffed her hands in her pockets. Under her pallor she seemed pleased at the recognition. “#SunflourBakery, with the hashtag. We had our promotional materials designed before we realized someone else had taken our

name, so Donnie thought quick and came up with the solution to add the hashtag. He thinks we'll be a big hit on social media."

"Clever," Laura murmured.

"You'll have to come by and try Donnie's wonderful treats. He's an amazing baker."

"Thanks." Laura thought that if she did drop by, it would be sort of like industrial espionage. Checking out the competition. She smiled inside as she pictured herself sneaking into their business wearing a trench coat and dark glasses.

A police car zoomed down the path, lights flashing. It pulled up, and Officers Greer Anderson and Dalziel Murdoch climbed out. Laura was glad to see Greer's friendly face in this terrible situation. The athletic blonde walked to Connie and Laura while Murdoch, one of the local police force's younger officers, sloshed to the body.

"What's going on here?" Greer asked when she was within earshot.

Connie swallowed. "I was jogging, and I saw . . ." She waved toward the loch, her back still to the lake.

Greer tilted her head toward Laura. "And you?"

"I came up behind Connie right after she saw the—" She stopped. What word to use? *Body* seemed so callous. "The victim."

Greer nodded. "Either of you touch anything?"

Both Laura and Connie shook their heads. The very thought made Laura shudder.

"I did walk toward him." Connie swallowed again. "To check, you know? To make sure I saw what I thought I saw. Though what I thought I would do, I don't know. I mean, what could I do?"

"It's okay," Greer said reassuringly. "You did the right thing staying put."

Connie relaxed a bit, then she reddened with embarrassment. "I felt sick."

Greer nodded. “Not surprising.”

Brown eyes serious, Murdoch stepped onto the path, a bit green around the gills himself. The fingers of one hand played piano scales against his thigh.

Laura noted he wore uniform-colored rain boots. She pointed at them. “Smart.”

Dalziel nodded. “We carry them with us this time of year.”

Greer studied Connie compassionately. “You’re shivering. Let me get your contact information, and you can go. You too, Laura. There’s nothing you can do here, and we’ll contact you if we have any questions.”

Before Connie could speak again, another police cruiser arrived carrying Chief Owen Thomson. As he approached, he beckoned his officers over as he started toward the lake.

Greer held up a finger to Connie. “One minute.” She and Murdoch followed the chief. They studied the scene and conferred, the two witnesses temporarily forgotten.

Connie stood with shoulders hunched, huddled into herself. Her glassy eyes made Laura worry she was going into shock. Knowing someone in danger of shock should be kept occupied to diminish the effects, Laura asked the first thing that came to mind. “So where did you and Donnie move from?”

Connie blinked and gave herself a little shake like she was coming back to awareness. “Um, northern California.”

“Near San Francisco or farther north?”

“Farther north. We had a bakery there too.” Connie gave a humorless chuckle. “Donnie wants to see if he can reproduce his big city success in a small town.”

And he had to pick our town? Well, Bread on Arrival would simply have to be better than #SunflourBakery, and it was up to Laura as chief baker to take on the challenge.

“Did Donnie go to culinary school?” Maybe her training would be her edge. She had years of experience on top of her degree in culinary arts from Newkirk College, where she’d met Molly and Carol more than thirty years earlier. Most of the pastry chefs she knew had studied in a specialized program at a college or culinary institute, which taught the chemistry of food and the practicalities of measurements, temperatures, ingredients, and presentation.

“Donnie’s a self-taught baker. He just does it.” Connie’s voice was full of pride, but then she grew solemn. “Someone knitted his socks.”

For a moment, Laura thought Connie was referring to Donnie. But then she realized what the comment referenced, and she glanced at the shore where the police chief and his officers still talked, blocking the view of the dead body. “You could tell that?”

Connie nodded. “You can always tell hand-knit goods. The stitches are different somehow.”

Laura had to agree, having done her own knitting and seen the work of the women in the Fair Knitting Ladies. The handmade quality was what made the sweaters and socks that grew on their needles so special.

A terrible thought ricocheted through Laura. Was the sock they were discussing one of a pair knit by one of the Fair Knitting Ladies? The thought made her feel sick.

Swallowing her discomfort, she pictured the foot. “The sock was an argyle pattern, wasn’t it?” That usually meant the knitter had used the intarsia technique. The leader of the knitting group, Aileen Morrison, liked using that complicated method, with its separate bobbins of yarn for each color and the over-and-under movements of yarn as colors were added and subtracted.

“The argyle was a blue-and-cream pattern with a bright green line through it,” Connie said.

No wonder she had felt sick if she was close enough to the body to see that thin green stripe. “If the sock showed that much above the boot, it must have been made to go up over the calf.”

Connie appeared thoughtful. “I bet it was knit with intarsia technique, not Fair Isle.”

“Aren’t argyles always intarsia?”

“They should be. Makes for a thinner fabric that lays nicely.”

“You’re a knitter.” And one who knew a lot.

“I am.” Connie touched her cap.

“You made your hat?” Laura was impressed. She hadn’t originally taken the hat as hand knit because the pattern was so complex, but now she recognized the work of a fine knitter.

Connie pulled it off and turned it inside out. “Fair Isle technique. See? You carry the yarn of one color across the back of the other colors, but loosely so you don’t pinch the main fabric. Makes things double thick.” She put the cap back on. “Good for a hat meant to hold in body heat, and I think it’s less fussy than messing with bobbins.”

“My business partner Carol is great at the Fair Isle technique. So is Aileen Morrison, who owns The Knit Hoose in town. Aileen’s good with intarsia too.”

Connie gasped in horror and stared toward the lake. “You don’t think that’s Aileen or her husband, do you?”

“No. It’s too small to be Andrew, Aileen’s husband, and it’s too big to be Aileen.”

Connie relaxed. “I’m glad. I’ve been in The Knit Hoose, and I liked Aileen. You don’t know how excited I was to find such a great shop here.” The enthusiasm showed in her voice, and her face had become animated. The sock that had started the conversation had clearly been forgotten, at least for the moment. She beamed. “Aileen invited me to join the Fair Knitting Ladies.”

“I hope I see you at the next meeting, then,” Laura said.

Connie’s smile fell away. “It makes me sad to think that guy had someone who cared enough to make his socks.” She bit her lip. “Whoever it is will be very upset when she learns what happened.”

“She?”

Connie shrugged. “Most knitters are women. A lot of them make things for the men in their lives.”

Laura had to agree as she watched a gray SUV pull up behind Chief Thomson’s. A man she didn’t know emerged. He glanced at the two of them but apparently dismissed them as unimportant.

“I don’t think we rate.” Connie sounded both amused and insulted as she watched him turn his back.

“His loss. He doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

The man strode toward the three officers, then paused and scrutinized Laura and Connie as if reconsidering. He pointed a finger at them. “Don’t you go anywhere. I want to talk to you.”