



Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries™

Quill the Messenger



Elizabeth Penney



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Molly Ferris smiled as her Scottish terrier scampered around the backyard, pausing to investigate every enticing aroma. Angus was overjoyed that warm weather had come to Loch Mallaig, Michigan—and so was she. Seasons often changed a bit later in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, but it was always worth the wait. Now it was May, and the trees were in full leaf, birds sang and soared overhead, and the warmth of the rising sun promised a lovely day ahead.

Stretching her arms wide, Molly inhaled fresh, sweet air. In this beautiful but cold corner of the country, each and every sunny day was something to cherish. Although it was the busy season for Bread on Arrival, the Scottish bakehouse she co-owned with two partners, she tried to spend plenty of time outdoors. Having a small but active dog who needed regular walks certainly helped with that goal.

A glance at her phone informed her that time had flown by and she needed to head back into the bakery. Fortunately, Molly lived in an apartment above it, so she didn’t have far to go to take Angus home. Molly clapped her hands. “Angus, come.”

Head baker Laura Donovan was already inside the kitchen with the ovens going, and their third partner, Carol MacCallan, was pulling into the driveway. As Molly began herding her reluctant pet toward the outside staircase to her apartment, Carol got out of her car.

“Gorgeous day, isn’t it?” Carol called. Tote in one hand and purse in the other, she used her hip to shut the car door.

“It sure is,” Molly said. “After I put Angus in, I’ll be right down.”

“See you in a few.” Carol took the path that led to the staff entrance of the bakehouse, which was a pale yellow Victorian trimmed with black shutters.

Molly got Angus inside and settled, then unlatched the doggy door that led to the yard and promised him another walk later that morning during a lull at the bakehouse. Then she washed up, tied on an apron, and hurried down the interior stairs, eager for a cup of coffee and a sample of whatever delight Laura had dreamed up today.

At the bottom of the stairs, she came face-to-face with famous romance cover model Gregory Gregg. Or at least a life-size cutout of him, dressed in his trademark kilt, sandy hair flowing and brawny arms bare. Molly yelped and jumped backward.

Laura and Carol laughed. “She got me with that too,” Carol said. “He was right by the back door when I came in.”

Molly grabbed the cardboard Gregory by the shoulders and moved it aside. “Where did you get this?”

“A bookstore in Marquette.” Laura slid her hands into oven mitts. “They were going to throw it away so I grabbed it. I thought it would be fun to have around since Castleglen is hosting that Scottish historical romance conference this week.”

“Fergus told me Gregory Gregg is supposed to be here in the flesh,” Molly said, then blushed. Her good friend Fergus MacGregor, the handsome owner of the Castleglen golf resort, had teased her lightly about the model being in town, and it had given her an odd feeling at the time. “Lots of best-selling Scottish romance authors are doing workshops and signings too.”

“And don’t forget the high tea we’re catering,” Carol handed Molly a mug of coffee. “Try a maple walnut scone.” She pointed to a tray of tiny frosted scones sprinkled with pieces of nuts.

Molly didn’t wait for a second invitation. She picked up the scone

and bit into it eagerly. The treat melted in her mouth. The frosting, made with locally produced maple syrup, gave a sweet and satisfying burst of flavor. “Oh Laura, these are going to disappear in two seconds flat.”

“I’ve got a few other flavors.” Laura pulled another tray of scones out of the oven. “I’m doing bite-size versions so people can try more than one.”

“Guess what?” Carol asked, snagging a scone for herself. “Laura found a source of early season rhubarb and is making strawberry-rhubarb tarts too.”

“Oh, I adore strawberry rhubarb. It’s one of my favorite combinations.” Molly took her first sip of fresh-brewed coffee, one of her favorite morning moments. “You’re on fire today, Laura.” Actually the baker was on fire every day, consistently turning out delectable and creative baked goods. Tourists often said that they’d heard about the bakehouse from friends or relatives, which meant their reputation was spreading.

Laura, who was setting scones on a rack to cool, smiled modestly. “I try. Changing the subject, we’re still going over to the conference after we close, right?”

“Definitely.” Carol pointed to her tote, which was resting under the coatrack. “I grabbed every Madeline Alt book I own for her to sign.”

“Hasn’t she written about thirty books?” Molly knew that fans lined up for blocks whenever the famous author held a book signing, and she was often a featured guest at conferences like the one this week. Millions of her books were in print.

“Yes, she has,” Carol said. “And I own twenty-nine of them.” She chuckled ruefully. “Mostly in paperback, of course, since my book budget isn’t huge.”

“Do you think they’ll be selling her books at the conference?” Molly asked. “I don’t have any, but it would be fun to get one signed.”

"Of course." Laura stacked the empty tray to be washed. "There will be tons of books to buy and all kinds of other merchandise." She smiled. "I've had myself on a budget for weeks so I could splurge on this."

"The vendor area is going to be great." Carol sighed in delight. "I even made a list of the booths I want to visit."

Molly went to the coffee maker and poured herself a refill. "I'm looking forward to the classes we signed up for."

"Herbal teas, bonnet trimming, and love letter writing," Carol recited, then grinned. "Complete with quills."

"I've never written with a quill," Molly said with a laugh.

"Me neither, but I'm sure it'll be fun," Carol said, bringing her mug over so Molly could fill it.

"I think so too." Laura added more flour to her mixing bowl. "But in the meantime, we've got a lot to do."

"I'll help you bake after Bridget comes in at eight," Carol said.

"Perfect." Laura glanced at the clock. "We open in ten."

Molly and Carol kicked into gear, finishing their coffee and heading to the front of the bakehouse to take care of a few pre-opening tasks. Then, at opening time on the dot, Molly unlocked the door and flipped the sign to *Open*.

Cars began to pull into the lot and for the next little while, they ran to pour hot beverages and serve fresh baked goods to their customers. Molly was restocking mugs during a lull when a middle-aged woman walked in, alone. Her first thought was that she seemed familiar, with her silvery bob hairstyle and lean features. Her skin was lightly tanned, and she had green eyes behind a pair of trendy eyeglasses.

Then Molly recognized her and yelled, "Patsy Mae Wallace! What are you doing here?"

Molly set down the tray of mugs and bolted around the counter to greet the newcomer, a friend the Bakehouse Three had made in

college more than thirty years earlier. Carol followed on Molly's heels, also exclaiming in surprise and delight.

Patsy Mae returned their fervent hugs. "Oh my, this is quite a welcome," she said, her charming Southern accent a nod to her Louisiana roots.

"Laura, get out here," Carol called. "You'll never guess who's here."

A moment later, Laura appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. Her face lit up. "Patsy Mae, I was just thinking about you." She exchanged a hug with her old friend.

"Good things, I hope," Patsy Mae said with a laugh.

"You bet," Laura replied. "You must be in town for the conference."

Seeing Patsy Mae's cheeks redden, Molly wondered what was going on. "Are you a big Scottish romance fan?"

"She's more than that," Laura said proudly. "She's an author."

Laura's announcement had drawn attention from other customers, deepening Patsy Mae's blush. "Hush now, Laura. I'm only an aspiring author. That's why I'm here, to try to connect with literary agents and editors."

"That's amazing." Carol took her friend's elbow and steered her toward the counter. "Let's get you something to eat and drink. Then you can fill us in."

Patsy Mae took a few minutes to admire the offerings on hand, then chose black coffee and a cream scone with lemon curd. "I'll have to come in every day I'm here so I can try everything," she said.

"You'll get a chance to sample more of Laura's baking at the conference," Molly assured her, setting Patsy Mae's selections on a tray. "We're catering a tea and some of the sessions."

"Lucky us," Patsy Mae said, picking up the tray.

"Let's sit over there so I can keep an ear out for the timers," Laura said, pointing, and everyone followed her.

For the next little while, everyone got caught up on news, with Patsy Mae giving an update on her two grown children, Lauren and Jerome, and her work as a librarian.

At the jingle of the bell on the front door announcing new customers, Molly started to rise, but Bridget Ross came out of the kitchen at that moment to start her shift. The college student who worked at the bakehouse part-time handled the newcomers, then hurried over to the table occupied by her bosses.

"You'll never guess who I saw on my way here." Bridget waited a beat, then offered her trademark sunny smile. "Gregory Gregg."

"You mean Laura's cardboard cutout?" Molly asked with a laugh.

Bridget shook her head, her dark hair flying. "No. The real one. He was walking along the sidewalk with a woman, headed this way." She glanced at the counter, where someone was waiting. "Excuse me, I'd better get to work." She hurried off.

"Oh my." Patsy Mae's hand went to her cheek. "Gregory Gregg is coming here, you think?" She pulled out a compact and checked her lipstick. "I'm a huge fan."

"Who isn't?" Laura asked wryly. The timer rang and she hopped up from her chair. "That's my cue. Talk to you all in a few."

"Did you hear about the contest?" Patsy Mae was smoothing her already flawless hair. "The winner gets to have supper with Gregory."

"You mean at the conference?" Although Molly admired many celebrities, she wasn't exactly starstruck. They were still people after all, even if they were unusually attractive or talented.

"It's a raffle." Patsy Mae snapped her compact closed and tossed it into her handbag. "The entry fees will benefit a literacy charity."

"That's a great cause," Carol said. "Maybe I'll enter."

"Does Harvey get to tag along to dinner if you win?" Molly teased, picturing Gregory, Carol, and her husband dining together.

"He'd insist on it," Carol said with a laugh, then dropped her voice. "But mostly because he reads Scottish romances too on the sly. He claims it's because he finds them lying around the house, but I know he secretly enjoys the sword fights and the happily ever afters."

"You're lucky to have him," Patsy Mae said wistfully. She cradled her mug in both hands pensively. "It's already been five years since I lost Bo."

"It's been twelve for me since Kevin passed," Molly said softly, her heart going out to her friend. Becoming widowed, especially at a relatively young age, was hard. "You'll always grieve, but it eases over time." And in time, she might even find room for new possibilities. Not that Molly was *quite* there herself. But almost, especially when it came to Fergus. Her spirits lifted when she realized she would see him later at the conference.

"The support of friends makes all the difference," Patsy Mae said, then seemed to shake off her sadness. "After Bo passed, I desperately needed a new passion in life. And one day I was working at the library, checking in some of my favorite authors, and I wondered, could I write a book? Maybe even get it published?"

"So you went ahead and started writing," Carol said. "Good for you."

Patsy Mae's smile was both proud and bashful. "Yes. I've written three books so far, although none of them have sold yet. Laura and I connected on social media, and she's been so encouraging even though I'm shy about it."

That explained why Laura had already known about their old friend's new endeavor. And how like Laura to keep the information under wraps until the right time.

"You'll have to tell us all about your books," Molly said, genuinely interested.

“Especially the dreamy Highlanders,” Carol added with a teasing grin. “Are they all modeled after Gregory Gregg?”

Patsy Mae’s blush returned. “I will admit dreaming that he’d be the cover model for one of my books. He’s the best in the business.”

“Maybe winning dinner with him will help,” Molly said. “Or if you don’t win, perhaps you can talk to him at the conference. Tell him about your books.”

“If they’re ever published . . .” Patsy Mae’s words trailed off. Her eyes widened as she grabbed Carol on the forearm. “Don’t look, but guess who just walked in.”

Naturally Carol turned around and Molly glanced toward the door as well. An attractive couple stood inside the entrance, taking in the bakehouse. As they started toward the counter, Molly studied them in what she hoped was an unobtrusive manner.

He was tall, with flowing hair and a chiseled face, wearing jeans and a leather jacket—the immediately recognizable Gregory Gregg. Other customers had also noticed him and were exchanging whispers and nudges.

The woman with Gregory was also striking, if somewhat overshadowed by the male model, with long, dark locks held back by a headband and pale, elegant features. She wore leggings, an open sweater over a silk blouse, and leather booties.

An unusual silence descended, the entire bakehouse watching as Bridget waited on the pair. “I’d like a dozen scones,” the woman said, either oblivious to the attention or used to it.

“What flavor?” Bridget asked. She named off six varieties.

“How about an assortment? Two of each.” Order placed, the woman began speaking to her companion in a low voice. He tilted his head to listen.

“Who is that with Gregory?” Carol asked, curiosity plain on her face.

Patsy Mae leaned across the table to respond. "That's Alyssa Martin," she said in a loud whisper. "She's a top editor at Tartan and Lace."

"Tartan and Lace is one of the top Scottish romance publishers," Carol said for Molly's benefit. "They publish Madelaine Alt's books."

"*The* top publisher," Patsy Mae corrected. "That's why I . . ." Her words trailed off. A frown knit her brows as she worried at her bottom lip with her teeth, chewing off all her carefully applied lipstick. She set down her mug and pushed back her chair, then hesitated. "Maybe I should wait."

"To do what?" Molly asked. But when Patsy Mae shook her head, Molly didn't push. Instead, she peered into her mug and saw it was empty. "I'd better get back to work." More cars were pulling into the lot and Bridget would need help. Carol started to rise, but Molly waved her down. "Keep Patsy Mae company."

Bridget was ringing up Alyssa's order when Molly slipped behind the counter. She smiled in the general direction of the pair. The editor ignored her, but Gregory greeted her with a warm grin.

"Nice place you have here," he said, his voice a deep, rich rumble flavored with a bit of Scots' burr. "You came highly recommended."

"That's nice to know," Molly said, her face heating under the model's scrutiny. "We do our best." Her cheeks burned hotter at her tepid response. Why couldn't she think of something witty to say? The man was entirely too good-looking, plus he had that elusive thing called charisma.

Bridget offered the box of scones to Alyssa, but Gregory reached forward to take it. Swallowing a chuckle, Molly watched a pink flush creep into Bridget's cheeks when the model's hands brushed hers.

Alyssa offered a tight smile of thanks, then slipped her arm through Gregory's. "Ready?"

Molly thought she heard a collective sigh of disappointment

from the women in the room. Were Gregory and Alyssa an item? It appeared that way. The couple whispered to each other as they crossed the floor toward the door.

“Miss Martin,” a voice called. “Miss Martin.” Patsy Mae was charging across the room, waving a hand to get the editor’s attention.

Alyssa set her jaw. She stopped walking and waited for Patsy Mae to reach them. “How can I help you?” she asked, her tone frigid. Molly wondered if it was her usual reaction to strangers flagging her down. Editors must frequently get accosted by aspiring authors and often at inopportune times.

Patsy Mae inhaled visibly. She stood with her fists clenched at her sides and determination on her face. “My name is Patsy Mae Wallace. I submitted a book to you last year. *His English Rose*?”

Alyssa made an abrupt, dismissive gesture. “We get thousands of submissions a year. I can’t possibly keep track of them all.” She huffed derisively. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.” The editor tugged at Gregory’s arm and the pair swept out the door, which shut behind them with a jingle of the bell.



A brief silence fell over the bakehouse. Then, as if orchestrated, the customers burst into chatter and laughter again. Patsy Mae, however, stood in the center of the room, her face a mask of misery.

Carol came rushing up and put her arm around Patsy Mae. “That woman was downright rude to you. I’m shocked.”

Patsy Mae forced out a laugh. “I’m not. She hasn’t responded to my e-mails or phone calls. I’m probably blacklisted by her company.”

“But why?” Molly asked, joining her friends. “You didn’t do anything wrong, did you?” She really had no idea how the publishing industry worked.

“I should have waited,” Patsy Mae said. “But when I saw her in person again—well, something came over me.”

“Again?” Carol repeated. “You’ve met her before?”

Patsy Mae nodded. “At a conference last year. I pitched my novel to her during a one-on-one. She seemed so excited about it, I was sure she would publish it. Silly me, right? Then, after I finished it and sent it in, I never heard another peep.”

Molly frowned. “That’s horrible. To get your hopes up like that and then ignore you? Anyone would be upset.”

“And she pretended that she didn’t recognize you or your book,” Carol pointed out. “That was obvious to me.”

Patsy Mae’s fingers twisted together. “That’s not the worst of it. The main character in my book was based on a real ancestor of mine. She was a lady-in-waiting to the English princess who became Saint Margaret, Queen of Scotland.”

"That sounds fascinating," Carol said.

"Hold on," Patsy Mae said. "There's more." She swallowed. "A few months ago, I saw an announcement about Madelaine Alt's new book. It features a lady-in-waiting to Queen Margaret."

Carol gasped. "Seriously? Did she copy your plot?"

"Maybe," Patsy Mae said miserably. "I find it hard to believe that it was a coincidence. It took some real digging to even learn about Lady Evelyn. And I cited my research sources in my letter. I hoped they would offer credibility to my story."

"You think Alyssa actually shared your book with another author?" Carol was aghast.

"You wouldn't think so, would you?" Patsy Mae shrugged. "But I also queried Caroline Callahan, Madelaine's agent, with my manuscript and synopsis. If Tartan and Lace offered to publish my book, I would need an agent to handle the deal for me."

Molly's chest tightened in anger on her friend's behalf. "So whether she got the tip from Caroline or Alyssa, Madelaine used your sources for herself."

"It appears that way." Patsy Mae made a helpless gesture. "I don't know what to do. I haven't read Madelaine's book yet to compare it. And even if she did plagiarize, I don't have money for a lawyer. And maybe she just stole the idea. You can't copyright an idea."

Carol patted Patsy Mae on the shoulder. "I don't know what we can do to help, but we'll think of something."

"We sure will," Molly said. "And maybe another publisher will take one of your books and you'll be a huge success."

Patsy Mae laughed. "I can hope, right?" She gave her friends a tentative smile. "I do want to ask you a favor. But please say no if it makes you uncomfortable."

"Anything, Patsy Mae," Carol said.

“Well,” the writer said, her voice hesitant. “I do have a new book ready. But this time when I tell people about it, I want a witness.”

“You mean, sit in on the meetings?” Molly asked. That didn’t sound too difficult. “If the agents and editors won’t mind, I don’t.”

“What will you tell them about why we’re there?” Carol asked. “Just curious.”

Patsy Mae’s cheeks reddened. “I didn’t think that far ahead. You’re right, it might look odd. And I don’t need any more hurdles than I already have.”

“What if I pretend to be your assistant?” Molly asked. “I can even take notes.”

A grin broke across Patsy Mae’s face. “What a great idea! I’m usually so flustered in those meetings, I can never remember what anyone says. You’re the best.” She gave Molly and Carol hugs. “See you at the conference later?”

“Definitely,” Carol said. “We’re heading right over after we close to attend the high tea reception.”

“Wonderful.” Patsy Mae gestured toward her table. “I’ll let you two get back to work while I finish my breakfast.” She smiled. “It’s absolutely delicious. It’ll get the bad taste Alyssa Martin left right out of my mouth.”



“Is that everything?” Carol asked later that afternoon, her arms full of bakery boxes destined for the high tea.

Laura glanced around the bakehouse kitchen. “I believe so. The resort is going to provide dishes, silverware, and napkins, so we’re all set.” She handed Molly a tote of trays and tiered stands, then picked up a second stack of boxes. “Now we just need to make it out to the hearse in one piece.”

The trio carted their burdens out to the 1939 LaSalle hearse they used to make deliveries. The eye-catching vehicle had come with the property, a former funeral home whose previous vocation had inspired the name Bread on Arrival.

Molly deposited the tote in the back with a sigh of relief after a busy day that hadn't had many lulls. Fortunately, Angus had happily spent his afternoon in the yard greeting customers through the fence instead of going on a longer walk. "I can't wait to sit down. Even if it's only for the drive to the resort."

"You and me both," Carol said as she headed toward the passenger door. "I think half our customers today came from the conference."

"I think so too," Molly said, sliding into the driver's seat. "A lot of them had Scottish romance novels and totes advertising the conference."

"I bet lots of other businesses saw heavy traffic today since the tea is the first official event," Carol said. "It seems like everyone checked in at the resort, then came to town to check things out."

Laura finished arranging the boxes to her satisfaction, then she climbed into the front seat beside Carol. It was a tight fit, but they managed. "This is going to be fun." She laughed. "I can't wait to see Gregory Gregg in costume, for one thing."

Molly started the vehicle and put it into gear. "I have to admit that Patsy Mae's situation dampened my enthusiasm a bit." She and Carol had filled Laura in about the possible theft of Patsy Mae's book idea.

"Same here," Carol agreed. "I might not even ask Madelaine to sign my books now."

"I can understand that," Laura said. "But I'm trying to check my wrath since we don't know for sure what happened. I think we need to focus on helping Patsy Mae get published with someone else. She is really, really good."

"You've read her writing?" Molly asked.

"Some of it," Laura said. "She wanted my opinion on the first few chapters of the Lady Evelyn book. It opens when the future Queen Margaret and her companions are shipwrecked in Scotland on their way to the Continent. According to Patsy Mae's description, they end up in the court of King Malcolm, who married Margaret. Lady Evelyn finds romance with a handsome Highlander."

"It sounds wonderful," Carol said with a sigh.

Molly agreed. She often wished real life could be as sweet as a romance novel. "I can't wait to read Patsy Mae's books."

Laura held up crossed fingers. "And here's hoping a publisher will snap her up soon."

The route to Castleglen, located two miles from downtown, was short but pleasant, leading them along the town's namesake lake. Trees in full leaf, flower gardens, and green lawns showed the quaint little village of Loch Mallaig at its best. Molly opened the car window so she could enjoy the unseasonably warm breeze on her face and in her hair. Oh, how she enjoyed spring, especially one that leaped right into summer.

Molly slowed the vehicle as they approached the resort before navigating into an entrance marked by stone pillars. The winding drive led them to the main building, a majestic structure of timber and stone set on the waterfront. Smooth golf greens dotted with white carts and golfers extended in every direction, and rowboats and canoes floated on the loch's blue water.

"I love coming here," Carol said as Molly halted the hearse under the portico at the front lobby entrance. "I feel more relaxed already."

"Me too," Molly said, opening her door. Once they set up the baked goods, they would officially be off the clock and free to participate in the conference.

Laura hurried inside to retrieve a cart while Carol opened the hearse's back door. Molly double-checked her tote for the Bread on Arrival rack cards they were going to set out. Providing treats for the high tea was a great advertising opportunity for the bakehouse and, as the trio's marketing guru, she planned to maximize it. Fergus had promised that Bread on Arrival would be listed as a vendor in the conference program as well.

Rumbling wheels announced the return of Laura, who was joined by Fergus, handsome in kilt and jacket.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he said with a smile, then began helping transfer boxes and totes to the cart.

"You're dressed already?" Molly asked him, alarm tingeing her voice. Had she gotten the time wrong? She and Fergus were members of The Piping Yoopers, the local bagpiper group performing at the event. She'd brought her costume along and planned to change after they set up the tea since there was plenty of time—or so she had thought.

Fergus pulled at his kilt with a laugh. "I've been wearing this all day. You'll see why in a minute."

Once they entered the hotel and made their way to the conference, Molly understood what Fergus had meant. At least half the guests were dressed in historical or traditional costume, as befitted fans of Scotland's past. As a woman rustled past in a gorgeous green satin gown, hair piled high to reveal huge, glittering earrings, Molly felt distinctly underdressed in her dress slacks and summery top.

Carol rolled her eyes. "I didn't realize the tea was formal," she muttered. "My gown is at the cleaners."

Molly laughed, resolving to enjoy the passing parade. The fact that people so strongly identified with the books they loved was fascinating. If they couldn't actually live in the past, at least they could pretend, she supposed.

The ballroom was packed already, with guests standing in clusters or circulating around the room. The air was also quite warm, and when they passed under a vent, Molly noticed it was blowing tepid air. “Is the air-conditioning on?” she asked Fergus.

He glanced up at the vent, his brows knit in concern. “We’ve been having some trouble with the system, but I thought it was fixed.” He made a face. “What a day for it to act up. The temperature is way above normal this afternoon, and as you can see, we have a full house.”

“Isn’t that always the way?” Molly mused sympathetically. If a heating or air-conditioning system acted up, it always seemed to happen at the worst possible time.

Fergus pivoted on his heel. “I’d better go check into it, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” Molly said. “I’ll catch up with you later. At our performance, if not before.”

Laura steered the cart toward the buffet tables located along a wall. Resort servers were setting up mostly cold, savory selections, as befitted the warm weather. Molly spotted stacks of smoked salmon sandwiches, an array of salads, platters of crudités and bite-size fruit, and a selection of hot canapés. Another table held hot and cold coffee and tea.

Working quickly, the women loaded serving tiers and trays with the miniature treats Laura had baked. Pots of clotted cream and jam went into ice provided by the resort. More than one guest wandered by to eye the choices, obviously eager to dig in.

Molly’s mouth was watering too. “Save me a salmon sandwich,” she said to Laura. “I might as well get changed for the Yooper performance before the tea begins.”

But Laura wasn’t listening. Molly followed her gaze to the ballroom doorway. Trumpets weren’t playing a fanfare, but Molly imagined them

anyway as Gregory Gregg stepped through, dressed in full tartan regalia. Alyssa Martin was on his arm, and she wore a red gown resembling one Molly had seen on a popular television show. If Alyssa was wearing *that* for the opening reception, how could she possibly top it at the closing ball?

The onlookers burst into applause, the thunderous sound echoing around the large room. Laura's face was alight with excitement.

Carol elbowed Molly gently. "Go change. I'll make you a plate. Laura seems a bit distracted."

Molly murmured a thank-you, then picked her way through the crowd, deciding as she went that it'd be wiser to exit through a side door rather than the main entrance, where Gregory and Alyssa were being swarmed. The alternate route led her past two women standing close together. One was thin and elegant, with a sleek helmet of brown hair, the other shorter and stout, with brassy blonde hair in loose curls.

As Molly sidled by, she realized who they were. Madelaine Alt was the dark-haired woman, and her agent, Caroline Callahan, was the blonde. She'd seen a picture of them together on the conference program. Was it Molly's imagination, or was the air distinctly chillier in the vicinity of the two literary icons? Both wore sour expressions, that much was true. But was she getting the wrong impression based on her preconceived notions from Patsy Mae?

She smiled and nodded, even murmured a hello. In return, they both stared at her. Rebuffed, Molly jerked her head back around. She'd gotten the message loud and clear—don't speak to Madelaine and Caroline unless spoken to. She shivered. How intimidated aspiring authors must feel around the two industry powerhouses. Molly was relieved she didn't have to deal with them.

Outside in the parking lot, Molly grabbed her outfit and bagpipes, then changed in the ladies' room off the lobby. By the time she was

done, sweat had broken out on her brow, little droplets peppering her skin. A hand held toward the closest vent revealed that nothing at all was blowing out. Had the system completely broken down? She sure hoped not, for the sake of the conference.

Molly turned on a tap and splashed her face with cool water, then dried off with a paper towel. Hopefully there would be better airflow in the ballroom so the Yoopers wouldn't pass out while playing. It took quite a bit of energy and breath to make those bagpipes sing.

Molly had almost reached the closed doors to the ballroom when the light sconces along the wall began to flicker. The overhead lights glowed brighter before fading out entirely. Then with a clunk, the struggling hum of the air-conditioning ceased.

The power was out. And Molly was standing alone in the darkness.