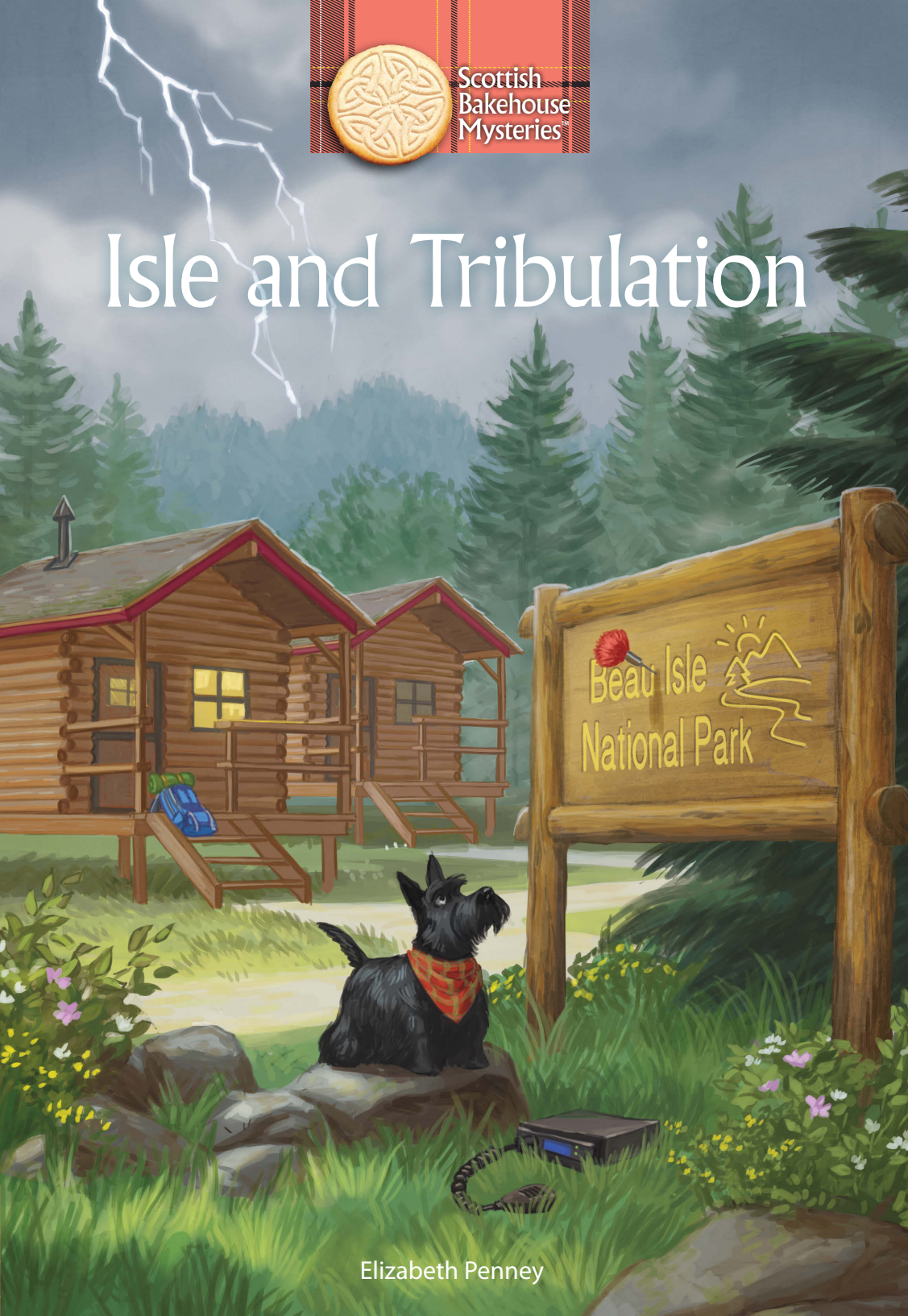




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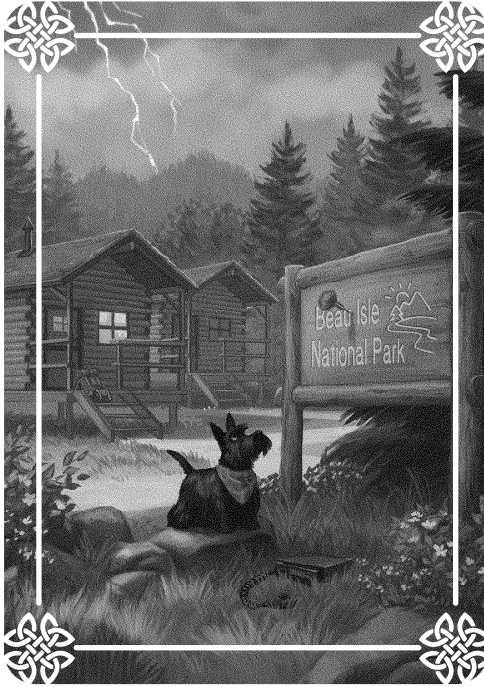
Isle and Tribulation



Elizabeth Penney



Isle and Tribulation



Elizabeth Penney

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Isle and Tribulation

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“He’s here,” Carol MacCallan sang out as she entered Bread on Arrival’s kitchen. She set an empty tray on the counter and grabbed a second holding an array of fresh-baked raspberry scones. “I do believe Warren is becoming one of our most loyal regulars.”

At the stand mixer, head baker Laura Donovan ducked her head, her cheeks flaming. “He does come in a lot, I have to admit.”

“Our baked goods are great, but I don’t think that’s the draw,” Molly Ferris, the third partner at Bread on Arrival, said with a smile. She had popped into the kitchen to grab a fresh bag of coffee grounds. On this bright summer morning, the early crowd had been out in full force and they were already on their third urn of coffee.

After hatching a plan at a college reunion, the trio had bought a beautiful Victorian house in Loch Mallaig, Michigan, a town founded in the early 1800s by Scottish immigrants that held its heritage in high regard. The building’s history as a former funeral parlor had made coming up with a name easy. Even better, working together had been surprisingly seamless, with Laura and Carol doing most of the baking while Molly handled marketing and sales.

“How long have you two been dating?” Molly asked. “I’ve lost track.” Molly was happy for Laura, who, after a disastrous engagement when she was thirty, had yet to find a man worth marrying. Although they knew Laura was fine solo, widowed Molly and happily married Carol hoped their friend would find the love she deserved. Molly didn’t know whether or not Warren was the right match, but at least Laura was enjoying herself.

Laura carefully measured a spoonful of baking powder before dumping it into the mixer bowl. “Oh, about a month or so. I don’t really remember.”

Molly didn’t believe that for a second, but she didn’t bother to argue. “I’d better get the next pot of coffee made. And I’ll tell Warren you’ll be right out to say hello, Laura.” Without waiting for an answer, she rushed back to the front of the bakehouse.

While she waited for the coffee to brew, her practiced eye swept over the customers, checking to see if anyone needed something. The small groups at scattered tables appeared perfectly content, either chatting quietly or reading the local newspaper. A few typed away on laptops, including Warren McMurphy, the man Laura had been dating.

Once the coffee was done, Molly filled a carafe and carried it over to Warren’s table since he had requested a refill. Warren, a history professor from a large college in Minneapolis called Blanchard University, was one of Loch Mallaig’s many summer residents. He owned a rustic cabin on the town’s namesake loch, where Molly would be attending a cookout that evening with Laura and Carol.

Warren continued to work as she approached, his long fingers tapping busily on the laptop keys. In his fifties, about the same age as Molly and her friends, the professor was lean, with chiseled features and silver-threaded dark hair that brushed his collar. During her few conversations with the man, Molly had gathered that he was an avid outdoorsman, and it showed in his muscled frame and deep tan. Laura was athletic as well, something she had in common with Warren.

Molly dispensed coffee into Warren’s mug. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

The professor finally glanced up, a twinkle in his hazel eyes. “Is Laura free? I have something to share with her.” He gestured to his laptop. “I thought it was bad news at first and I have to admit

being worried, but I think I've come up with a solution." He grinned smugly, deep smile lines bracketing his mouth.

Molly's curiosity was definitely piqued. "I'll go get her once I'm done with refills." She hurried across the room, pausing here and there to fill mugs, then swept into the kitchen.

Laura was watching as the stand mixer beat a large glob of bread dough. Molly had to come right up beside her so she could hear. "Warren has something important to tell you. Is this a good time to stop?"

The baker peered into the mixer, then shrugged and flipped the switch. "Sure, if I'm not gone too long." After wiping her hands on a towel, Laura followed Molly back into the main room.

"What's going on?" Carol asked, pausing in the act of placing clean mugs on a shelf behind the front counter.

"Come find out," Molly said, gesturing. At the moment, business was in a lull, with no new customers coming through the door.

The trio arrived at Warren's table. "Do sit down," he said with the professorial formality he frequently exhibited.

They all perched on their chairs, ready to jump up if duty called. Molly wondered what he thought about all three of them listening in when he had only asked for Laura. He probably realized by now that the Bakehouse Three often operated as a unit. Certainly Carol's husband, Harvey, and Molly's close friend, Fergus MacGregor, were well aware of this tendency.

"What's going on, Warren?" Laura asked. "I only have a few minutes to chat, sorry to say. I'm in the middle of making bread."

"I understand how difficult it can be to be interrupted in the midst of important work," he said magnanimously. "It would be a shame to distract you from creating something as delectable as your cherry sour cream scones." He waved toward a plate of crumbs on the table. "Molly said the fruit was from a local orchard. Is that right?"

“There’s a lovely orchard down the road,” Laura confirmed. “I’m glad you liked it.” She shifted in her seat. “So, what’s up?”

Warren smiled. “As you know, Laura, a colleague and I are putting on an expedition to Beau Isle National Park, our Survive and Thrive Adventure. We’re scheduled to depart Friday.”

“Two days from now?” Laura asked.

“That’s right,” Warren answered. “Along with outdoor activities and lectures on natural and island history, we’re providing hands-on instruction in some very interesting and useful topics. Plant identification. Survival techniques, naturally.” He grinned. “And my favorite—outdoor cooking techniques, including smoking meat.”

“That all sounds intriguing,” Molly said. She had heard of Beau Isle, a beautiful but isolated island on Lake Superior favored by hikers and boaters. She didn’t often participate in strenuous athletic activity, but she would enjoy identifying plants and outdoor cooking.

Warren gave Molly’s comment a nod of approval. “Maybe you can come along, Molly. You see, I need two people to round out the numbers. A couple has just dropped out.” He cringed. “The husband is having emergency surgery.”

“Harvey is having surgery too,” Carol said. “But it’s not an emergency. He’s having his rotator cuff fixed on Monday, and he’s very annoyed that he can’t go fishing until his shoulder heals.” Harvey was an avid fisherman, one of the reasons he had happily gone along with the idea of relocating from Pittsburgh to Loch Mallaig—the other main reason being that the couple’s daughter, Jenny, lived there with her husband, Craig, and their seven-year-old twins, Maisie and Gavin.

Laura shook her head. “I would love to go, Warren, but I can’t leave the bakehouse.” She waved a hand at the full tables. “As you can see, we’re still in our busy season.”

Carol made a scoffing sound. “Why not? Bridget is on summer break from college and has been asking for more hours. And Hamish is retired, so he’s got plenty of time to help. Together, we can hold down the fort for a few days. I may not be as good a baker as you, but I can certainly follow your recipes.”

“She’s right,” Molly chimed in. Despite Laura’s refusal, she sensed that her friend would love to go on the trip. She would get to spend more time with Warren, and all the activities were right up her alley. “You haven’t taken a vacation all summer.”

“And neither have you,” Carol said, to Molly’s surprise. “I think you should go along. Didn’t Warren say he needed two more people?”

“We do,” Warren said, his face lighting up with hope. “Otherwise we’ll have to cancel, and I was hoping that this trip would be the first of many. We’ve been talking about taking it around the country to other wonderful locations. My partner is getting a trademark for *Survive and Thrive* as we speak.”

Laura gnawed at her bottom lip and shot Molly a sidelong glance. “I’ll go if you will.”

Molly hesitated, wondering if she would be up for it physically. “I’m not the greatest athlete, though. I might slow everyone down.”

“Not to worry,” Warren said. “The activities are designed for all levels, from outdoors buffs like me to those less comfortable with physical exertion.” His smile was triumphant. “We didn’t want to preclude anyone from participating.”

How could she say no? Molly inhaled a deep breath, taking in Laura’s eager expression and Carol’s encouraging nod. “All right. I’ll do it. Let’s *Survive and Thrive*.”



Later that afternoon, when she stepped into the apartment she lived in above the bakery, Molly realized why she couldn't possibly go on the trip to Beau Isle. Her reason was staring up at her with big brown eyes. Angus, her Scottish terrier, was presently on both eardrops and oral antibiotics for an ear infection. Carol and Harvey had taken care of Angus in the past, but with Harvey's upcoming operation, she couldn't bear to add to Carol's plate.

"I'll have to tell Warren tonight," Molly said as she held the dropper to Angus's ear. After some initial reluctance, he'd learned the drill. "Hopefully he'll be able to find someone else to fill in."

She had to admit to being disappointed. All day, ever since agreeing to go on the expedition, she'd thought about it in the back of her mind. Deciding what to pack. Wondering if she needed to make some additional purchases. Trying to remember if she still had a sleeping bag or if she'd loaned it to her grown daughter, Chloe, who lived in Milwaukee.

Molly washed her hands and put away the medicine, then filled Angus's supper dish. Deciding she had time for a quick shower, she headed for the bathroom, only to be stopped by the ring of her cell phone. It was a welcome interruption from Fergus, who was planning to swing by and take her to Warren's cookout after he finished work at Castleglen, the golf resort he owned.

"Hi, Fergus," she said. "I'm almost ready."

"I'm running a little late myself, actually," he answered.

"Take your time." Should she share her news? Angus trotted into the room, tags jingling. And the potential hitch in her plans? She decided not to wait. "Guess what? Warren asked Laura and me to go on his inaugural Survive and Thrive weekend. Two other guests dropped out, so we're headed to Beau Isle to rough it for a few days."

“Sounds intriguing,” Fergus said. “What’s involved? I’m impressed you’re up for something so adventurous.” Having met Molly when they were teens and then reconnected when she’d moved to Loch Mallaig as an adult, Fergus had known Molly long enough to realize that she usually stuck to less strenuous activities.

Molly gave him a quick rundown of the expedition’s agenda. “Warren assured me that we can do the physical activities at our own level.” She laughed. “He probably doesn’t know how basic my level is, but oh well.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Fergus said reassuringly. “Although, do you know how isolated Beau Isle really is? No one lives out there. They used to, until—” He broke off abruptly.

“Fergus?” Molly’s voice rose an octave. “Don’t leave me hanging like that. What happened out there?”

He sighed. “It was terrible. Back in 1900 or so, one of the mine shafts caved in. And because of the remote location, it took far too long for help to arrive. None of the miners involved lived, and the mine closed for good soon after.”

Stunned by this tragedy, no matter how long ago it had happened, Molly fell silent for a moment. “I’m sure Warren has safety precautions in place. And I’ll stay away from mine shafts.”

“Good plan,” Fergus said, good humor restored to his tone. “But promise me you’ll be careful out there.”

“Of course.” Molly glanced down at Angus, who was staring up at her with his puppy-dog eyes again. Her shoulders slumped. “I probably shouldn’t go anyway. Angus is on medication for an ear infection.”

“Oh, poor guy,” Fergus said. “Want me to take him?”

What a generous offer, but one Molly couldn’t possibly accept. “Thanks so much, Fergus, but I know the resort is full this week and next. You’re too busy.”

“I would make it work. You let me know,” he said. “I’m here for you if you need me.”

She smiled into the phone. “I know you are. See you soon. And don’t worry about coming to the door,” she added, well acquainted with Fergus’s chivalrous nature. “I’ll watch for you and meet you at the car.”

Half an hour later, Molly was showered and dressed in fresh jeans and a summery floral top, waiting by the front window for Fergus to arrive. When the silver Range Rover pulled in, Molly grabbed a light jacket. As she reached for the doorknob, Angus whined.

“You want to come with us, don’t you?” Molly glanced at the leash hanging nearby, then down at the dog. “Well, we are eating outside. And Warren seemed to like you when we stopped by with Laura last week.”

Angus yipped encouragement.

“All right, boy,” she said, reaching for the leash and eliciting further yipping and even a little prancing. “You’re coming too.”

“I see three’s company,” Fergus said when Molly and Angus arrived at the Range Rover. He had climbed out to greet them, and after giving Molly a quick hug and Angus a pat, he opened the rear door for the dog. “In you go, Angus.”

Once Angus was settled in the back seat, Fergus opened Molly’s door for her.

“You’re spoiling me,” she said, sliding onto the soft leather seat.

“You make it easy.” Fergus shut the door gently, then headed around to the driver’s seat. Soon they were underway, driving along Yooper Boulevard toward the Moose Lake Country Club, the other golf resort in town. Warren’s cabin was beyond the club, located with others nestled by the loch.

They rode in silence along the lake. Tonight the water was placid, with a few fishermen and kayakers enjoying the warm evening.

Soon they navigated off the main road onto a narrow, tarred

lane, and after that, onto a dirt road. Many of the cabins out here were closed up in the winter, although in recent years, more people stayed year-round.

Fergus glanced at Molly and chuckled. “It feels a little weird showing up empty-handed, doesn’t it?”

Molly smiled. “It does, but Warren and Laura insisted on being in charge of the menu.” Her eyebrows rose. “I think we’re going to be enjoying some foraged food. Warren has a vast knowledge of local flora and fauna, you know.” He’d mentioned it on multiple occasions and was clearly proud of his expertise on that and many other topics.

“Yes, I recall him saying so.” As they arrived at the professor’s cabin, Fergus shrugged as if to indicate he was up for an adventure. “It’ll be interesting to learn what’s edible around here that I’ve ignored my whole life. Dinner hiding in plain sight.”

Tucked between thick stands of evergreens, the cabin was modest, cedar-sided, and rectangular, with a deck overlooking the water. Fergus pulled into the wide driveway next to Carol’s Chrysler. Ahead of Carol, Laura’s red VW convertible was next to Warren’s pickup. A gray Honda CR-V Molly didn’t recognize was parked on the road.

They climbed out of the Range Rover, and Molly opened the back door to let Angus out. As soon as his leash was clipped on, he began pulling her toward the closest tree so he could investigate it fully.

“Go ahead,” she told Fergus. “I’m going to walk him for a minute.”

“I’ll let them know we’re here.” Fergus strolled toward the cabin, cutting across the small lawn toward the deck where everyone was gathered.

Smoke scented with grilling fish was already drifting across the yard, making Molly’s mouth water. Hopefully Angus’s adventurous nose would be satisfied soon, though that wasn’t terribly likely in a place so rife with interesting smells.

“Let’s go this way, Angus,” she said, giving the leash a gentle tug. She decided to walk along the dirt road they’d just driven in on.

Angus was in heaven, running ahead and investigating clumps of ferns and downed branches. This time of day, a few birds chirped sleepily in the woods. Small creatures scampered about in the underbrush, rustling the detritus.

A branch cracked somewhere deep within the dense forest. Molly glanced up, alarmed. That sounded far too large for a squirrel or chipmunk. Was it a deer—or a black bear? Both were frequently seen around the loch.

The terrier lifted his head and issued a bark.

“It’s okay, Angus,” Molly said, hoping she was right. “It’s only an animal.”

But when Angus added deep growls to his yaps, Molly peered closer.

A dark figure stood in the shelter of a large pine. Her heart stuttered in her chest.

That wasn’t an animal. It was a man. And he was watching her.



Startled, Molly yelped in alarm, almost as loud as Angus was barking. The figure pivoted and began pushing through the woods, seeming heedless of the noise he was making. More downed twigs cracked underfoot and branches swished as he passed by.

Her heart still pounding, Molly urged Angus in the direction of the cabin. She urgently scanned the trees, but to her relief, the man didn't return.

As her pulse slowed, Molly's thoughts calmed. He was probably a local resident out for a walk. She and Angus had probably scared him as much as the reverse. She smiled down at her dog, trotting smartly beside her. For such a small guy, he really could be intimidating when he wanted to be.

As Fergus had done earlier, Molly cut across the lawn and walked around to the back deck. Warren was standing at the grill, chatting with Harvey and Fergus. Carol and Laura were seated at a long table, talking to a lean, tanned woman with short dark hair, who appeared to be about Molly's age. Everyone glanced Molly's way as she and Angus approached, and she waved a greeting. Angus strained at the leash, eager to join the party.

"I thought you got lost," Fergus called from the deck.

Molly made a face. "You know Angus. He's in charge." She decided not to mention the man she'd seen. He was gone now, which made her think he had been an innocent neighbor out for a walk in the woods.

Angus tugged at the leash, leading the way up the stairs to the deck.

“What a cute dog,” the unfamiliar woman said. Sensing a new fan, Angus trotted right over to her with Molly trailing him. As she reached to pat his dark head, the woman smiled at Molly. “I’m Bernadette Roy, Warren’s partner in crime.”

“Bernadette is the other Survive and Thrive leader,” Laura explained. “She’s a geology professor, so she’s a natural history expert.”

The professor shrugged. “I wouldn’t say I’m an expert on everything we’ll cover, but I know enough to be dangerous.” She laughed, revealing perfect white teeth.

“More than us,” Laura said. “And that’s what counts.”

Molly settled into a seat at the table, eyeing Bernadette with curiosity. So this was the colleague Warren had referred to. She seemed to be pleasant and good-humored, with deep laugh lines and a cheerful expression. And Angus liked her, which was always a good sign.

“You may let him go, Molly,” Warren said. “As long as he doesn’t run off. I wouldn’t want him to get lost in these woods.”

“Are you sure?” Molly asked.

“Absolutely,” Warren answered. “I’m glad you brought him. I meant to suggest it earlier today, but I was a little distracted.”

At his assurance, Molly bent to unclip Angus. She knew that as long as she was here, he’d be right by her side.

“Speaking of what was distracting you, I’m getting super excited about our trip,” Laura said, her eyes sparkling. “Bernadette has been filling me in on the details.”

Fergus glanced over at Molly, and she knew what he was thinking.

“About that,” Molly said hesitantly. “I don’t think I can go.”

Laura groaned, and so did Carol. “Why not?” Carol asked. “I told you the bakehouse would be fine.”

“It’s not that,” Molly said, shifting in her seat. She hated to let Laura and Warren down. “It’s Angus. He’s on medication. Drops and

pills, twice a day for an ear infection. I can't let Carol deal with that on top of Harvey going to the hospital."

"We'll have home nurses the first couple of days so I can work." Carol frowned in concern. "But you're right. They can't take care of a dog, Harvey will have limited mobility, and I can't bring him to the bakehouse. Unless he stays upstairs alone while we're open."

"But that puts an unfair burden on you," Molly said.

Fergus opened his mouth, and Molly knew he was going to make his offer again. But Warren spoke first. "He can come to the island," he said. "He's clearly well-behaved." He grinned at Angus, who was now sitting calmly at Molly's feet, the picture of canine innocence. "As long as he doesn't bother any of the wildlife, he should be fine."

Hope lit Molly's heart. "He won't. I promise." She bent toward her pup. "Do you want to go on a trip, Angus? You'll get to ride on a boat and spend a few nights on an island."

His bright eyes widened, and his tail whipped back and forth. She decided to interpret his response as agreement.

"Phew, I'm glad that's settled," Laura said, fanning her face with a hand. "I'm really looking forward to this trip. We're going to have a great time, Molly. I just know it."

Bernadette nodded, her eyes on her coleader. "Yes, it's going to be exciting, that's for sure."



Fergus came by the bakehouse to say goodbye to Molly and Laura the morning they left for Beau Isle. "Do you have everything?" he asked, bending to peer inside Molly's compact Honda Fit, which was loaded to the gills. He gave a bark of laughter. "I hope so. I'm not sure anything else will fit."

“I had to make a list,” Laura said, showing him her clipboard. “It’s very important to think of every possible thing we’ll need.” She flipped through the pages. “Once we’re on the island, we won’t exactly be able to pop out to the store.”

“We’ve got everything but the kitchen sink,” Molly joked. “That wouldn’t fit.”

The past couple of days had been a flurry of activity as they prepared for the trip in addition to their work at the bakehouse. Molly had found her sleeping bag at the back of a closet, and she’d put together a simple wardrobe of layers suitable for every possible weather situation they might encounter. Laura had loaned her some high-tech rain gear and a short-sleeved wet suit perfect for kayaking. Even in August, water temperatures in the big lake were in the sixties, cold enough to cause hypothermia to set in.

Angus pushed his little face out the open back window, panting with excitement, and Fergus bent to pat him. “I’m glad there was still room for you,” he said to the little dog. “Are you all set for your big trip?”

“He should be,” Molly said. “I’ve got plenty of food, his dishes, his favorite blanket, his leash, and most important, his medicine. The vet warned me that I have to be consistent or else the ear infection could come back.”

“We wouldn’t want that, would we, boy?” As Fergus continued to pet him, Angus leaned into Fergus’s hand.

“Soak up all the Fergus affection you can now, Angus,” Laura said with a wry grin. “You’ll be going without for a little while.”

Fergus chuckled, then raised an eyebrow at the women. “I was surprised to learn the island is five miles out on the water. And yes, I did research it.” He put an arm around Molly and gave her a quick squeeze. “I had to know where you were going to be for the next four days.”

A note of trepidation chimed in Molly’s mind. They were going

to be truly isolated and beyond easy reach. But rather than give voice to her fears, she said brightly, “I’ve been reading about the island’s history. It’s fascinating. Did you know they’ve found copper artifacts from 4000 BC out there?”

Laura whistled. “Six thousand years ago. That’s a long time.”

Fergus nodded. “I’ve been reading up about that too. People used to hunt for artifacts and sell them, but it’s illegal now.”

Laura put her clipboard inside the car on the passenger side. “Don’t worry. If we stumble across any, we’ll be sure to leave them alone.”

Molly glanced at her phone. They needed to leave now if they wanted to arrive at the ferry dock with time to spare. The thought of missing the only public boat to Beau Isle horrified her. “It’s time to go.” She gave Fergus a quick hug. “See you soon.”

He squeezed her in return. “Send me messages if you can. I understand you might be out of range on the island.”

“Probably,” Molly said, nerves twisting in her belly. She forced a laugh. “You don’t realize how reliant you are on instant and constant communication until it’s not a certainty.”

Laura shrugged as she opened the passenger side door. “I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

Fergus stood in the driveway and watched them pull away. He waved when they reached the street, and Molly honked the horn in response.

Laura nearly bounced in her seat with anticipation. “I’m so excited about this trip, Molly. I desperately needed a change of scene, a new adventure.”

Molly laughed. “As long as it isn’t too exciting an adventure.” As they rolled through the sleepy early morning streets of Loch Mallaig, she realized that while she was glad to go, she was already looking forward to their return. This was home sweet home.



The ride to their departure point was several hours west, then north as they skirted the shore of the big lake. Molly had never been out this way, and she'd forgotten how much she enjoyed exploring new places. Not that they stopped, except for a break in Duluth, Minnesota, but she took note of the towns and state parks she wanted to visit again. *Someday*, she thought. *After we survive this trip to Beau Isle.*

With time to spare, they entered the tiny village of Elk Run, located in the heart of unincorporated wilderness.

"Wow," Laura said, staring out the passenger window at the one-block main street. "This town makes Loch Mallaig seem positively urban."

"Agreed," Molly said, braking to let a stray cat wander across the street, a sight that made Angus yip. "It's more remote than I thought." Did this town even have a police station or a hospital? What did people do when something went wrong? Then she scolded herself. Why was she borrowing trouble?

They found the docks easily enough. Modest fishing boats and sailboats rocked on their moorings, and a handful of people stood on the main dock. Quickly picking out Warren and Bernadette, Molly slid into the closest parking spot she could find so they could easily cart their gear to the loading area. Their ferry wasn't in yet, which meant they didn't need to rush.

"Arrived at last," Laura said eagerly as she unfastened her seat belt. "Let's go."

Angus began to whine.

"Hold on, buddy," Molly said as she and Laura climbed out. "You can get out in a minute."

After Molly raised the hatch door, they both donned the backpacks they'd use on the island. Then Laura grabbed both duffels holding their clothing and personal items and carted them off toward the dock. Molly followed with the oversize tote holding their sleeping bags and pillows, leaving Angus behind for the moment. She'd been glad to learn that they were staying in a cabin. Otherwise they would have needed a tent as well.

"Bring enough?" a middle-aged man asked as Laura dropped the bags on the weathered dock boards. He was short, sporting a gray goatee and wraparound sunglasses.

"I hope so," Laura said, barely winded after lugging the heavy bags. She glanced at Warren, who remained deep in conversation with Bernadette several feet away, then rested her hands on her hips. "I'm Laura Donovan, and this is my friend, Molly Ferris."

"Gordon Feeney." He gestured to the woman with him. "This is my wife, Donna."

Donna was even shorter than her husband, with a rounded body and a long gray braid. She tilted her head back and peered at the newcomers. "Nice to meet you," she said, her voice neutral. "What do you do? Gordon is a published author." She straightened her spine with pride, adding a whole inch.

Molly smiled. "We run a bakehouse in Loch Mallaig. It's nice to meet you as well." She turned to Laura. "Want to help me with Angus and his gear?"

"Sure," Laura said cheerily. "We'll be right back."

As they headed back to Molly's car, where Angus was waiting impatiently, a voice called out behind them.

"Laura, you made it!" Warren came trotting along the dock and swooped her into his arms for a bear hug.

With a laugh, Laura stepped back. "That's quite a greeting, Warren."

Molly glanced at the others taking in the scene. A young woman was scowling at Laura and Warren. Despite her ugly expression, she was quite pretty, with long, dark braids and a slender figure. While Molly watched, she abruptly spun away, saying something to her companion, who was also young but curvy, with creamy skin and red-gold hair worn in a bob.

A crush on Warren, maybe? Molly could understand that. Not only was he tall and handsome, he was magnetic, full of life. It probably happened to the college professor all the time.

With a shrug, Molly hurried to fetch Angus, who was now howling insistently. The poor thing probably thought they had forgotten him. She was halfway to the car when Laura's footsteps echoed behind her.

"Sorry about that," Laura said, laughing. "Warren is something else."

"He certainly seemed happy to see you." Molly hesitated. "But one of the young women didn't seem as glad."

"Oh, you mean Maddie Gore. Warren told me about her. She's a PhD student and a bit dramatic. Her friend, April Roberts, has some sort of administrative job at Blanchard."

"I'm surprised they'd come on a trip like this," Molly said, thinking that the average age of the other participants was significantly higher than the two twentysomething women.

"Warren is Maddie's advisor, so in that respect it makes sense." Laura exhaled. "He said he's stuck with her shadowing him until she finishes her thesis."

But the question was whether he wanted to get unstuck. Then Molly scolded herself for her suspicions. Laura seemed happy with Warren so far, and she wasn't rushing into anything serious. Molly winced at the thought of planting such an unpleasant suspicion in her friend's mind. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that. Maybe Warren would turn out to be Laura's knight in shining armor, the wonderful partner she deserved.

At the car, they let Angus out and gathered his supplies. Then Molly locked the car, double-checking to be sure that everything was secure and that she hadn't left anything important behind.

As they walked back to the dock, Laura pointed to the water. "There's the ferry."

The group watched a large boat chug toward the harbor. Everyone was standing in small clusters—Warren and Bernadette, Gordon and Donna, and Maddie and April. Once Molly and Laura joined them, Warren made sure they all knew each other's names.

A breeze blew off the water and sunshine sparkled on the rippling waves. Molly's heart lifted in anticipation. She needed an adventure too, an opportunity to get away from the daily grind, no matter how much she loved it.

The boat grew larger every moment, its progress toward the landing steady and sure. Finally, with shouts from the crew, the craft slid into its berth, barely contacting the bumpers placed to protect the paint. The boat was named the *Beau Isle II*. Molly wondered idly what had happened to the *Beau Isle I*.

A gate in the rail was opened by a crew member, who held up a hand. "Hold on, folks. We need to unload before you can board." He slid a metal gangway out to connect the boat with the dock.

Molly moved back a little, thinking that another group must have been staying out on the island. But then she saw two of the crew pushing a gurney, which held an injured man. Up the hill, an ambulance wheeled into the parking lot, no doubt sent to retrieve the patient.

"What's going on?" Warren asked the first crewman. "Did someone get hurt?"

The man nodded. "That's your forest ranger. Fell into a hole and broke his leg." He paused, grimacing. "Until a replacement can be found, I'm afraid your group will be alone out there."