



Scottish  
Bakehouse  
Mysteries™

# Scone Cold Murder



Rachael O. Phillips



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*Scone Cold Murder*

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“**A**re you sure about this?” Carol MacCallan tried for a casual tone, but that was becoming increasingly challenging as she watched her friend and business partner, Laura Donovan, fiddle with the ropes trussing a canoe to the top of her red Volkswagen Beetle Convertible. While the windshield frame appeared to be supporting most of the boat—Laura had raved about her special-order, ultralightweight new toy’s minimal heft, which she’d picked out specifically so that she, a proudly single woman, could carry it herself—Carol couldn’t help but frown.

Laura seemed oblivious to the folly of her plan, but Carol couldn’t really blame her for being set on an adventure. High traffic at their Scottish bakehouse, Bread on Arrival, had kept them working nonstop this Labor Day weekend, and they needed a Sunday afternoon break before tomorrow morning’s challenges. A canoe trip down the McLain River—which connected their new hometown of Loch Mallaig, Michigan, to Lake Superior—had seemed like a great idea . . . until Carol had seen the canoe teetering atop Laura’s convertible. At least the vinyl top was up.

“The wind’s strong today, Laura,” their other partner, Molly Ferris, observed. “It might send you sailing before that canoe ever touches water.”

Laura crossed her arms, but a grin tugged at her mouth. “I know I’m the baby of our bunch. That you’re both *so* much older and wiser—” Carol poked her with an elbow. “Not that much older.”

“I can’t believe you’re still using that line after thirty years of friendship,” Molly added with a wry grin. “And we all went to the same college, so I know you should be smart enough to admit this is a bad idea.”

“Oh come on,” Laura protested. “It’s questionable at worst.”

As they bantered, Carol hinted that Laura’s canoe would probably fit next to the MacCallans’ canoe on top of the Jeep Cherokee on loan from her husband, Harvey. Laura either didn’t pick up on the hints or pretended not to hear them, and after a few more rope adjustments, she jumped into her Beetle.

“If we don’t get moving,” she said through the open window, “we’ll never make it to the river.” With a jaunty wave, Laura and her awkward load zoomed out of her cottage’s driveway.

Carol and Molly hopped in the Jeep to follow, sharing a wince as Laura’s canoe shifted on the Beetle’s roof when she turned onto the main road. Miraculously, they only had to stop three times to reposition the canoe before they reached the sparkling, swiftly running McLain River.

Carol pulled the Jeep to the launch’s parking area, then jumped out and surveyed the river. Unusually high August rainfall had sent it out of its banks until a few days ago. Though it had receded somewhat, the fast current carried sticks, leaves, and other detritus swiftly toward Lake Superior a few miles away.

“Maybe we should go drop our canoes in Loch Mallaig,” Molly said, referring to the town’s namesake lake. “It’s safer. Granted, it’s probably also overloaded with holiday boaters.”

“But then we’d have to watch Laura haul that thing back to town.” Carol pointed, grimacing.

“Good point,” Molly agreed. As Laura climbed out of her Beetle and jogged to where the others stood, Molly gestured toward ducks speeding downriver. “That current is really moving.”

“Enough to make it a fun ride.” Laura inhaled, her face bathed in sunlight. “Come on, ladies. Live a little.”

With shrugs, Carol and Molly shed their misgivings and swiftly helped unload canoes and safety gear. After donning life jackets, the Bakehouse Three, as they were known around town, hauled the canoes down to the shore.

When Laura successfully took a seat in her bobbing canoe, she must have noticed Carol’s sigh of relief. “Hey, my canoe’s new,” she said, “but I’m not new at canoeing.”

“Thank goodness for that,” Molly said as she tugged the bow of Carol’s hefty old canoe into the stream.

Carol steadied its stern while Molly seated herself, then Carol climbed in. The vessel rocked slightly, but she maintained her balance. “Bon voyage, ladies.”

“Here’s to smooth sailing.” Laura raised her oar as if in a toast, then paddled toward quiet water by the opposite shady bank.

Carol steered hers behind Laura’s, and for a while they floated quickly but serenely down the river. The water reflected the gorgeous day’s blue sky and green forest, dissolving the past week’s stresses in its shimmering depths. The strong current carried their canoes along as if it knew they needed a rest.

Molly laid her paddle across her lap. “Wow, I could do this all afternoon.”

“Feels like we have all the time in the world,” Carol said, then her sharp eye caught movement on the shore. “A muskrat!”

As they glided downriver, they spotted turtles sunning on boulders, frogs hopping from rock to rock, and sleek trout darting under the surface. Even two snakes squiggling through the water drew squeals of delight rather than fright.

Although it felt like they could have ridden the current forever, the

river's fast flow would shorten their adventure today. Carol didn't mind, though. Harvey and their son-in-law, Craig Gilmore, would meet them at river's end with cars and a trailer for the canoes. Carol and Harvey would have time to load, unload, and clean up before joining Molly and Laura for a cookout hosted by Craig and the MacCallans' daughter, Jenny. The guys would grill their fabulous ribs. Carol would enjoy her seven-year-old twin grandchildren, Maisie and Gavin—two big reasons she and Harvey had moved to Loch Mallaig from Pennsylvania. Starting this week, school and activities would devour their days, but tonight belonged to Grandma.

A whoop from Laura interrupted Carol's reverie. "Can it get any better than this?"

Peering skeptically at the roaring rapids they were approaching, Carol answered the rhetorical question. *Yes, it can get better. Much better. And far less deadly.*

White water surrounded a small island, betraying boulders under the water's surface. Instead of trying to steer around it, Laura and her canoe shot into the wildest water, rising, falling, then going airborne, clearing the twisting, angry current.

"Woohoo!" Laura yelled, as if riding a bucking bronco.

"All she needs is the cowboy hat," Molly said through gritted teeth as she paddled with all her might in the other direction.

"Laura will be fine," Carol said. "She always is." *Hopefully we can say the same for ourselves.* Carol wrestled with her paddle. Thank goodness she'd kept up with her daily Pilates lately. Even the less violent water demanded every ounce of her strength.

"From your lips to God's—oh no!" Molly gasped.

Laura's canoe whirled like a broken propeller.

Pulse pounding and adrenaline rushing, Carol longed to help her friend but knew she could do nothing except try to keep herself and Molly safe.



Laura's canoe smacked a boulder, and a whirlpool swallowed her up. "Laura!" Molly and Carol screamed in unison.

For what felt like an eternity, they saw no sign of their dearest friend. Then, several yards downstream, a slimy, greenish head bobbed to the rushing water's surface, followed by the flash of an orange life jacket.

*Thank heavens.*

Carol and Molly dug with their paddles, propelling themselves as swiftly as possible through the tumultuous waters. Still, they couldn't catch up with Laura.

"Swim to shore!" Carol yelled to Laura as she and Molly continued down the river. Finally, they rounded another bend and quieter water awaited Carol's aching arms. For two seconds, she paused to breathe.

"There she is!" Molly pointed at a panting Laura, still swathed in algae, hunched in shallows on the river's opposite side.

"Let's get her," Carol said, resuming her paddling and steering toward Laura.

But someone beat them to her.

On shore, a tall, fiftyish man wearing a blue plaid flannel shirt had yanked off his hiking boots. Wading into the water, the handsome stranger extended a hand to Laura. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

Molly and Carol grinned at each other. Laura hated being called *ma'am*—and she'd take particular offense to someone her own age calling her that, especially while she was coated in gunk.

"I'm fine," Laura muttered, barely loud enough for Carol to hear.

The man peered at Laura in concern. "Are you sure, ma'am? Your face is bleeding—"

"I'm fine." Laura straightened and moved away from him.

The man cocked his dark head, face still furrowed with concern.

"We'll help her," Molly said as their canoe reached Laura.

Molly climbed out hastily, setting the canoe rocking precariously. She waded to Laura as Carol steered her canoe alongside the would-be rescuer, who helped drag it to shore.

“I’m glad you came along.” Carol pointed upstream. “We hit rapids and, well . . .”

“Happens to the best of us.” The man glanced at Laura, now seated onshore, then extended his hand to help Carol out of the canoe. “I’m Trent McKade.”

“Carol MacCallan,” she said while she dug for towels and a first aid kit in her backpack. “The blonde is Molly Ferris, and that’s Laura Donovan covered in algae. We co-own Bread on Arrival, the Scottish bakehouse in Loch Mallaig.”

“I’m half Scottish,” Trent said. “I’d be remiss if I didn’t stop by soon.”

“Please do.” Carol threw a towel around Laura’s shoulders, then assessed the gash on Laura’s cheek. “The cut doesn’t look deep,” she said as she cleaned the wound. “But maybe we should take you by the hospital to be sure.”

Laura shook her head. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Suit yourself.” Carol applied a bandage, hoping her friend’s stubbornness wasn’t also foolishness.

“I assume you had two canoes.” Trent scanned the water. “I haven’t seen the other float by.”

“After Laura capsized, I saw the current trap her canoe against a rock.” Molly gestured upstream. “Maybe it’s still stuck back there.”

“Perhaps I could help recover it,” Trent said.

Laura raised her chin, brown eyes full of hope. “Could you? It’s brand new. I’d hate to lose it.”

“I’d be glad to.” Trent grinned, and Carol blinked. This guy possessed a smile that could part the waters.

Trent sat and began yanking on his hiking boots.

“I’ll call my husband and see if he can help.” Carol pulled the dry bag containing her cell phone from the backpack. “He and my son-in-law are probably already at the boat launch downriver.”

Trent waited until the other men arrived, then the guys hiked back to the disaster site while the women attended to Laura’s other scrapes and bruises.

“Sorry I ruined our afternoon off,” Laura muttered, her pride clearly bruised as well.

“We’re just happy you’re alive.” Carol frowned at the areas already darkening on her friend’s arms and shins. “I still think we should take you to the medical center.”

“More fuss? I’ve already caused enough.” Laura shook her head again, and Carol knew the subject was closed.

“It’s okay.” Molly hugged her.

Carol linked an arm with Molly’s, and the friends sat together in the sunshine, their silence saying more than words.

Carol had almost dozed off when Trent rounded the bend in Laura’s canoe. A spark of Laura’s usual energy brightened her face. “Not a total loss after all.”

Trent expertly guided the canoe to shore as Harvey and Craig emerged from the woods.

Laura stood and addressed the men. “My heroes!” She fixed her smile on Trent. “I can’t thank you enough for rescuing my canoe.”

“It took all three of us to loosen it from that rock and right it,” Craig said. “You’re lucky you fell out when you did.”

Laura frowned and scanned the canoe. “Is it okay?”

“No major issues,” Trent said. “It’s a little scratched up, but I could easily fix that for you in my shop.”

“Your shop?” Molly asked.

Trent beamed. “I’m opening an outfitter in Loch Mallaig soon.

There's a workshop in the back for waxing skis, doing minor equipment repairs, that kind of thing."

"You're a godsend," Laura said. "No more driving to Marquette every time I need gear."

"If you want, I can paddle downstream with you and haul the canoe to my shop from there," Trent said. To Carol's ears, his above-and-beyond offer sounded like one he would only make to a beautiful, vivacious woman like Laura—and that maybe the offer of a dinner date wasn't too far behind.

"That sounds very responsible," Molly chimed in, no doubt remembering as Carol did the precarious trip the canoe had made atop the Beetle. "We've had enough excitement for one day."

"No kidding," Craig said. "The river looks great, but that current's scary."

"Fortunately, that was it for rapids for the rest of your trip," Harvey said. He put an arm around Carol and squeezed her to him. She knew without him saying it that he was relieved Laura hadn't been injured—but equally if not more relieved Carol hadn't been in the same kind of danger.

"Do you want Harvey and me to paddle the rest of the way in your canoe while you and Molly hike?" Craig asked Carol.

"And let you have all the fun?" Carol scoffed. "Not a chance."

Craig chuckled. "That's the spirit. We'll see you downstream."

While Craig and Harvey headed for the wooded trail leading into the sun-dappled forest, Laura and Trent set off in her canoe. Molly and Carol prepared to follow in the MacCallans' boat, but after exchanging conspiratorial grins, they took their time. When it came to their long-single friend spending a few minutes alone with a handsome newcomer to Loch Mallaig, keeping a respectful distance was most certainly in order.



Despite all the excitement of her afternoon, Carol thoroughly enjoyed spending time with her active grandkids at Jenny and Craig's cookout. However, she also thoroughly enjoyed the chance to sit still and relax around the firepit after the twins' bedtime.

"What a shame that Trent couldn't join us tonight," Molly said.

Laura, clean of algae and appearing human again, shrugged.

Carol smirked. "He seemed sorry to have other plans."

Laura riffled through the bag of marshmallows, saying nothing.

"Though I wonder what those plans might have been," Carol continued, "considering he wasn't wearing a wedding ring and didn't mention a wife."

"That was awfully kind of him to haul your canoe to his shop," Molly added. "Pretty clever way to get your number."

"It's good business sense." Laura jabbed a marshmallow with her hot dog skewer and stuck it in the flames. "He knows we own the bakehouse and he figures I'll tell everyone in town."

"Mm-hmm." Carol let the subject of Trent McKade drop, but something told her that the handsome newcomer was going to make life in Loch Mallaig very interesting. Very interesting, indeed.



“Something about the day after Labor Day makes me think I should be in a classroom,” Carol said. Not that she’d ever wish herself away from the bakehouse kitchen, teeming with delicious smells even though the dawn sky was barely light. Still, Carol couldn’t deny the wave of schoolroom nostalgia that had washed over her.

“Pop by Loch Mallaig High,” Laura teased. “If anybody can make teen math haters love calculus, you can. First, though, wash the flour off your nose.”

Molly threw Carol a sympathetic glance. “I know you’ve missed your students since you retired.”

“Some of them.” Others made Carol thankful she was shaping bread dough instead.

“I know what you mean.” Laura expertly piped creamy filling into chocolate éclairs. “It’s September—shouldn’t we be in college? Just moving into our apartment? But it’s been thirty years.” She adjusted her shoulders, likely still sore from the river incident, as Carol was. “Not that I don’t have other reminders.”

“It’s hard to see young families who have been vacationing here leave us now that school is starting,” Molly said. “Meeting them reminded me of when I spent summers here with my family as a teen.”

“And of spending all that time with Fergus,” Carol teased. Molly still insisted handsome Fergus MacGregor, her summertime teen crush and current owner of Castleglen golf resort and lodge, was simply a very good friend. Carol, however, thought her friend must be blind not

to see the sparks between herself and Fergus when they were together.

Likely still smarting from the teasing she'd gotten about Trent, Laura quickly came to Molly's rescue. "The fall leaf peepers will head our way soon, and the backpackers trying to take one more hike before winter."

A loud knock resounded at Bread on Arrival's locked front door. Carol checked the wall clock and saw it was time to open. She peeked out the kitchen door toward the tall, Victorian windows in the customer area. A grizzled, seventysomething face pressed against the vintage glass with an indignant expression. With a grimace, she scurried toward the door to open for the day.

"*Guid mornin*, Vernon," Carol said to Vernon Pennycook, hoping he'd appreciate hearing the signature greeting she'd adopted from her paternal grandparents, Scottish immigrants like Vernon's family.

"Thirty-two seconds late," the old bait shop owner informed her. "Lass, when a man's been fishin' since before sunup, he needs a hot cup of tea and oatcakes to keep body and soul together. And he needs it right away."

"You're absolutely right." With a smile, Carol edged the cantankerous old man toward the counter. "Just took oatcakes out of the oven. How many?"

Vernon grumbled until she brought him buttered oatcakes and a cup of Scottish breakfast tea laced with hot milk. With each sip and bite, his mood mellowed, as Carol had expected.

"How do you cater to that old codger?" Laura whispered as she brought out a tray of scones.

"It's always fun to watch the metamorphosis," Carol said.

"From a grizzly to a teddy bear," Laura agreed.

More customers entered, hungry eyes fixed on the antique display cases. Other early-rising fishermen like Vernon appeared, undergoing

a similar change as they were served. Local business owners such as Cameron MacPhee, who ran the drugstore, and Beverly Scott, the real estate agent who had handled the Bakehouse Three's purchase of the grand old Victorian that housed Bread on Arrival, took coffee and bagged pastries to work.

Doreen Giobsan, the proprietor of the Thistle and That gift shop next door, shared a table with fellow single ladies Kirstie Fergusson, who owned Highland Blooms flower shop, and Greer Anderson, a town police officer the Bakehouse Three had come to know and appreciate.

Serving them all, Carol realized this was the perfect remedy for missing the students she'd left behind in Pittsburgh. She took a moment to appreciate the bakehouse's spacious eating area with its rustic, Celtic Northwoods chairs and tables topped with sunflowers thanks to Molly. She sniffed the smoky, homey fragrance of the small fire Hamish Bruce, their handyman and part-time employee, had built in the large stone fireplace. What a change it was from the funeral parlor it had been before they'd taken over the building.

Watching a smiling Molly wait on their Tuesday morning crowd, Carol knew her partner felt the same way. Laura, formerly a chef at an elite New York City restaurant, sometimes bemoaned Loch Mallaig's lack of excitement. Carol imagined, though, that she'd experienced enough over the weekend and suspected Laura was feeling a renewed appreciation for the small town's slower pace.

Peeking in the kitchen door, Carol saw that her auburn-haired friend was concentrating hard on the experimental new dessert recipe she'd mentioned at the firepit Sunday evening, carrot-pecan cake with salted caramel frosting. Carol's mouth watered in anticipation of being a taste tester, and she wondered if she could limit herself to one bite. Or maybe two . . .



The jingle of the bell on the front door announced the arrival of someone who might distract Laura from her work. Trent McKade entered on the heels of Fergus MacGregor. Fergus made a beeline for Molly's section of the counter, and Trent waved at Carol.

Doreen, Kirstie, and Greer stopped chatting as Trent walked past their table, then exchanged impressed glances that indicated they hadn't yet met the Loch Mallaig newcomer.

Trent paid them no mind, however. As he removed his khaki jacket and draped it over his forearm, his green eyes continued to flit around the room.

*I know who you're looking for.* Carol suppressed a grin as she went to the back hallway and poked her head through the kitchen door. "Laura, you're wanted out front."

Laura frowned. "Brody hasn't brought Mom and Dad today, has he? I told my dumb brother we could visit *next* week."

Knowing Laura might balk if she knew Trent was the visitor, Carol mumbled unintelligibly as she entered the freezer. Cracking the door, she watched Laura peel off her apron. Muttering something about annoying brothers, her partner strode like an army captain out the kitchen door toward the front.

Following her friend quietly and at a distance, Carol saw Laura stop in her tracks, then continue forward. A moment later, the muffled sound of greetings floated toward her.

She suppressed a chuckle. Laura would find a way to get even. But someday, Laura might also thank her.



Thursday morning, as Carol completed another customer transaction, she noted with relief that their breakfast crowd hadn't diminished

much from pre-Labor Day numbers. Plenty of townspeople stopped by the bakehouse before work, lingering over hot coffee and fresh Scottish pastries if they had the time or taking them to go.

As usual, Joyce Bruce, Hamish's wife, brightened the room with her smile. She'd met Tanya, their daughter-in-law, and their youngest granddaughter, Janine, at the bakehouse to console the toddler after her three older sisters left for school. Though Hamish's work ethic rarely allowed him to take a break before midmorning, he willingly sat with his family today.

"Watch little Janine talk Hamish into another cinnamon roll," Carol whispered to Molly. Both struggled to keep straight faces as the red-haired child wrapped her grumbly grandfather around her chubby finger.

A few unfamiliar faces graced their eating area: A family with preschoolers who didn't have class until later, an elderly man with a cane stooped over coffee and a scone, a retired couple planning their last boat ride of the season on Lake Superior, and a young, blonde woman in an understated outfit and an oversize khaki jacket who nibbled on a cherry Danish. She'd ordered the same pastry earlier that week. She hadn't said much, mostly concentrating on her electronic tablet. Perhaps she was a businessperson passing through town.

Trent McKade, currently bantering with Laura as she restocked a display case near his table, was no longer a stranger. Long widowed and alone since his son, Jeremy, had returned to school at Central Michigan University, Trent had come yesterday for breakfast too. Today, he'd appeared again. Though he'd finished the apple streusel muffin he'd ordered, he seemed in no hurry to leave.

He'd been staying at Castleglen until his rental home was ready. He and Fergus had hit it off, playing a few rounds of golf together. Tuesday, Fergus, unaware of the canoe incident, had wanted to introduce his new friend to Molly and company.

Instead, Trent had spotted Laura—conveniently summoned to the front by Carol—and teased her about her rapids adventure. Despite her protests that she wasn't interested in Trent nor he in her, Laura had smiled more than once when her partners had kidded her. Carol knew that between breaking off an engagement from a cheating fiancé when she was thirty and her other mishaps in love, Laura was more than a little gun-shy. But Carol also hoped that maybe this would be different for her friend.

Over Trent's visits, they had learned that he was of Greek and Scottish descent. He'd been born and raised in upstate New York, but he'd spent most of his adult life abroad. Carol had overheard bits and pieces of his descriptions of travels to Africa, South America, and Asia. Perhaps he was the excitement Laura thought Loch Mallaig was missing.

Suppressing a chuckle, Carol turned her attention to the front door as it opened again to reveal more new friends, Shohiwa and Aneni Moyo, recent immigrants from Zimbabwe. Though the young couple lived in Houghton, they often stopped by the bakehouse for Selkirk bannock, a Scottish tea bread.

"Guid mornin," Carol said brightly. "So good to see you again so soon."

"Aneni cannot seem to eat enough of your breads." Shohiwa's brilliant smile shone as he gazed adoringly at his wife.

"That's not unusual for a lady expecting a baby." Carol warmed slices of the bread and poured the English tea with milk she knew they preferred. "How are you feeling, Aneni?"

"A little tired." The lovely young woman touched her blossoming belly, which was covered by a flowing printed skirt. "It is hard to sleep when my baby kicks."

As the Moyos chatted with Carol, she noticed Trent perk up when they mentioned Zimbabwe. Maybe he'd traveled to their home

country. Perhaps he'd welcome a chance to connect with someone familiar with places he'd visited.

Sure enough, when Carol made introductions after completing the Moyos' order, all three faces lit up. Trent gestured to the chairs across from him, and, while Laura excused herself, the couple happily sat down with their breakfast.

"Are you from Harare?" Trent asked.

"No, Bulawayo," Shohiwa said. "It is not the capital, but still a large city."

"I stopped there before I went on my first safari in Zimbabwe," Trent said. "Reminded me of New Orleans."

Soon Trent and the Moyos were comparing notes about Zimbabwe's famous national parks, animal life, and beautiful Victoria Falls.

"Aneni and Shohiwa look so happy." Molly, who had brought out freshly baked turnovers, smiled at the sight of their customers enjoying themselves. "Aneni's struggled with homesickness, especially since they left their families back in Zimbabwe."

Carol loved that about Bread on Arrival. People who felt alone found themselves chatting with strangers over a cup of tea or coffee and pastries, often discovering they shared far more than refreshments with unexpected friends.

"If you return here tomorrow morning," Trent told the Moyos, "I'll introduce you to a lady friend of mine who also went on safari. She'd love to talk about Zimbabwe. She's traveled all over the world but says Africa's her favorite continent."

Carol glanced back at the kitchen. Laura had just returned to her morning baking routine, so she hadn't heard Trent mention a lady friend. Carol fiddled with her apron hem. Should she casually mention this bit of news? She figured she could wait until after she got through the growing line of customers to make that decision.

As the Moyos left, Fergus entered and ordered coffee and a blueberry Danish. Carol was in the middle of brewing a new carafe of coffee, so she promised to bring his order to him at Trent's table.

"I'm glad your apartment's ready," Fergus was saying to Trent when Carol delivered his breakfast, "but it's been nice having you at Castleglen."

"I'm going to miss having a golf course right outside the door," Trent admitted. "You're still two games ahead of me. I'll have to catch up after I get settled at the apartment."

"You're welcome to try," Fergus said, grinning. "As for moving, your truck's coming this afternoon around four, right? My offer to help stands."

"Harvey and I can help too," Carol blurted.

Trent smiled. "That's awfully kind of you, Carol, but I couldn't ask that."

"You helped us so much on Sunday. We ought to return the favor," she insisted. "I'll bet Laura and Molly would like to pitch in as well."

"Count me in too," Hamish put in from his nearby table.

Trent blinked. "Wow, thanks. I didn't expect all this help. I've spent the past twenty years traveling a lot, so I don't own much. We'll finish before you know it."

"Many hands make light work," Carol said.

Checking his wristwatch, Trent winced. "I'd love to stay and chat, but I have to make sure my utilities are set up at the new place."

Trent stood, then put his plate in a nearby bus pan despite Carol's protests and headed for the coatrack. As he donned his jacket, Laura appeared from the kitchen as if she'd sensed he was leaving. They said goodbye, and she watched him walk out the front door.

After Trent had gone, Doreen, who had lingered, also rose to leave. "Laura, did you hear?" she said. "Trent's lady friend is coming tomorrow. I'll bet she's something."

“Oh?” Laura’s smile remained bright, though Carol detected the faintest twitch of displeasure. “Yes, I imagine she is.”



Helping Trent move in was like receiving a lesson in world geography.

“He might not own much,” Carol whispered to Molly as she unpacked a box of dishes and handed them to Carol to wash, “but what he does own is like a museum exhibit.” She gestured to a mahogany rocker from Brazil, handwoven wall hangings from the Andes, colorful hand-painted lacquer trays from China and Vietnam, and an intricately carved teak chest from Zimbabwe.

“No kidding.” Molly held up beautiful enameled bowls. “Does Trent really use these at meals?”

Laura dried them with as much reverence as she showed her grandmother’s heirloom baking dishes. “We’d better ask if he wants them displayed somewhere.”

Hearing Laura’s comment as he passed the kitchen, Trent popped into the room with a grin on his face. “My friend in South Africa who made them would laugh. Her family uses them every day. Their kids wash them in the river.”

Trent hadn’t underestimated the amount of time it would take to empty his moving truck and set up his two-bedroom rental. He’d be sleeping in his own bed that night surrounded by his global souvenirs.

And by early evening, no fewer than five women had dropped by with casseroles, lasagna, banana bread, and even a sachet of homemade potpourri. Trent, caught off guard but still unerringly polite, thanked them profusely. He conversed briefly with each visitor, juggling pleasantries and giving directions to his helpers.

Carol wasn't surprised when fiftysomething, red-haired Wilma Guthrie, the police department's receptionist, knocked at Trent's door. Wilma kept up with every detail about everyone.

Unlike the other women's homemade dishes, Wilma had brought a massive bag of imitation cheese-curd popcorn. Introducing herself, she flashed a magenta-lipsticked smile and held out her gift. "Welcome to Loch Mallaig."

"Wow. Thank you." Trent accepted it with grace, though his right eyebrow arched slightly.

Carol's taste buds, however, went on high alert. Though this popcorn contained a negative number of nutrients, it was one of her favorite guilty snacks. Harvey loathed it. Whenever she brought a bag into the house, he swore he would drive to Minneapolis with a wrench and dismantle the equipment that had ruined popcorn forever.

After a friendly conversation Trent somehow kept short—an amazing feat considering Wilma's penchant for chatter—he surveyed this newest offering. "Jeremy likes this stuff, but remind me. What is it?"

They all giggled. "Wilma hates cooking," Joyce explained. "She brings popcorn to every potluck. I'm sure she believes she's brought you the best housewarming food ever."

"I appreciate her kind intentions," Trent said magnanimously. "And I'm definitely not a fussy eater. I've eaten everything placed in front of me. Including Mopane worms in Africa and fried scorpions in Asia." He chuckled at the group's shocked and horrified reaction. "But given all the other wonderful food I've gotten today, especially that lasagna Joyce put in the oven, I'll save the popcorn for Jeremy's next visit home."

Although Carol had fleetingly anticipated the popcorn as a snack, she knew it was for the best. One or two—or three—handfuls were never enough.

Hamish hungrily sniffed the heavenly aroma hovering in the kitchen. “Aye, a wise choice, Trent. My Joyce puts Italians to shame with her lasagna. A veritable feast awaits.”

And a delicious feast it was, in spite of the fact that they had to eat it off paper plates because Trent only owned a handful of dishes. Trent’s eyes popped when Laura brought out the meal’s crowning finale—her decadent, cherry-laden Black Forest torte.

Chuckling, Carol whispered to Molly, “Those women knew better than to try to top Laura at making dessert.”

Reenergized by the hearty meal, Harvey helped Trent set up his office in the second bedroom while everyone else cleaned the kitchen and finished unpacking a few remaining boxes. Once his computer was connected to the Internet, Trent called everyone into the room and made a video call to his son. “I want Jeremy to meet my new friends.”

The young man, who had inherited his father’s good looks, blinked at all the faces crowding his screen. “Whoa, Dad, all these people helped you move?”

“Hey, that’s not all. You should see my refrigerator.” Trent described the welcome-wagon goodies. “Wish you were here to help me eat it.”

“I do too,” Jeremy said. “I’m glad to see my friends again, but dining hall food is as awful as ever. Oh hey, man!” he added to someone off-screen, and a moment later a sandy-haired young man with glasses joined him. “Everyone, this is my roommate, Clinton Darrow.” Jeremy frowned. “You okay, dude?”

Carol had noticed the boy’s tense shoulders and shadowed eyes, but she’d chalked it up to the stress of starting a new school year. Was there more to his edgy demeanor?

Clinton shrugged, but Jeremy gestured toward the screen. “Tell Dad about your sister,” Jeremy urged. “Maybe he can help you figure out what to do.”



"I'm glad to help if I can," Trent said.

After exchanging glances among themselves, everyone else scattered to give them privacy, taking the opportunity to wrap up any remaining move-in tasks they could. Harvey stayed to try to improve the Internet connection, which seemed spotty.

Trent reappeared as Carol and the others were preparing to leave.

"You're not trying to leave without hearing thank you again, are you?" Trent shook his head. "I wouldn't have accomplished this much by myself if I had a whole week."

"It's going to take you that week to eat all the food in your fridge," Fergus said. "But if you're tired of casseroles by Saturday, I'd love to have you all over for a cookout. We need to enjoy this beautiful weather while we can. Autumn in Upper Michigan doesn't last long."

Everyone accepted his invitation in chorus, then there was a flurry of activity as they gathered their belongings and headed for the door.

While saying goodbye to Trent, Carol couldn't help asking, "Is Clinton all right?"

Trent smiled. "I think he'll be okay. He's a smart kid and a talented actor majoring in theater. He's just really sensitive. Both his parents died in an accident a few years ago. He's close to his older sister, Ashley. She's all the family he has now." His smile faded. "But Clinton said that recently, she's been acting strangely. On her last visit a few days ago, she took off without saying goodbye. He's left messages on her phone, but she hasn't called him back."

"Perhaps the young lady is involved with someone her brother would not approve?" Hamish suggested drily.

"Definite possibility," Trent agreed. "She may be tired of playing second mother and want a life of her own. Clinton's probably over-reacting, but you can hardly blame him." He exhaled. "I told him to give Ashley space, but to call me anytime he needs to talk. If he doesn't

hear from her within a week, I'll help him check with her friends and maybe her workplace.”

“It’s kind of you to help the kid,” Fergus said.

*Clinton needs more than that. Something’s really wrong.* Carol’s strong gut reaction surprised her. But what could she say or do? She didn’t know the boy or his sister, let alone all the facts involved.

As she and Harvey got ready for bed, she recalled that throughout the video call, her husband had helped Trent with his unstable Internet. Maybe he’d heard something that would shed light on the situation. She asked him about it.

Harvey lowered his graying brows. “I tried not to listen. It was Trent’s call, after all. None of our business.” He placed an ever-so-slight emphasis on “our.”

“I know you wouldn’t eavesdrop,” Carol protested, “but I sense that Clinton’s on target about his sister’s odd behavior. That he needs more than a sympathetic ear.”

“And you know this how?” Though Harvey rolled his eyes, he enfolded Carol in his arms. “Honey, you are the most caring person in the world. But you can’t fix everyone’s problems. Trent and Jeremy know Clinton better than we do. Let them handle it.” He lifted her chin, his kind, wise eyes warming her heart. “Let it go.”

Of course, Harvey was right. But as her husband snored beside her, Carol stared into the darkness, reliving Trent’s video call with the young men. Clinton’s anxious face refused to disappear from her mind.



Carol had never expected to overhear a discussion about African arrows at Bread on Arrival, but then again, their bakehouse had nurtured plenty of surprises.

Friday morning, she smiled to see Shohiwa and Trent examining each other's vintage weapons—wooden bows and notched, featherless arrows rarely used in Zimbabwe nowadays, but part of its history.

“My grandfather received this bow from his grandfather, who made it.” Shohiwa caressed the bow, which was decorated with black geometric designs. “My father received it from him, then passed it to me.”

Trent appeared to own its near duplicate. “I received mine from an old man who had no children. When a relief organization asked me to take mosquito nets to the man's village to combat malaria, he insisted I have it.”

So Trent wasn't merely an adventurer. He was a good Samaritan through and through, not just when a pretty lady needed her canoe rescued.

Laura, bringing more tea to their table, took notice as well—though the sight of arrows with narrow, wicked-looking blades stopped her short. “Yikes. I bet those are sharp.”

“They had to be.” Shohiwa lightly touched the hand-hammered tips of Trent's arrows. “For many years, my people's survival depended on their work in metals.”

Other patrons craned their necks to view the weapons being discussed, and a few stopped by the table to ask questions. Most other customers lingering in the shop that morning—the single, female customers, anyway—seemed to only have eyes for Trent. Carol didn't have to be a genius to know they were all waiting around for Trent's lady friend to appear. Even Laura was spending more time in the café area than usual.

The bell on the front door jingled occasionally with a new arrival, and Trent glanced up every time. Finally, he must have seen what he'd been waiting for, as he stood and walked to the door.

Most of Bread on Arrival's clientele fastened their gazes on the woman Trent welcomed with a hug.

Carol's own jaw dropped. This was not what she'd expected at all.