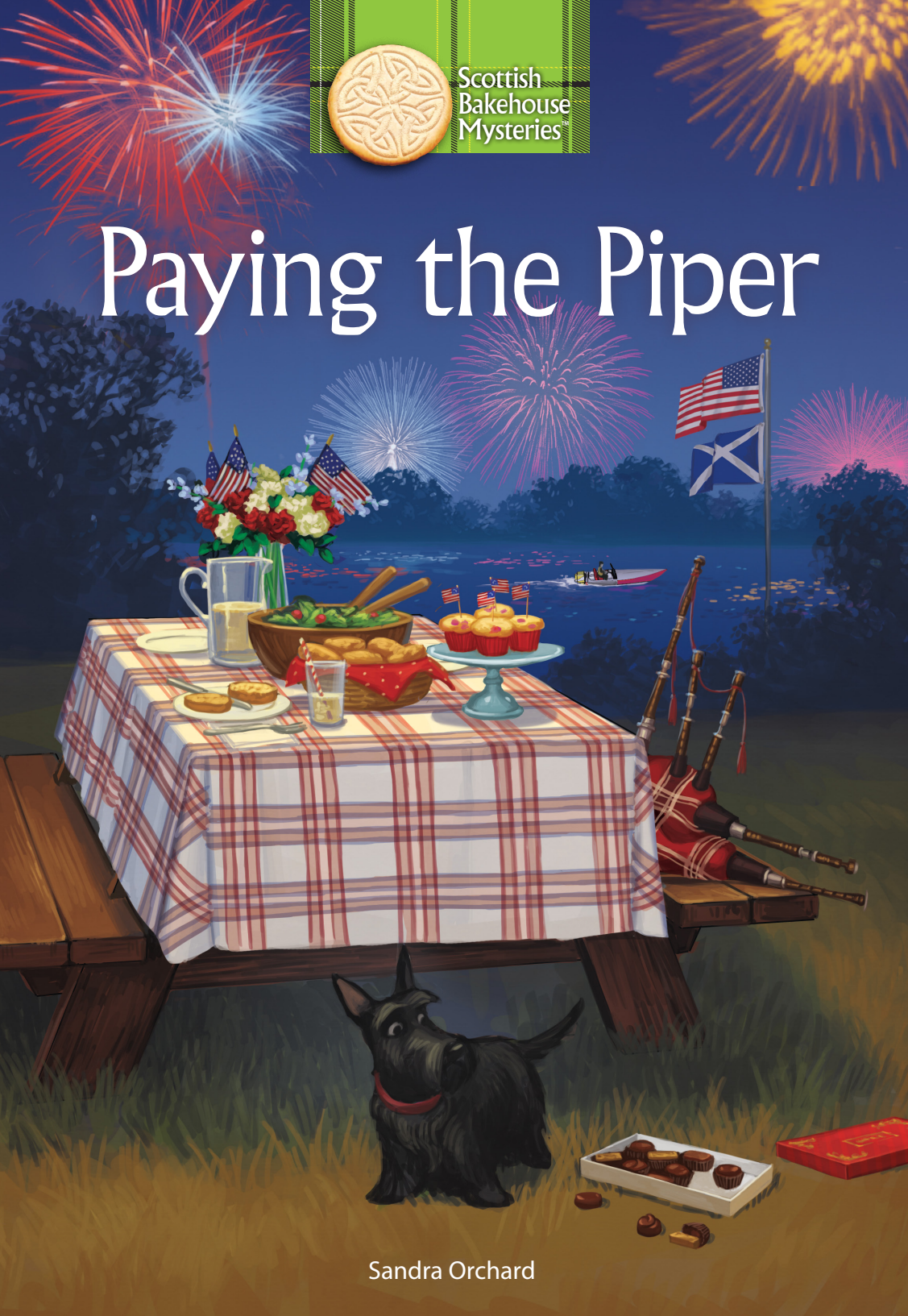




Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries™

Paying the Piper



Sandra Orchard



Paying the Piper



Sandra Orchard

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Paying the Piper

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“Independence Day celebrations don’t get any better than this,” Molly Ferris said to her best friends, Carol MacCallan and Laura Donovan, as they arranged supper dishes on the picnic table they’d commandeered. When they’d been college roommates thirty-plus years ago, none of them could ever have imagined that one day they’d move to Michigan’s Upper Peninsula to open a Scottish bakehouse together in the picturesque town of Loch Mallaig.

Laura added a salmon salad—a signature dish from her former days as an NYC chef—to the table. “It’s always special when we come together as a community to celebrate.”

The women, along with their staff and families, set up lawn chairs and blankets at the end of Dumfries Park closest to the regal, butter-yellow Victorian that housed their business, Bread on Arrival. Satisfied everything was ready for the picnic, Molly swept aside her long blonde bangs and shaded her eyes to scan the spectacular view. Visible across Yooper Boulevard, the town’s namesake lake sparkled under a cloudless sky, and the sun cast vivid reflections of the rugged shoreline in the still water.

“The entire town seems to be here.” Carol smiled at her seven-year-old twin grandchildren, Maisie and Gavin, as they played tag with some other children. The lure of watching the kids grow up had inspired Carol and her husband, Harvey, to move here upon her retirement from teaching high school math—and that move had led Molly and Laura to join her.

With a loud *whomp*, a flying disk smacked their handyman and part-time helper, Hamish Bruce, in his midriff. A confirmed curmudgeon, the retired history teacher put on his grumpiest face, his white beard twitching with irritation. Grabbing the offending disk, he sprang from his lawn chair. The little redheaded girls across the lawn paused and stared at Hamish for a moment, clearly nervous about his reaction. Then with a wink, Hamish grinned and flicked the disk across the lawn to his now-giggling granddaughters.

“Events that include the wee *bairns* always do well,” he said in the Scottish accent he brought out for special occasions. Although born and raised in America, Hamish had grown up revering the town’s Scottish heritage like most other Loch Mallaig natives.

Molly’s Scottish terrier, Angus, sped after the disk, yipping happily. With a leap that would do the local Leaping Lowlanders dance troupe proud, he grabbed it at the same time as one of the girls. The game then switched to tug-of-war, and more laughter ensued.

“And at least the organizers spared us from having to listen to the Pipe Dreamers,” Hamish grumbled. “No slight intended,” he quickly added to Molly, a member of the town’s bagpiper group, really called The Piping Yoopers.

“You don’t enjoy bagpipe music?” asked the petite strawberry blonde who’d arrived with Hamish and his family. “I adore listening to the bagpipes.”

Harvey, who was manning the grill, his skin glistening with perspiration from the heat, chuckled at Hamish’s irritable grunt. They all knew that Hamish’s distaste for the “infernal noise” had more to do with the fact that The Piping Yoopers practiced in the park on Sunday afternoons, when Hamish liked to bird-watch, than his taste in music.

“This is Lucy Bruce Drake, the daughter of Hamish’s late cousin,”

Carol explained to her husband. “Lucy, this handsome grill master is my husband, Harvey.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Lucy said. “I’ve enjoyed getting to know Carol a little bit on my visits to the bakehouse to see Hamish. She’s been so welcoming.”

“That’s her specialty. We’re happy to have you here in Loch Mallaig, Lucy,” Harvey said.

Lucy beamed. “I’m happy to be here.” As it had for Carol, family had drawn Lucy to the small town in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Hamish and his siblings were the only living relatives Lucy had left since losing her husband in a tragic car accident.

“How do you like the house you’re renting?” Molly asked Lucy. “Settling in okay?”

Lucy’s smile turned wry. “Honestly, I can’t wait to buy a place of my own. I can do no right in the eyes of my neighbor. He’s phoned my landlord on me twice already. It’s downright nerve-racking.” She opened the lid of her cooler and withdrew a tray of homemade chocolates. “I couldn’t even bribe him to like me with chocolate. He doesn’t eat it.” She scoffed. “I mean, that’s not normal. Who doesn’t like chocolate?”

“Oh, those look delicious.” Laura eyed Lucy’s latest creations. As the chief baker of their threesome, she was usually the hardest to impress when it came to food.

Lucy beamed at Laura’s encouragement. “I’ve been experimenting with Tunnock-type creations, and I brought these for everyone to try.”

“When it comes to pleasing folks in Loch Mallaig, you can’t go wrong with Tunnock’s,” Carol put in. “They’ve been one of Scotland’s go-to chocolate manufacturers since the late 1800s. A perfect fit for our town of lads and lasses.”

“Aye, but the founders of Loch Mallaig left Scotland decades before

Tunnock's came to be," Hamish said. He could always be counted on to share historical tidbits, whether his audience was eager or not.

His wife, Joyce, was apparently in the "not" category today. "Yes, but The Hamper still carries their products, so everyone knows and loves them." The Hamper, Loch Mallaig's local grocery store, carried a wide variety of imported Scottish foods and drinks for the townsfolk to enjoy. "Lucy, please tell us about your chocolates before Hamish launches into the history of Loch Mallaig—again."

"Sure." Lucy sliced into a chocolate-covered dome about as big around as a silver dollar. She held up one half to reveal a marshmallow atop a cookie inside the chocolate. "This is similar to the Tunnock's tea cake. I always thought marshmallow was harder to make than it is."

"I love that one. Both yours and the original." Joyce's eyes sparkled. "Your marshmallow is divine and the shortbread biscuit is the perfect crispness." She sighed. "All wrapped in a delicate layer of scrumptious chocolate."

"Cousin Joyce is my taste tester," Lucy explained. "Apparently she ought to write my marketing copy too."

Joyce, standing no taller than Lucy at just over five feet, patted her pleasantly plump figure. "I'm going to be ten pounds heavier by the time her chocolate shop opens if I'm not careful."

"Seems like a worthwhile trade-off," Molly joked.

"Burgers are ready," Harvey called from the grill.

"I suppose we ought to wait until after we eat to try these," Joyce said wistfully. "At least none of the rest of you know what you're missing."

Children came running, and parents helped them fill their plates and settle on the blankets.

Laura pulled her electronic tablet from her tote. "We need a group photo. Everyone gather around behind the kids."

A passing teenage boy on a skateboard offered to snap the picture for her so she could be in the it too. Laura handed over her tablet and dashed across the picnic blanket to join the collected group.

“Everyone say ‘cheese,’” Joyce sang out.

“Cheese,” they all said in unison as the teen repeatedly tapped the screen.

The boy frowned. “It’s not working.”

Laura hurried back to show him how to use the camera, but frowned when she couldn’t get the app to work either. “I don’t know what’s wrong with it. It was fine earlier.”

“Let Lucy check it out,” Joyce said. “She fixed my computer last week.”

Laura’s eyes widened. “You make delicious chocolate *and* know how to fix computers? A woman of many talents. Do you think you can troubleshoot my tablet?”

Lucy shrugged and approached Laura. “I can give it a shot.” She tapped at the screen for about thirty seconds, then handed it back to the teen. “Try it now.”

His skeptical expression quickly morphed into pleasant surprise. “Okay everybody, we’re good. Say ‘cheese.’”

Laura returned to the group. “Wait,” she said to the teen, then waved at Lucy. “Lucy, get over here.”

Lucy waved her hand. “That’s okay.”

“Nonsense,” Joyce said. “You’re part of the family.”

Lucy shrugged, then obliged. Their impromptu photographer snapped a dozen photos in quick succession and returned the tablet to Laura.

Molly surveyed the pictures over Laura’s shoulder. “Wow, that tablet takes pretty good photos.” She laughed at the funny faces Carol’s grandchildren had made in one of them. And the rabbit ears Hamish’s

son, Logan, had held behind his dad in another. Logan was tall like his dad but with a more muscular build, and Hamish had likely had the same thick, red hair back when he was forty too. However, Logan must've inherited his playful personality from his mother.

"Aw, Lucy, you're completely hidden behind Logan," Laura said. "We'll have to try again later."

Once adults had served themselves from the buffet of burgers, salads, and corn bread, everyone settled down to eat the potluck meal. Their large group was spread out on several blankets, with Molly, Laura, and Angus sharing one between Hamish and Joyce on one side and Carol and Harvey on another. The MacCallans' daughter, Jenny, her husband, Craig, and the twins were at the next blanket over.

Gavin suddenly reached toward Harvey and tugged on his pant leg. "Look at that old car, Grandpa!" The boy pointed to a shiny green Mustang cruising along Yooper Boulevard, and everyone oohed and aahed to the youngster's satisfaction.

"That reminds me," Hamish said to Molly. "I noticed on my delivery route yesterday that the LaSalle's been spitting and sputtering. We should get it checked."

Molly nodded solemnly. "We can't afford to have it out of commission. We'd be lucky to fit half our orders into any of our own cars." The 1939 LaSalle hearse had come with the funeral home they'd converted into the bakery, and the classic car had been working out wonderfully as their delivery vehicle—at least until now.

"I can ask Pierre to investigate," Logan offered from his spot on the other side of Hamish. "He's my maintenance man at the marina and great with anything mechanical. He won't mind working on the LaSalle outside of business hours. He even mentioned that he's sourced a new auto parts guy that'll sell him supplies at wholesale, so that could save you a few bucks."

Molly offered a grateful smile. Logan ran a tight ship over at the Mighty Scot Marina, and Molly knew that if this Pierre fellow had Logan's stamp of approval, he had earned it. "That sounds great."

"I'll ask him if he can stop at the bakehouse after he finishes work tomorrow," Logan promised.

Molly noticed that he sounded tired, and when he rubbed his temple, she grew concerned. "Are you all right, Logan?"

"Just a headache setting in," he said with a wan smile. "Nothing major."

"This is a nice spot for a nap." Molly glanced at his four boisterous daughters. "If you can get one."

Although the adults savored their meals, the children devoured their food in record time. As they were getting antsy to run off and play again, Fergus MacGregor rode up on a bicycle-driven ice cream trolley.

Molly's heart fluttered as the handsome man's blue-eyed gaze met hers, reminding her of how she'd felt when they were teens and her family had vacationed in Loch Mallaig. She mentally shook her head at the involuntary reaction. She wasn't a teenager anymore.

"Can I interest anyone in an ice cream cone?" Fergus dismounted and opened the top of his cooler to reveal several tubs of ice cream. He grabbed a scoop and a waffle cone. "On the house."

Fergus owned the Castleglen golf resort and lodge outside of town, but this was the first Molly had seen him serving ice cream. "Is this a new sideline?" she teased.

Fergus grinned, and Molly remembered the dimples behind his dark beard and mustache. "I picked this up for a song to advertise the resort at next week's Scottish Games Festival," he explained. "I thought I'd take it for a test drive before one of my staffers gets all the fun of driving it."

The children eagerly gathered around, calling out their orders. Laura jumped up and snapped photos of the hullabaloo.

Hamish's daughter-in-law, Tanya, joined in. She held up her cell phone to snap a picture, but almost immediately turned to Lucy. "My camera isn't working either. What is it? A new software update that's got these things glitching?"

"Sometimes that's what it is." Lucy stood and took the phone from Tanya, then tapped on the screen. A moment later, she handed it back.

Joyce raised an eyebrow. "Maybe you should open a dual business—a technology-fixing chocolate shop."

Everyone laughed, and Lucy ducked her head, appearing self-conscious at all the attention.

A former event planner who now served as Bread on Arrival's marketing strategist, Molly smiled sunnily. "It's not a bad idea, Lucy. You'd be amazed how having a unique way to market your business affects sales."

"It's too bad this year's Michigan Sugar Showcase competition doesn't have a chocolate-making category," Harvey said as he and Carol joined the conversation. "Doing well in that could get your upcoming shop great publicity."

"Oh, she's entered." Molly shot Lucy a teasing rivalrous look. "She was one of the first people to sign up for exactly that reason, Harvey."

The Michigan Sugar Showcase had once been held adjacent to the state fair, but the multiday baking event had proven so popular that it had branched off into its own entity. This year it would feature a Scottish theme, and the competition's coordinators had wisely selected Loch Mallaig as the setting. Additionally, the contest would take place during the town's annual Scottish Games Festival, lending more excitement to both events. And since Molly had lobbied hard for Loch Mallaig to be the competition's locale, she figured it was only fair she should volunteer to collect registrations.

“Ooh.” Joyce clapped her hands together. “You’ll be a shoo-in for the tablet category.”

Lucy’s cheeks flushed crimson. “Thanks, Joyce, but there are two other categories. I’ve toyed with tablet since it’s a candy, but I’ve never made a clottie dumpling in my life.”

Joyce gaped. “I’m surprised your mother never taught you. They were one of her specialties.”

“Don’t sweat it.” Harvey grinned. “No one can beat my wife’s dumplings anyway.”

Carol swatted his arm, but Molly could tell she was flattered by the compliment.

Like Lucy, the Bakehouse Three hoped a good showing in the contest would bring welcome publicity to Bread on Arrival, although just having the filmed competition take place in their town was a coup in itself. It would be broadcast statewide later that summer.

Lucy retrieved her plate from her blanket and deposited it in the nearest trash bin, then excused herself. “I’m going to check out some of the activities going on in the park before sunset,” she said. “I’ll be back for the fireworks.”

“We’ll save you a spot,” Joyce promised.

Molly noticed several volunteer firefighters already heading down the bluff to the pier below, where they’d be setting off the evening’s fireworks show. She approached Fergus, who was still scooping ice cream. He was a member of the Loch Mallaig Volunteer Fire Company. “You’re not part of the fireworks detail tonight?”

He shook his head. “Fortunately, they had more than enough volunteers.”

“They’ll have the finest view,” Hamish said.

“We’re watching the fireworks from a boat,” Hamish’s eldest granddaughter, Courtney, piped up.

Tanya's expression grew apologetic. "I think we'll have to take a rain check on doing that," she told her daughter. "Daddy's migraine has gotten worse, and he's going home to lie down. We're going to stay here and watch the fireworks with our friends. Won't that be fun?"

"Yeah!" the younger Bruce girls shouted, almost spilling their double-scoop ice cream cones. The eldest seemed disappointed by the change in plans.

Logan removed his ball cap and raked his fingers through his dark red hair. "I'm sorry, sweetie," he said to Courtney. "We'll do a night cruise with the Agnews another time." He said goodbye to the rest of the group, then headed off.

Fergus handed Molly a three-scoop tower—strawberry, chocolate, and vanilla. "As I recall, you could never decide on a favorite flavor when we were teens."

Molly giggled. "Still can't. Thank you." Her skin tingled where his fingers had grazed hers during the handoff. Why was she reacting to him this way? It must be the Independence Day picnic bringing back memories of her teenage crush.

Fergus rode off to serve ice cream to the next group of picnickers. Molly sat down to enjoy her treat beside Laura, who had returned to their blanket with her own cone.

Laura elbowed her. "He *really* likes you, you know."

"We're old friends."

"Uh-huh."

Conversations shifted to preparations for the Scottish Games Festival, which was scheduled to begin that Friday in Dumfries Park. The event would overlap with the Michigan Sugar Showcase, likely drawing record crowds to town.

"The games attract lots of tourists as well as competitors," Joyce said. "Did you know Fergus is always a top contender in the annual caber toss?"

“Oh really?” Carol said, smirking, as she and Laura batted their lashes at Molly.

Molly rolled her eyes at their teasing. She wasn’t surprised Fergus was a champion log thrower. He certainly had the muscles for it, much more than when he’d first tried to impress her with his skills as a gangly fifteen-year-old.

“The Sugar Showcase will attract a whole new cross section of visitors too,” Molly pointed out to change the subject. “Bakers from around the state will be here, as well as food lovers—and perhaps best of all for local business owners, news reporters from near and far.”

Hamish grumbled something unintelligible about reporters and Joyce shot him a frown, then she said, “Logan is hoping it’ll bring more business to his marina. The last couple of summers have been a little lean with the crazy weather we’ve had.”

Jenny finished helping Gavin wipe chocolate ice cream from his mouth. She sent the boy off to play with the other children and Angus, who considered himself one of the kids. “How does the baking contest work?” she asked. “I mean aside from local contestants who can bake at home, where will contestants prepare their entries?”

“Booths equipped with counters, refrigerators, cooking ranges, and ovens will be set up here in the park,” Molly explained. “The contest coordinators are coming tomorrow to scout out the best place to set up. I’m hoping to persuade them that right here would be the perfect spot.”

“Near the bakehouse.” Jenny grinned. “Smart thinking.”

A woman passing by suddenly stopped and backtracked to where they were gathered. Her long black hair was pulled into a ponytail and she wore a T-shirt that read, *My candy will give you sweet dreams*. “Are you talking about the Michigan Sugar Showcase?”

“I love your shirt,” Laura said. “Are you a competitor?”

“Yes.” The woman adjusted her black-framed glasses, then extended her hand to shake Laura’s. “I’m Corie. I own Corie’s Candy Café in Kalamazoo.”

“Catchy name,” Laura said, then introduced Bread on Arrival’s team.

“You’re the bakery in the old funeral home?” Corie’s brows rose above her glasses frames.

“That’s us,” Molly said brightly.

Corie shuddered. “I don’t think I could stand working in a place that once housed caskets and dead bodies. I’m kind of surprised you chose a name that draws people’s attention to the fact. I, for one, would do my best to keep it secret.”

A smirk played on Carol’s lips. “If you think that’s bad, you’d hate our delivery vehicle. It’s the funeral home’s old hearse.”

At that revelation, another young woman who’d drawn up beside the first groaned. “That’s downright creepy.”

Harvey shrugged nonchalantly. “Based on business,” he said, his tone casual, “I’d wager you ladies are in the minority.”

Molly’s heart lightened at the supportive observation.

“Well,” the blonde newcomer said, “I’m hoping a contest win will give my business an advertising boost, because I don’t have anything quite so . . . dynamic to capitalize on.”

Laura introduced the Bread on Arrival crew again, then asked the blonde, “Where are you from?”

“I’m Patty from Pickford Pastries.” She showed them the writing on the beach bag slung over her shoulder, which read *Life is better with sprinkles on top*.

“That’s cute,” Carol said. “And it’s nice that you were both able to come early and enjoy a little vacation time before next weekend’s competition.”

“It helps that the holiday made it a short work week,” Patty said. “Fortunately, my husband is able to hold down the fort at the shop.”

Maisie closed the cooler and carried a juice box to Carol for help inserting the straw. “You should get T-shirts with sayings like that, Grandma.”

“That’d be fun,” Carol agreed. “We could wear matching ones for the contest. We need something uniquely Scottish too, in keeping with our town’s heritage.”

“Ooh, I have one,” Joyce blurted. “If Empire biscuits are wrong, I don’t want to be right.”

Everyone laughed. “Bridget will love that,” Molly said, referring to their college-age part-timer, who adored the shortbread sandwich cookies filled with raspberry jam.

Patty sniffed. “I suppose you ladies have lots of experience making Scottish baked goods.”

“The town *is* known for its Scottish heritage,” Laura said, “so residents and visitors alike expect to find their favorite goodies at our place. I like to think we’ve nailed the classics—Abernethy biscuits, Montrose cakes, Selkirk bannock, cranachan, and Empire biscuits.”

“But,” Molly interjected, “we’re all going to face stiff competition. There are a few competitors who actually hail from Scotland. Some local entrants had their families’ prized recipes handed down to them. And many simply love Scottish food.”

“Aye,” Joyce chimed in. “My husband’s second cousin . . . or is it first cousin once removed? I can’t keep track.” She shook her head. “Anyway, her name is Lucy Drake. She makes chocolate treats that rival any Tunnock’s goodies you’ve ever tasted. I daresay she’ll be the one to beat on the day everyone makes tablet.”

“I’m not thrilled that they combined baking and candy making in this contest,” Corie complained, crossing her arms. “But either way, losing isn’t an option for me. My café’s rent has doubled in the last year. Winning this contest is my last hope of keeping my shop open.” She stalked off before anyone could respond.

The streetlights came on and the rest of the children raced over from where they'd been playing tag. "It's getting dark," Alannah said. "Are they going to do the fireworks soon?"

"I imagine so," Hamish said. "You can play for a few more minutes, but stay close by."

Molly, Laura, and Carol continued chatting about the baking contest with Patty and a few other competitors who happened by. Before they knew it, darkness had fully descended, and the children scrambled for prime fireworks-viewing positions on their picnic blankets. But even as the first peony shell of colored lights burst open in the night sky, the visiting contestants didn't seem eager to stop chatting.

When another baker joined the conversation and claimed he had the winning shortbread recipe, Patty shook her head and boasted, "People would kill for the secret ingredient in mine."

Maisie jumped up from her blanket and ran over to Carol, her face awash with worry. "No one's going to kill you for your recipes, are they, Grandma?"

Carol gave her granddaughter a reassuring squeeze and tossed a silencing glare over her head at the chatty competitors. "Of course not, dear. It's just an expression. You go back and watch the fireworks."

Maisie ran off to join her friends, who were all mesmerized by the light show.

Then gasps that didn't coincide with the fireworks ignited not far from Molly, from the direction of a set of stairs that led down the bluff. A moment later, Lucy stumbled out of the darkness.

Weaving wildly, Lucy reached one hand toward the group, her other hand clutching her chest.

Molly surged toward the young woman. When she got close enough, she saw something dark seeping through Lucy's fingers.

“Help,” Lucy wheezed, then crumpled to the ground.

“Someone call an ambulance!” Molly skidded to her knees at the woman’s side, but the instant she lifted Lucy’s limp arm to feel for a pulse, she knew they were too late.



Molly sat back on her heels at Lucy's side, overcome by a sense of helplessness she hadn't felt since losing her husband more than a decade earlier. Several bystanders activated the flashlights on their cell phones and shined them toward Lucy's lifeless body. A red stain marred her blouse. Had she been stabbed? Shot?

Molly swallowed hard, but couldn't bring herself to inspect the source of blood more closely. Lucy's face was ashen, her hair wet and tangled as if she'd been in the lake. Her clothes were soggy too, and she was missing a sandal.

Tanya quickly corralled her four daughters before they could catch sight of the tragedy and herded them toward the parking lot amid protests that the fireworks weren't finished yet.

"I'll go with them," Joyce said to Hamish, her face almost as gray as Lucy's. "Tanya needs a hand with the girls."

"Aye," Hamish muttered, clearly distracted by the inexplicable attack on his relative—a relative he'd only recently reconnected with.

Carol and Harvey helped Jenny and Craig hustle their children safely away before they could see the horrific sight as well.

At the bottom of the bluff, the volunteer firefighters continued to ignite fireworks. The men were oblivious to the tragedy, as were most of the townsfolk crowded in the park to watch the show. That is, until an ambulance and police cruisers raced down Yooper Boulevard, lights flashing and sirens blaring.

By the time the grand finale lit the sky with one burst of colorful

showers after another, most of the crowd had turned their focus to the swirling lights of the emergency vehicles. Harvey flagged down the vehicles and directed them to Lucy's body.

Molly stepped back to give the paramedics space but stayed close as Hamish recapped to the responding officers what he knew of the situation. Laura appeared at Molly's side, holding a squirming Angus in her arms.

"Thanks so much for keeping him safe," Molly said, grabbing the end of the leash. She felt a shiver of guilt that she'd forgotten to keep tabs on her little dog amid the shock of Lucy's death. "You can set him down."

As Laura put Angus on the ground, Officer Greer Anderson hurried toward the scene. Molly knew her well from The Piping Yoopers as well as a handful of investigations the Bakehouse Three had found themselves embroiled in. Today Greer wasn't in uniform, no doubt in the park to celebrate the holiday like everyone else.

Some lookie-loos drew closer while others hastily gathered up lawn chairs and coolers, apparently hoping to make a quick escape ahead of the crowds.

Molly startled at that realization. Every single person here was a potential witness—and suspect. They had to be detained. She intercepted Greer. "You need to stop everyone from leaving. Lucy was shot or stabbed. Someone could have seen something and maybe not even realize it. Someone might've even seen the attacker running away."

"We'll do the best we can," Greer assured her. "Did you know the victim?"

"It's Lucy Drake, Hamish's cousin," Molly said. "She moved to town a month or so ago. She was picnicking with us, then she went off to explore. A few minutes ago, she stumbled toward us from the stairs down the bluff."

Carol and Laura had joined them halfway through Molly's account, and Carol said, "If Lucy was in the water near the pier, she wouldn't have been far from the firefighters. So why didn't she go to them for help?"

"Maybe she jumped into the water to get away from someone," Laura suggested. "And wasn't shot or stabbed until after she got back out and started up the stairs."

"We'll figure it out," Greer said, then excused herself to speak to the approaching police chief, Owen Thomson.

Carol tugged her cardigan more tightly around herself. "Why would anyone want to hurt Lucy?"

Molly couldn't help but play the horrifying scene over and over in her mind. Then she realized something that might be important. "She didn't have her beach bag with her anymore."

"But I can't imagine she'd have had anything valuable in it, at least not valuable enough to get killed for," Carol countered.

"You're probably right," Molly agreed, then a fraught silence fell. She stood numbly beside her friends, wanting to help. But how?

Bystanders made way for Oliver Fitzgerald, the town's coroner and owner of their remaining funeral home. Besides his trademark bright-colored sneakers, the heavysset man wore Bermuda shorts and a collared shirt covered in a fireworks motif, a far cry from the business suit Molly usually saw him wearing. Everyone watched as he crouched to examine Lucy's body.

A few minutes later, Oliver stood and stripped off his latex gloves. He raked his fingers through his thick blond hair, appearing more disturbed than Molly would have expected of someone who regularly dealt with dead bodies. He joined Chief Thomson near a cruiser and the pair stood with their heads close together, their postures tense.

More officers arrived. Half of them worked at cordoning off the path Lucy had taken from the bluff, across Yooper Boulevard, then

through Dumfries Park, while the other officers collected statements from witnesses.

Fergus jogged up to Molly. "Are you okay?"

Tears sprang to Molly's eyes at the concern in his voice. "It's Lucy Drake. She's dead." Molly filled him in on what had happened.

"You don't know where she went after she left you earlier?" Fergus asked.

"Not really, no." Molly's voice caught.

Fergus clasped her shoulders and held her gaze. "The police will find whoever did this." His voice was firm, resolute.

She nodded, and he pulled her into a comforting hug. They broke apart after a few moments, though Fergus kept his arm around her shoulders. His cell phone rang from the pocket nearest Molly, but he ignored it, seemingly unwilling to let her go. It started up again moments after the first call had probably gone to voice mail.

"You should answer that," she told him.

He gave her shoulders another squeeze before releasing her, then snagged his phone and glanced at the screen. "It's the resort." He tapped the answer button. "Hello?" He listened intently, then asked, "Did you try resetting it?" Another pause. "Okay. I'll call Marvin and see if we can figure it out." He ended the call, then offered Molly an apologetic grimace. "I'm sorry. One of the security alarms is acting up at the resort, and my staff can't seem to silence it. Or at least keep it silent before it goes off again. I need to call our security company."

"Go ahead," Molly urged. "I have Laura and Carol here. I'll be fine."

He sighed. "I know you will." He glanced toward Hamish, who was still talking to one of the police officers. "But will Hamish?"

Molly's courage seeped from her like air from a deflating balloon. "I don't know. But we'll be here for him and Joyce."

Fergus nodded, then disappeared into the darkness.

As she watched him go, Molly heard no-nonsense librarian Grizela Duff giving her statement to young Officer Dalziel Murdoch nearby.

“When I returned my picnic basket to my car after supper, I saw that young lady in the parking lot arguing with a man.”

Molly’s ears perked up. Lucy had argued with someone?

Officer Murdoch was scribbling in his notebook. “Did you recognize him?”

“No.”

“So you don’t know whether he was local or from out of town,” the officer murmured.

Grizela drew herself up to her full height. “Officer Murdoch, as a longtime citizen as well as the head librarian and president of the Loch Mallaig Historical Society, I know every single face in this town. At least the ones who visit the library.” She cleared her throat. “Not that I’ve seen your face around there recently, young man.”

Murdoch flinched, but continued. “Can you remember anything else about the man?”

Grizela gave a condescending sniff. “Of course I can. I may be older than you, but my memory is fine. He wore an outback hat.”

He frowned in confusion. “A what?”

Grizela raised her eyes heavenward as if asking for patience. “An outback hat. One of those wide-brimmed khaki ones with the snap-up sides.”

“I see,” Murdoch said, considerably chastened.

While Grizela continued her discussion with Murdoch, Officer Michael Drummond wrapped up his interview with Hamish. When the officer moved on, Molly and her friends rallied around Hamish to offer moral support.

“Do you think this could’ve had something to do with your baking contest?” Hamish grumbled. “Some of those competitors you lot were

blethering with earlier seemed downright obsessed with winning. And you saw how Joyce said Lucy was a shoo-in for the tablet competition.”

“It’s possible, I suppose.” Molly shuddered, recalling Maisie’s fearful question to Carol about being killed for her recipe. “People have done worse for less.”

“Winning that contest was all Lucy talked about lately,” Hamish went on. “She was convinced it would catapult her new business to instant success. And some of those other folks seemed to have the same idea.”

Molly glanced around, wondering what had happened to those competitors. Not that they could have hurt Lucy. Patty and the guy whose name she’d never caught had still been in the immediate vicinity when Lucy had stumbled over.

“There’s no point in speculating,” Harvey said. “For all we know, someone from Lucy’s past could have followed her to Loch Mallaig. A romance turned sour, perhaps?”

“She only lost her husband six months ago,” Carol reminded him.

“Okay,” Harvey conceded, “but my point is, we really don’t know if she had enemies or if this was a random act of violence.”

Hamish’s shoulders slumped. “I should have tried harder to stay in touch with her after my cousin died. We were the last family she had. And here I couldn’t even tell the police if there’s anyone they should notify outside of my family.”

“She didn’t have any siblings?” Laura asked.

“She had a brother, but he was killed in the same house fire that took her parents when she was away at college.” Hamish shook his head. “Their funeral was the last time I’d seen her before she moved to Loch Mallaig. I think Joyce sent her Christmas cards, which is how we found out she got married not long after the fire. But I hadn’t heard of her husband’s death until she showed up here out of the blue.”

Someone's phone beeped with an incoming text. Molly, Laura, Carol, and Harvey all checked their phone screens. "It must be yours," Molly said to Hamish.

He blinked. "My what?"

"Your phone," Molly said.

"Oh right." Joyce made him carry a phone, but Hamish interacted with it as little as possible, disliking "the infernal thing." He pulled it out of his pocket. "Joyce wants me to call Lucy's late husband's brother to let him know what happened and ask him if he knows of anyone else that should be notified before her death hits the news."

"Do you know his name and number?" Harvey asked.

Hamish read the screen. "Joyce says it's Dean Drake. She must have gotten that from my granddaughter's family tree project."

"The one Grizela was helping her with?" Molly asked.

"Aye." A proud twinkle lit Hamish's eye. "With Grizela's help, Courtney found cousins upon cousins I never even knew I had."

"Did she take the family tree all the way back to Robert the Bruce?" Carol teased. Hamish was fond of telling them he was a direct descendant from the first king who'd fought England for Scottish independence.

"Nay, she petered out after a few generations." Hamish tapped Dean Drake's number into his phone.

A faint ring emanated from the darkness beyond the reach of the police searchlights.

"Do you hear that?" Molly whispered to Laura and Carol, peering at the trees as the sound repeated.

They edged toward the sound, but it stopped before they could pinpoint it.

Hamish's call went to voice mail, and he explained who he was and asked the man to call him as soon as he got the message.

“That was a weird coincidence.” Molly switched on the flashlight on her phone. “Do you think Lucy’s brother-in-law is here tonight?”

“If he was, why wouldn’t he have introduced himself?” Laura asked.

“That phone could have belonged to anyone,” Harvey reasoned. “Someone leaving, an officer searching for clues, or even a phone someone dropped. And it just happened to ring when Hamish tried to make the call.”

“True.” Still, Molly shivered. But what if the phone *had* belonged to Dean Drake? What reason might he have had for being there that night—and for hiding from them?