



Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries

Under Loch and Key



Jan Fields



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Series Creator: Shari Lohner

Series Editor: Elizabeth Morrissey

Cover Illustrator: Kelley McMorris

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Raising a hand to shield her eyes, Carol MacCallan blinked against the bright sun when she stepped outside the double doors of St. Andrew's Church. The warmth bathing her face was almost enough to make her forget how cold the winter and early spring had been in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Fellow parishioners murmured greetings as they slipped around her to the wide front steps. For some, this was prime time to visit with friends and neighbors. For others, it was a quick escape for home and whatever activities were planned for the rest of a beautiful June Sunday. Despite the steady buzz of voices, Carol could still hear the birdsong that seemed to fill every day lately.

Birds were exactly the cause that had driven her outside quickly after the service. She hoped to spot Hamish Bruce before he and his wife, Joyce, slipped away. She was surprised by how difficult it was proving to be to catch them. Usually Joyce would happily chat with Carol and her husband, Harvey, for at least half an hour, and Carol always looked forward to it.

Someone put a hand on her shoulder. She spun around to see a beaming Molly Ferris, the bright sun giving her blonde hair a halolike cast. The pale blue of her linen dress was a nearly perfect match for her eyes. Molly was one of Carol's best friends and a joint partner in their bakehouse, Bread on Arrival. In fact, Molly was responsible for the bakery's rather colorful name, inspired by the building's previous use as a funeral home. The women's third friend

and partner, Laura Donovan, was a trained chef who dreamed up the delicious recipes churned out in their kitchen—much to the delight of Loch Mallaig’s residents, most of whom enthusiastically celebrated their Scottish heritage.

“If you want Harvey,” Molly said, gesturing over her shoulder with her thumb, “he’s inside chatting with Bridget’s dad about fishing lures. At least I think it was fishing lures, or else Mr. Ross is overly interested in flies.”

“I saw them,” Carol said. “In fact, it was seeing Bridget’s dad that reminded me I wanted to chat with our *other* part-time employee.” Bridget Ross and Hamish Bruce both worked at the bakehouse, but the two couldn’t be more different. Bridget was a college student with a cheerful disposition, and Hamish was a retired history teacher and freelance handyman who reveled in being a notorious curmudgeon.

“Hamish?” Molly clarified. “I don’t think I’ve seen him. What do you need? Are you missing your daily dose of grumpy?”

“Actually I need his bird-watching talents.” Carol had spotted an unusual little bird on her feeder on Saturday afternoon. Its bright yellow chest caught her attention, and Carol wasn’t sure she’d ever seen one like it. Since Hamish prided himself on recognizing any bird in Michigan, she hoped he could identify her little visitor from the photo she’d taken.

Carol scanned the church lawn, squinting at the almost painfully bright sunshine and wishing for the sunglasses she’d left in the car. “Quite a crowd here today.”

“The tourists must have heard about Reverend Findlay’s wonderful sermons.” Molly gazed at the people milling around the front of the church and those drifting in the direction of the parking lot. “At least Hamish is tall. That should help. Wait! There.”

Carol followed Molly’s pointing finger with her gaze and spotted

Hamish's snowy hair and beard. She could barely see the more diminutive Joyce among the numerous people heading for their cars. "I see them," Carol said. "Thanks. Excuse me."

Carol hurried down the steps and wove through groups of chatters to reach Hamish and Joyce. She caught Hamish by the arm and dipped her other hand into her purse for her phone.

"Hamish," she said, her voice slightly breathy. "I'm glad I caught you. I want to show you a picture of a bird. I can't figure out what kind it is, and I knew you could tell me."

Hamish stared at her blankly and, for an instant, Carol wasn't even certain he'd heard her. She held up the phone to underscore what she'd said, and he practically growled at her.

"You should invest in a good field guide," he grumbled. "I'm not an encyclopedia." Then he tugged his arm free and stalked off toward the parking lot.

Carol stared after him, her mouth open in shock. Hamish was often grumpy, sure, but he wasn't usually rude. And she'd never ever heard him be outright mean. For a moment, she wondered if she'd done something to offend him. She'd been so busy at the bakery on Saturday that she'd barely spoken to him. Had she given offense somehow and not realized it?

"I'm sorry."

Carol looked down at Joyce's apologetic face. The shorter woman was living proof that opposites attract. Where Hamish was tall and thin, Joyce was barely over five feet, with the rosy cheeks and rounded figure of a gnome wife. Her usually sunny disposition was less in evidence now as she frowned after her husband. "Please, don't mind my old bear," she said. "Show me the bird. Perhaps I can identify it for you."

"Thank you." Carol brought up the photo and passed the phone to Joyce. "Is something bothering Hamish?"

“Your guess about Hamish is as good as mine right now.” Joyce sighed, then shrugged. “But I can help with the wee bird. That’s a male Kirtland’s warbler. They’re quite rare. When Hamish gets over his snit, he’ll be jealous that you spotted one. You wait and see—he’ll be clamoring to see the photo then.”

Carol thanked Joyce for the identification as she took back her phone. “I was afraid I’d offended him somehow.”

“I’m sure it’s not you,” Joyce said. “He won’t tell me what’s stuck in his craw, and I don’t know what to do. It’s making both of us miserable, along with nearly everyone else he comes into contact with. If I wasn’t so fond of the old grouch, I’d chuck him out to commune with his birds for a while.”

“He’s scheduled to work tomorrow,” Carol said. “I’ll ask him about it then. He may be worried about upsetting you.”

“The way I’m not upset now?” Joyce said drily. “But you’re probably right. If you learn anything, I’d be grateful. I can’t help what I don’t know about.”

“I’m on it. And if he won’t tell me, I’ll sic Harvey on him. Maybe he’ll be more open man to man.” Plus, Harvey’s years in investigative journalism before his retirement made him extraordinarily good at prying information out of people.

“Thank you.” Joyce’s attention darted away. “And now if you’ll excuse me, I’d best go before Hamish’s grumpiness inspires him to drive off without me.”



On Monday, Carol quickly found her promise to Joyce may have been overly optimistic. Hamish came in to the bakehouse growling and managed to grumble his way through the morning. Even the

comforting smell of baking bread couldn't soothe whatever was wrong with the prickly handyman.

Fiercely frustrated, Carol poured some of that exasperation into her work. At one point, Molly giggled when Carol struck a swollen ball of bread dough with a particularly loud *thud*.

"Don't you think you may be taking the phrase 'punch down the dough' a bit too seriously?" she asked, still grinning.

Carol eyed the thoroughly pummeled dough and rubbed her sore fist, admitting to herself that maybe she'd kneaded a little too hard. "It's Hamish. I promised Joyce I'd try to find out what has him this grumpy, but all I've managed to do is beat up an innocent pile of rye dough. As you noticed."

The partners all worked within feet of each other in the kitchen. The area would be quite spacious for a home kitchen, but it made for a cozy professional bakery. Carol loved it. She didn't mind working closely with her two best friends in the world, and she loved the cleanliness of the gleaming chrome and stainless steel appliances and work surfaces. She even found the gray-and-white color scheme homey rather than gloomy. At least that was the way she felt about it most days.

When Carol gave a deep sigh, Laura said, "On the plus side, no one has complained about anything this morning." Laura had been the head chef at a trendy restaurant in New York City before moving to Loch Mallaig to open the bakehouse with Carol and Molly, and Carol figured her friend had probably come into contact with more than her share of customers complaining about nothing. Carol always assumed that was part of the stress her friend often moaned about from living in the city.

"They may not be complaining, but I suspect it's more because they don't dare," Molly fretted. "And I'm not sure Hamish's attitude is doing much for our word-of-mouth advertising. I can see our online

reviews now.” She swept a hand through the air as if highlighting a marquee. “The food is heavenly if you can get through the purchase without having your head bitten off.”

“I’ve asked him three times what’s bothering him,” Carol said. “He barely muttered at me, and I’m fairly sure the word ‘busybody’ was used during one of the grumbles. I’m considering trying to beat the problem out of him with a wooden spoon.”

“Don’t do that,” Laura said. “You’d break it over Hamish’s hard head before you’d get anything out of him.” She pointed her own wooden spoon at Carol. “This is why I’m happy *not* to have a man in my life.”

“Don’t go making blanket statements,” Carol warned good-naturedly. “My Harvey has never been that grumpy, not even when Jenny was a tiny baby and Harvey and I were desperately sleep-deprived.”

Molly groaned. “Oh goodness, I remember those days. I loved being a new mother, but I would have given nearly anything for a solid eight hours of sleep during Chloe’s first month.”

“And there’s another thing I don’t feel bad about missing,” Laura said. “I’m always the one who gets to sleep like a baby.”

“We’ve told you,” Molly said, grinning. “Babies don’t sleep.”

Once the rye loaves were in the proofer for their last rise before baking, Carol decided to give it one final try with Hamish before calling in Harvey’s help. She walked out into the front and poured herself a cup of coffee while surveying the room. The rustic Northwoods-meets-Highlands furniture and gleaming hardwood floors were normal enough, but the hushed atmosphere in the room was not.

A tidy line of customers waited at the counter, but with none of their usual chatter and banter. They all aimed wide, hopeful eyes at Carol before darting glances toward Hamish’s dark scowl. Carol wondered if it would be better simply to find Hamish a task that didn’t require dealing with people and work the front herself. Despite being

busy in the kitchen, Carol was beginning to think someone ought to rescue the poor customers.

While Carol sipped her coffee, the bakery door opened and a short, hefty man marched in. Carol recognized Hamish's brother, Argyll Bruce. He wasn't a regular at the bakery, which Hamish blamed on Argyll's used car lot keeping him busy, but she saw Argyll often enough at church.

Argyll bustled up to the counter, ignoring the line. The jovial expression Carol associated with the gregarious man had been replaced by one of deep annoyance, making him resemble Hamish more than usual. "Hamish Bruce!" Argyll barked. "Why didn't you tell me Ian Bathgate was coming to town?"

Hamish glared at his brother. "I don't have time to update you on all the comings and goings in Loch Mallaig. I'm working here." He waved toward the line of customers, and several actually winced. "Don't you have a car lot to attend to?"

"I do," Argyll agreed. "Which should tell you how seriously I take this. I'm worried about you."

That pulled Carol's attention completely away from the nervous customers. Who was Ian Bathgate and why would his coming to Loch Mallaig be worrisome to Argyll?

"I dinnae need to air my grievances with you or anyone else," Hamish said, his Scottish burr increasing. He had been born in America, but like many Loch Mallaig residents, he had inherited the accent handed down by previous generations.

His brother harrumphed, and his own accent strengthened. "You didnae feel that way when Ian left town. I remember that clearly enough. Ian was your best friend. You must be having a tough time with this."

"I'll thank you not to talk about that *bampot* around me," Hamish

growled. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have customers to tend.” Again his gesture toward the line of waiting customers made them stiffen.

“I can take care of the customers,” Carol said, setting down her coffee cup and gently stepping forward to insert herself between Hamish and the counter. “You should take a break and chat with your brother.”

Hamish glared at her, but gave way to let her begin waiting on the customers. Though he’d surrendered his position behind the counter, he still completely ignored his brother. Instead, he backed up and folded his arms over his chest, scowling at the whole lot of them. Argyll offered him a matching glower. Carol doubted that made anyone feel much better since the bakery was still unduly quiet.

Carol decided to ignore the brothers, trusting that they’d figure out how to work through their problems—preferably out of view of their clientele, but she wasn’t about to get caught in the cross fire by suggesting such a thing. She focused on waiting on the customers in front of her, offering each person a cheerful “*Guid mornin*” before asking for their order. She didn’t think her cheer was comforting anyone much. The next woman at the counter whispered her order, all the while keeping a nervous eye on Hamish.

Carol worked her way through the handful of people in line while the brothers continued their glare-off. Finally, Argyll huffed and muttered something under his breath, then strode out of the bakehouse.

A few moments later, the door to the bakery opened again and a flamboyantly dressed man paraded in with all the pomp and circumstance of a royal at court. He wore a purple vest embroidered with gold stitching over a white shirt with long, puffy sleeves. It gave him the air of a circus barker, an impression enhanced by the fat stack of handbills he carried.

He walked straight to the counter and bowed low in front of Carol. Carol heard a murmur of conversation starting up at the tables around the room and wondered if they were merely commenting on the man's unusual appearance or if this was someone she should recognize.

"Good morning, miss," the man said, his voice entirely too loud for the short distance between them. Then he spun to face the room. "And good morning, dear residents of Loch Mallaig, I am Ian Bathgate. I've recently completed my longtime Las Vegas residency, much to the disappointment of many, but I knew it was time to share my talents across this great nation of ours. And what better place to embark upon a tour of the heartland than by doing a one-night show at the Loch Mallaig Community Center on Friday night?"

"What kind of show?" Carol asked, which made Hamish bark a single harsh laugh.

"What kind of show?" Ian Bathgate echoed, his face a mask of overly exaggerated surprise. "Why, dear lady, a performance of magic and illusion the likes of which you have never seen." He pushed a handbill at her so insistently that she had no choice but to take the paper or let it fall to the counter. He directed his next comment at the seated patrons. "I have one of these for each of you. They include a discount coupon for a ticket. Come early. All tickets will be sold at the door, and the show is certain to sell out. We always do."

The whispers around the room sounded excited and pleased, but they fell silent instantly when Hamish brushed past Carol to lean forward over the counter. "You've got some nerve, Ian Bathgate, coming into a place of business and disrupting the peace with your rubbish."

Ian responded to Hamish's anger with a grin. "Hamish, old friend," he said. "I have a coupon for you too, of course."

With a roar, Hamish came around the counter and dashed the handbills to the floor. "You'd best get out of my sight," he snarled.

“Clearly you’ve forgotten our last meeting, but I have not. If you ever dare pretend we’re friends again, I’ll not be promising that you’ll walk away to tell the tale.”

All the fake cheer drained from Ian’s face, replaced by an anger every bit as dark as Hamish’s. “Perhaps it’s you who should be worried, *old friend*. And it’s you who have forgotten who you’re dealing with. I will not be bullied.” He gave Hamish a two-handed push before bending to scoop up the bulk of the flyers from the floor.

Carol held her breath, not sure how Hamish would react to being shoved. To her shock, she realized she was actually worried her friend could become violent, but Hamish merely snorted before spinning on his heel and marching through the doorway toward the kitchen. The magician flounced out of the bakery with most of the handbills clutched close to his chest.

The whole bakery seemed frozen for a moment, holding their collective breath in shock at what they’d witnessed. Carol tried for a comforting smile but didn’t quite manage it. The truth was that she was worried about the angry words that seemed to hang in the air around them. She’d never heard Hamish Bruce threaten anyone that way. Surely he didn’t mean it . . . did he?



By the next morning, everyone at the bakehouse was collectively holding their breaths and walking on eggshells around Hamish. Laura let him work only the busiest part of the morning rush before sending him home. She didn't tell him that it was because he was terrifying the patrons, of course. Even Laura, who had years of experience handling temperamental employees, wasn't going to tangle with Hamish in his present mood.

On Thursday, Carol noticed that word of Hamish's reduced hours seemed to have gotten around. The morning rush simply moved to later, when Hamish was gone. When she told Laura and Molly about the shift, Laura groaned.

"We've got to keep Hamish out of the bakery until after this magic show is over and he calms down," Laura said. So when Hamish came in, she told him that she thought he should enjoy a three-day weekend with Joyce.

"If I needed a long weekend, I would have asked for one," Hamish grumbled.

"Sometimes we don't know what we need until we get it," Laura answered brightly. "And now you've got it."

Molly and Carol bit their lips waiting for Hamish's response, but he nodded brusquely and stomped off. Once he was out of earshot, Laura whispered, "Hopefully the long weekend will reset Hamish's grumpiness to a normal level."

Carol thought that was overly optimistic, but it meant that Bridget's

cheerful presence cast a sunny glow on the bakehouse all day Friday with no threat of clouds.

“I love Hamish,” Molly said on Friday afternoon as she helped sanitize the stainless steel counters in the kitchen at the end of the day. “But I was ready for a little break from the growling.”

“I wish we had more information,” Carol said as she rinsed out a cleaning rag before tossing it in the bucket for the laundry. The faint scent of lemon hung in the air over the bucket, a smell Carol always associated with cleanliness. “We know Hamish is mad at that magician, of course, but how did the man go from being Hamish’s best friend to being someone he threatens with bodily harm?”

“I wish Argyll came in here more often.” Laura tossed her own cleaning rag in the bucket after Carol’s. “He’s a talker. We could have gotten it out of him.”

Molly smiled sheepishly. “I actually drove by Argyll’s Autos on Wednesday afternoon and considered pulling in to ask him about Hamish, but I’m not good at resisting sales pressure and I don’t need a new car. Hey, maybe you should go ask him some questions.” She waved her cleaning cloth toward Laura. “You’re great at resisting sales pressure.”

Laura folded her arms over her chest. “Tempting, and I’d pump the man for information if he showed up here, but going to the car lot seems extreme.”

“Oh admit it,” Molly said. “You’re scared of the car lot too.”

“Not me.” Laura shook her head, her expression stoic, then she cracked and grinned at both of them. “But I know one of you two will eventually go down there to talk to Argyll. You can’t resist.”

Carol responded by pushing Laura’s arm playfully. “You think we’re nosy?”

Laura shrugged, her brown eyes full of mischief. “If the nose fits.”

Molly walked over to join her friends, tossing her own cleaning cloth in the bucket. “Hey chef, does that make you the pot or the kettle?”

Laura grinned again. “The pot, I suppose.”

“May I interrupt your banter?” Carol asked. “I found out a few things about Ian Bathgate.”

“Found out how?” Molly asked.

“Harvey,” Carol admitted. “I told him about the whole scene with Hamish and asked him to see what he could track down. If there’s a fact available, he’ll find it.” Then she frowned. “Though he drew the line at quizzing Argyll.”

“So what did he dig up?” Laura asked, her face reflecting the same curiosity as Molly’s.

“He learned Ian Bathgate built his career in Las Vegas,” Carol said. “He never seemed to be a headliner, but his visibility did pick up after he was on television.”

“Television where?” Molly asked. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“A cable series about the invention of magical illusions,” Carol said. “Ian Bathgate performed on several episodes. He appears to be fairly well known among magicians, mostly for inventing a number of new illusions.”

“That’s interesting,” Molly said. “I wonder if Fergus has ever heard of him. He went through a magic phase when we were kids. I had to pick a card, any card, over and over one summer.”

Carol suppressed a grin, as she often did when Molly mentioned Fergus MacGregor, the owner of the luxurious Castleglen golf resort. Though Molly insisted Fergus remained just an old friend, Carol couldn’t help but notice how often he came up in conversation. Instead of teasing Molly, though, Carol said, “I’m pretty sure half the boys in America go through a magic phase. Harvey still sometimes ‘finds’ quarters behind the twins’ ears.”

She smiled at the mental image of her husband playing with their grandkids, seven-year-old Maisie and Gavin. The twins lived in Loch Mallaig but were currently vacationing in Yellowstone National Park with their parents, the MacCallans' daughter, Jenny, and her husband, Craig, and Carol missed the whole bunch. They were a big part of the reason she and Harvey had moved here, after all.

Laura tapped Carol's arm. "Back to the topic at hand. Is that all Harvey discovered?"

"Interestingly enough, no. He also found out that Ian Bathgate's wife died a little less than a year ago. She was his assistant in the act."

"That would clarify things if Ian Bathgate was the one being a horrible grouch," Laura said. "But it doesn't do much to explain Hamish's mood at all. At worst, you'd think Hamish would have some compassion for a man who lost his wife recently."

"Maybe he doesn't know," Molly suggested. "If the feud between them is from years ago, he may not be aware of any recent bereavement."

"Not that the magician appeared particularly bereaved," Carol said drily. "Though I suppose he could simply be a good actor."

"He is a professional performer." Laura brushed her hands together. "And that brings me to the end of the day. I think I'm going to head home, put up my feet, and go through the pile of food magazines waiting for me. I feel guilty if I toss one in the recycle bin before I actually read it."

"I can relate," Carol said. "I thought I'd have more time for reading by my age, but I still always have a pile of magazines and a stack of books waiting for me."

Molly didn't join in the magazine talk, and Carol noticed her pensive expression. "What's on your mind, Molly?"

"I was wondering if Ian would be working alone in his show," Molly answered. "I know illusionists usually have an assistant, but if his wife died less than a year ago, maybe he works solo now. The idea

makes me sad.” A widow whose husband had passed away more than a decade earlier, Molly was sensitive to such matters. “I’m planning to go to his show. I guess I’ll get my answer then. Are either of you going?”

“Nope,” Laura said. “I have never seen the allure of magic myself. And I don’t much appreciate his coming to our bakery to shill for the show. He didn’t even buy a scone.”

“In his defense,” Carol said, “Hamish practically threw him out. He didn’t have a chance to buy a scone.”

Laura raised her eyebrows. “You think he was planning to?”

Carol thought about it a moment, then shook her head. “No, I think he was focused on promoting.”

“Hey now, let’s not badmouth business promotions,” Molly said, holding up a hand. Since Molly handled the bulk of Bread on Arrival’s marketing efforts, Carol could understand her being stung by any criticism of the activity.

“You’d never go to someone else’s place of business and play carnival barker for our bakehouse,” Laura replied. “You’re too much of a class act for that.”

“Which brings us to Ian Bathgate’s act again,” Carol said. “I’ll be at the show, and I hope to bring Harvey along if I can lure him away from his fishing flies. He says they’ve been flying out the door.”

Molly and Laura groaned together at the puns, making Carol laugh.

“On that note, I’m out of here,” Laura said. She walked across the room to grab her purse from the table where they packed orders for shipping. “I’m sure I can count on you two to tell me anything interesting that happens tonight.”

“You got it,” Carol sang out.

“Have a good time with your magazines,” Molly added.

Laura’s voice rang down the hall on her way to the door. “Hottest date in town.”

“I should get going too,” Carol said. “Do you want to meet outside the community center? Then we can sit together.”

“That would be fun,” Molly agreed. “I always enjoy a show more with friends.”

Carol started across the room to grab her own purse. “I’m glad the show is only one night. Maybe the magician will leave town right after and we’ll get our old Hamish back.”

Molly nodded. “I could go for that.”

“I feel for Joyce right now,” Carol added. “Having Hamish here this week has been like working with a bear full of porcupine quills. I can’t begin to imagine how he’s acting at home. I spoke to Joyce on the phone Wednesday, and she is clearly at her wits’ end.”

“It reminds me to appreciate my quiet apartment with Angus,” Molly said. On cue, a flurry of barks erupted in the yard. Molly’s adorable Scottish terrier loved to spend sunny days in the bakehouse’s fenced-in “barking lot” at the base of the outside stairs, where they also welcomed customers’ well-behaved dogs while their owners snacked in the bakehouse. Angus could go in and out whenever he pleased, and he spent most nice days outside. This normally helped him pass the time well, but he wasn’t above missing his favorite human now and then. “Speaking of which, apparently Angus is more than ready for his walk.”

Carol went out with Molly. In the yard of the huge, butter-yellow Victorian that housed the bakery, the air carried a mixture of scents. The aroma of fresh bread had followed the women out the door, to be mingled with the sweetness of flowers, blooming in beds around the house and in planters near the street. A faint smell of fish and big water came off Loch Mallaig, the town’s namesake lake. Though Carol couldn’t see the lake from where they stood in the yard, she knew it was easily visible from the windows of Molly’s apartment upstairs.

“Hello, handsome,” Molly said, then reached over the picket fence that circled the yard and scooped up Angus.

Carol paused to pet him, and the little Scottie basked in the attention that he clearly felt was his due.

“I hope we figure out something about Hamish soon,” Molly said. “I’m worried about him.”

“Me too.” Carol gave Angus a last rub under the chin and added, “And I think Joyce is about ready to put him on an all-haggis diet if he doesn’t tell her what’s wrong soon. Maybe something will happen tonight to shed some light on it.”

Molly rolled her eyes. “What could happen at a magic show? I can’t imagine Ian Bathgate making announcements about some past transgression against Hamish in the middle of his act.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Carol agreed. “Either way, it should be a good show.”



As excited voices buzzed around them in the line for the magic show, Carol eased closer to Harvey, using him as a windbreak. She’d expected the June evening to be warm, but a cool breeze had kicked up at sunset, and Carol wished for something heavier than her cotton cardigan.

“I’d think you were showing a touching burst of affection,” Harvey said and he moved even closer to her, “if I didn’t know you were using me for a heat source.”

“Not a heat source, a windbreak.” Carol slipped an arm through his and leaned close enough to catch the scent of his aftershave. “Though I’m perfectly happy to show a touching burst of affection.”

He chuckled. “I’ll take it.”

Carol peered toward the parking lot, concerned that she hadn't seen Molly yet. The line was moving fairly quickly toward the double doors at the front of the large brick-clad building, and they'd soon be inside with no Molly in sight.

At a chime from her purse, Carol dipped her hand inside to retrieve her phone, then groaned, reading the text on the screen. "Molly's not coming."

"Something wrong?" Harvey asked, concern lacing his tone.

"Not with Molly," Carol said. "But apparently Angus managed to get into some garbage on their walk and has an upset stomach. She doesn't want to leave him alone in case he gets worse and needs a trip to the vet."

"I imagine he'll be fine," Harvey said. "Dogs have cast-iron stomachs."

Carol gave him a quick side-eye glance as she typed a response to Molly's text. "I think you're confusing dogs with you."

"I only do that when I'm in the doghouse," Harvey said.

After Carol finished her message wishing Angus well, she dropped the phone into her purse. She began to slip her arm through Harvey's again, but he reached out to take her hand instead. He leaned forward to speak close to her ear, his voice a low rumble. "I get you all to myself this evening."

"Right," she said. "In a community center crammed with people."

They reached the doors and stepped into the building. They had a much shorter line to reach the folding tables in the foyer that had been set up to sell tickets to the show. The Loch Mallaig Community Center was a multipurpose building with five small meeting rooms in addition to the large space that frequently served as practice area for various community organizations. It also hosted most of Loch Mallaig's larger performances, exhibits, and the like.

The buttery aroma of fresh popcorn in the air suggested concessions would be sold during the performance. Carol wasn't surprised, as the

manager of the community center, Veronica Drummond, didn't miss many opportunities to raise funds.

When they reached the folding tables, Carol was surprised to see Bridget, her shoulder-length black hair pulled into a perky high ponytail.

"What are you doing here?" Carol asked.

"Volunteering," Bridget said brightly. "I get college credit if I do enough community service. Plus, I'll see the show for free. I like free."

"I never met a college student who didn't," Harvey said as he pulled out his wallet to pay for the tickets.

Carol eyed the large poster that stood on an easel behind Bridget. It showed Ian Bathgate in the same purple vest he'd worn at the bakehouse, though this time it coordinated with the lining of a long black cape draped over the magician's shoulders.

"Performing for sold-out crowds for three decades," Carol read aloud from the poster. "That seems unlikely."

"Never believe hype," Harvey suggested as he took the tickets from Bridget and steered Carol around the table.

Despite Carol's agreement with Harvey's sentiment, the performance proved to be surprisingly good. Ian walked out on stage with his hands in the air. He wore what was clearly his signature purple vest, but he'd eschewed the cape in the poster. Instead, he sported a kilt whose colors clashed almost painfully with the vest.

"Hello, again, Loch Mallaig!" he boomed. "I know you enjoy a bit of Scotland in everything you do, so here I am." He flung out his arms and spun.

A smattering of laughter and applause met that comment, and the magician moved smoothly into his act by producing a bouquet of Scottish thistles that were obviously fake. To the amusement of the audience, he made a big show of being stung by them, then made them disappear by tossing them to the ground in a burst of fire and smoke.

It was from the covering smoke that Carol got the answer to another question. Ian Bathgate did, in fact, have a new assistant—a young, beautiful woman with a head full of wild, blonde curls who emerged from the smoke screen to a smattering of applause.

Though Carol watched the magician closely, she couldn't work out how he was doing most of his tricks and whispered as much to Harvey. His reply made her giggle softly. "What did you expect from someone who has performed to sold-out crowds for three decades?"

The show was a mix of old-school sleight of hand and big illusions, including one in which the assistant vanished from a large box only to reappear in a totally different box. Then, while Ian was doing a trick that involved oversize playing cards, he scanned the audience and suddenly stumbled over his words. He dropped the handful of cards, which fluttered to the floor around his feet. He laughed shakily, pretending the drop was part of his act, but Carol was sure he'd had some kind of shock.

She twisted in her seat, searching the rear of the room for an idea of what the magician may have seen to cause such a reaction. To her surprise, she spotted Hamish standing near the door, his arms crossed and his face full of fury. Hamish was partially blocked from her view by another man, this one was taller than Hamish with broad shoulders and muscles bulging under a black T-shirt.

Carol wondered if the sight of Hamish had upset the magician, but she couldn't imagine why. After all, Ian Bathgate had seen a similarly fuming Hamish at the bakery on Monday and had not reacted strongly. Then, as Carol watched, the bigger man lightly pushed Hamish. Hamish responded by letting the man herd him through the doors and out of the room.

"You're looking the wrong way," Harvey whispered to her.

Carol faced forward to watch the magician again. Ian seemed to have recovered his aplomb, and the rest of the act went smoothly. He was quite accomplished, and Carol found she was glad they'd come to see him.

When the show ended, the audience clapped enthusiastically, even rising to their feet for a standing ovation. Carol joined in, though she felt slightly disloyal to Hamish when she did. Then again, whatever Ian Bathgate had done to upset her friend, he was unquestionably an accomplished magician deserving of her appreciation.

The applause continued long enough to bring the magician out for a curtain call. He beamed at the crowd and promised them one more trick to thank them for their kindness. His young assistant wheeled a large box onto the stage. Unlike the ones the magician had used earlier, this one appeared to be metal, made to resemble a safe with a door and a dial on the front.

"I should warn you," Ian said. "This safe is quite airtight, with only enough breathable air for two short minutes. Thanks to some ancient Tibetan techniques I have mastered, I will put myself in a semitrance while escaping from cuffs, chains, and this safe."

The assistant scurried off the stage again before returning with an oversize timer on wheels.

"Because the safe only holds two minutes of air," the magician explained in an ominous tone, "we must run a timer as a safety precaution."

The assistant snapped cuffs on Ian's wrists, then wrapped him in chains that she secured with padlocks. Finally she spun the dial dramatically and swung open the door. After a dramatic nod to the audience, Ian squished himself into the space. His assistant closed the door and threw a dark cloth over the safe.

She slapped a large red button on the oversize timer to set it in motion. The audience listened to the loud ticking and waited for Ian to

appear. Carol found herself holding her breath as the timer ticked closer to the end. The time passed and the alarm went off. The assistant clapped her hands to her face, fretting and frowning—but was it for show?

“He’s probably already out of the box,” Harvey whispered to Carol.

More time passed, and the audience grew restless. Becoming increasingly anxious, the young assistant pulled the cloth from the safe, which still sat sealed on the stage. She spun the dial and swung open the door.

Ian Bathgate spilled out of the safe and onto the floor, where he lay without moving. The young woman stood over him and screamed. “Somebody help!”