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Bakehouse
Mysteries™

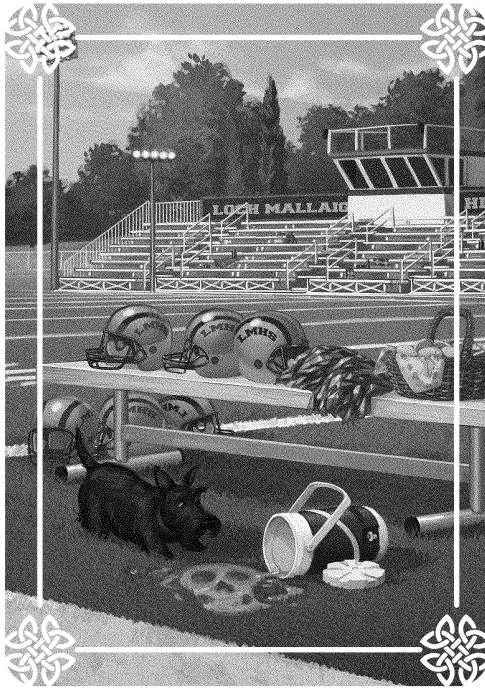
Settling Auld Scores



Sandra Orchard



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Settling Auld Scores

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Laura Donovan scanned the high school football field from the hearse's front seat. She wasn't on her way to a funeral, merely riding in the passenger seat of the old LaSalle used by her Scottish bakehouse, Bread on Arrival, as a delivery van. She generally disliked the hearse, though she knew that the eye-catching vehicle did a lot to promote the business she co-owned with her best friends, Molly Ferris and Carol MacCallan, when it was being driven around their adopted town of Loch Mallaig, Michigan.

Since it had been marketing wiz Molly's idea to repurpose the hearse when they'd bought the former funeral home that housed their bakehouse, she had no qualms about driving it. "Do you see Henry?" Molly asked while scanning the lot for a parking space.

Laura shook her head. "The players aren't warming up on the field yet. It's probably just as well his teammates don't spot his aunt arriving to watch the game in a hearse."

"He's been living with you for two months," Molly said. "I think they know who you are by now."

Laura glanced at the field again and bit her lip. "Is it weird that I'm nervous?"

"Weird that you, Laura Donovan, former Manhattan master chef, are nervous? Maybe." Molly shrugged. "But tonight's qualifier game is the first step in getting to the state championship. It's a big deal for Henry and the others. And parenting, even in the short term, will bring out emotions you never realized you could feel."

“You’d certainly know.”

Molly chuckled. “My nerves don’t get quite the same workout as they used to now that Chloe is an adult and living in Milwaukee.” She braked after a second unsuccessful pass through the parking lot. “I’ll let you out here, then catch up with you after I park down the street.”

“I can walk from wherever you park,” Laura protested.

“Not with all the bakery boxes of goodies you brought for the tailgating party. Good thing Fergus got here early enough to stake out a place for us.” Molly pointed to Fergus MacGregor’s chrome Range Rover six parking spaces from the entrance to the field, her face beaming. Now that she was actually dating the man she’d crushed on when she’d been no older than Laura’s nephew, the smile seemed to be a permanent fixture whenever he was around. Molly’s hand stole to the bangs of her blonde bob, as if to ensure every hair was still in place. “He’s already got his grills heating and chairs set up in the grass.”

“Perfect.” Laura clambered out. The cool November air bit at Laura’s cheeks, and she pulled up her hood before grabbing a couple of bakery boxes out of the back of the LaSalle.

“Leave the tote with the napkins, plates, and face paint,” Molly called back to her. “I can bring those.”

College-age bakehouse employee Bridget Ross trotted over from the crowd of tailgaters. “Here, Laura. Let me help you.”

Laura grinned. “How are you always right where I need you, Bridget?”

Bridget chuckled. “It’s a gift.” The breeze ruffled her long, black hair, which she’d streaked with green and gold for Loch Mallaig High’s school colors.

Once she and Bridget had their arms full, Laura pushed the door closed with her hip and took in the excited crowd. “I feel so out of my element,” she admitted to the younger woman as Molly drove away.

“This is only the second of Henry’s games I’ve attended, and I haven’t been to a tailgate party since college.”

“High school tailgates are way tamer and, in my opinion, tons more fun because they’re family oriented.” Bridget nodded toward a grassy space adjacent to the parking lot. “Look, they’ve even set up games for the younger children. I brought supplies for making balloon animals, and Molly will do face painting.”

The butterflies in Laura’s stomach started to mellow as they headed toward Fergus’s SUV. “Back in the Stone Age, when I went to high school, we never did anything like this. And living in NYC for the past couple of decades, I’ve missed out on opportunities to cheer on my niece and nephew.”

“I think it’s great that you were willing to take Henry in while his mom and dad are on their mission trip to South America.”

“I’m happy I could help,” Laura said. “His sister, Adina, is in her first year of college back in Marquette. She’s living on campus and far too busy to take responsibility for her brother. Henry balked at leaving the country because he wants to be seen by college football scouts this season.”

“If he’s planning on playing college ball, then he made the right choice,” Bridget said. “He’s a great kid.”

Laura grinned. “I think so, but I could be biased. I appreciate your making time to help him.”

“My pleasure.” Bridget, now in her final year of college, had been tutoring Henry in a couple of subjects in which his school transfer had left him a little behind. A decent grade point average was important if he didn’t want to lose his spot on the football team.

“Hello, ladies.” Fergus relieved Laura of her bakery boxes and set them in the back of his open Range Rover, then took Bridget’s. “Where’s Molly?”

Laura suppressed a chuckle, unsurprised that his first question was about Molly. “Parking down the block.”

He nodded. “It’s a great turnout. Carol and Harvey and their grandkids are around here somewhere. Moving a little slower with the twins in tow.”

“What about Jenny?” Laura scanned the crowd for the MacCallans’ daughter, who taught chemistry at the high school.

“She’s on concessions duty,” Fergus said. He paused, eyes twinkling, before adding, “Is Trent coming?”

At the mention of the relative newcomer to Loch Mallaig, Laura nearly blushed. She wasn’t prone to girlish giddiness when romance was concerned, but something about handsome, adventurous Trent McKade brought out her inner teen. “I’m afraid not,” she answered. “He had a group come into Northern Woods Outfitters yesterday asking for advice about an overnight backpacking trip. One thing led to another, and he wound up offering to serve as their guide. He’ll be back tomorrow night.”

“Sounds like Trent,” Fergus said with a chuckle.

“Is Neil coming, Fergus?” Bridget asked, her casual tone sounding slightly forced to Laura’s ear. Bridget and Fergus’s son, who was in his midtwenties and served as Fergus’s right-hand man at the family-owned Castleglen golf resort and lodge, were casual acquaintances as far as Laura knew—but could there be more to the relationship? She shook her head, not wanting to give in to the same sort of speculation that she disliked when it was done about her own romantic pursuits.

“I’m afraid not, Bridget,” Fergus answered. “He’s coordinating a formal dinner at the resort tonight.” When her shoulders slumped slightly, he added, “But I’ll be sure to let him know you asked about him.”

“Here we are,” Carol announced, arriving at the Range Rover holding one grandchild’s hand in each of hers. Seven-year-old twins Maisie and Gavin sported matching hints of rosiness in their cheeks.

“It’s our first game, Miss Laura!” Maisie crowed.

“I’m certain it will be very special then,” Laura said.

Behind them, Harvey tugged a giant cooler on wheels. “If you’re thirsty, we brought soft drinks, juice boxes, and water.” He held up the grocery sack in his other hand and grinned at Laura. “And lots of candy because I know your nephew is going to deliver us a pile of touchdowns.”

Jumping up and down, Maisie and Gavin let go of their grandmother’s hands and cheered. Laura chuckled. Until last week’s game, she hadn’t been familiar with the local tradition of tossing candy to the children after a touchdown.

Harvey inhaled appreciatively as he wheeled the cooler over to where Fergus had set up a pair of charcoal grills on the asphalt beside his car. “The smell of fresh coals has me missing summer.”

Fergus glanced at his watch. “I guess I’d better get our meal going too.” He unlatched a cooler with the logo of the King’s Heid Pub on it, the restaurant he owned as part of Castleglen. “I brought hamburgers, sausages, and hot dogs.”

“Sounds yummy,” Bridget said as she tied off the end of the long balloon she’d filled. She quickly fashioned it into a poodle for Maisie.

“Can you do a dinosaur for me?” Gavin begged.

“Of course,” Bridget said, then raised an eyebrow. “But you forgot the secret word.”

Gavin frowned in thought for a moment, then his eyes lit up. “Please!”

When Bridget handed him his requested dinosaur, a swarm of children surrounded her to make requests.

Molly joined the group, sneaking around the boisterous children to greet Fergus with a sideways hug. “Have you seen Henry yet?” she asked Laura.

Laura's dozing butterflies erupted into a fresh frenzy. "No. Do you think the coach will let the players join the pregame party?"

"I don't see why not," Molly said. "They don't need to get dressed and onto the field for warm-ups for a while yet."

"It depends on how focused Coach Bassett wants them to be," Fergus chimed in. "Loch Mallaig High's football team has never made it to the state finals, but this year lots of people think they have a real shot at it."

Laura wrung her hands. "First they have to win today's game, then get through next weekend's tournament, then the one after that—"

Carol clasped her warm hands around Laura's. "Just enjoy today."

Laura nodded. "You're right, of course. It's just that I really want Henry to do well. He said there will be college scouts at the district finals next week. And he absolutely lights up when he talks about playing college ball."

"Does he want to play for Michigan State?" Fergus asked.

Laura laughed. "I think he's hoping for Alabama or Florida. Someplace a little warmer."

"Smart boy." Harvey blew on his cupped hands to keep them warm.

Fergus shook his head. "Too much time in the sun will make him soft."

"Who are you calling soft, Mr. MacGregor?" Henry appeared from between two cars, his bright eyes twinkling. His blond hair gleamed in the sunlight, and he wore a team jacket. Laura blinked, wondering if he'd grown yet again since that morning. He seemed to shoot up inches at a time without her noticing. Now well over six feet tall, he towered over his aunt.

"Not you." Fergus clapped the boy on the shoulder. "Good luck out there today."

Henry ducked his head. "Thanks."

Harvey cleared his throat. "I heard Marcus Parish is coaching your opponents today. Does that have Coach Bassett worried?"

Henry shrugged. "Not that he's said."

"Who's Marcus Parish?" Laura asked.

"Loch Mallaig High's former football coach," Fergus explained. "The principal fired him before the end of last season for failing to appropriately supervise his athletes at an away game."

"Why would his coaching the opposing team worry our new coach?" Molly asked.

"Karl Bassett was Parish's assistant last year, so unless Bassett really changed things up, Parish likely knows the man's playbook inside and out."

"Don't worry," Henry assured them. "We've got moves the Marauders won't see coming."

Henry hung around long enough to down a hamburger, a sausage, and half a dozen Empire biscuits, then headed to the locker room as the bakehouse's other part-time helper, Hamish Bruce, arrived. A retired history teacher, the tall, white-bearded handyman had a knack for oversharing trivia and a curmudgeonly demeanor, but the Bakehouse Three loved him all the same.

"Ooh, a birdie." Maisie pointed past Hamish to a man-size duck strolling through the parking lot, occasionally flapping its giant, black-and-white wings.

"That's Larry the Loon, our team's mascot," Carol explained.

"Like the birds we hear calling across the lake?" Gavin asked.

"That's correct, young man," replied Hamish, an avid bird-watcher. He gestured to the emblem on the retro green-and-gold jacket he wore, which likely heralded from his teaching days.

"Why is he here?" Maisie wanted to know.

"The mascot helps get the crowd excited to cheer on the players," Bridget said.

The young man wearing the costume must have noticed Maisie's

fascination with him because he came over and crouched so he was at eye level with her. “Are you loony for the Loch Mallaig Loons?”

Maisie giggled. “I want them to win.”

“That’s good.” The bird high-fived her. “Cheer good and loud.” He offered her a team button and her eyes widened with awe.

“Can I keep it?” she asked Carol.

“Of course,” replied her grandmother. “I’ll help you put it on.”

After handing over a pin for Gavin as well, the mascot moved on to the next family. Their pins secure, Maisie and Gavin ran to join a dark-haired teenage girl who had been walking with the mascot and was now showing another group of kids how to make maple keys, the winged seeds from maple trees, fly like helicopters.

Before long, volunteers roamed through the parking lot asking the tailgaters to start cleaning up as the game would soon start. Molly broke open a box of garbage bags she’d brought for the job and they all pitched in. Carol collected the twins, and the group headed to the side of the stands reserved for the home team. On the other side, their opponent’s fans had a respectable showing. Laura and her friends claimed seats on the fifty-yard line, the benefit of arriving early with the tailgaters.

A few minutes before the game started, Hamish’s cheerful wife, Joyce, and their four granddaughters joined the little group. Although the youngest, two-year-old Janine, stayed with Joyce, the older three girls, ranging in age from five to ten, joined Maisie and Gavin. Noticing the team logos that Molly had drawn on the twins’ faces, Courtney, Alannah, and Leah begged for their own, and Molly happily complied.

The first quarter passed uneventfully, although Laura found it difficult to ignore the pair of teenage spectators berating the Loch Mallaig players’ performance from just outside the fence ringing the field. From their belligerent attitude and leather jackets, they seemed as

if they would be more at home in a motorcycle gang than at a sporting match, and Laura couldn't help wishing they'd stop poisoning the atmosphere for everyone else and leave.

"When's the candy toss?" Maisie asked impatiently.

"When they score a touchdown, duh," her brother said.

Carol scowled. "Please watch your tone, Gavin."

Maisie frowned. "Well, when are they gonna score a touchdown?"

Hamish's granddaughters chimed in with similar grouching, clearly growing equally bored.

"You never know," Fergus said brightly. "They could surprise you when you least expect it."

Hamish shook his head as one of their players fumbled the first pass of the second quarter. "*Och*," he grouched in the Scottish brogue commonly heard among locals. Loch Mallaig had been founded in the early 1800s by Scottish pioneers, and the town held their heritage in high esteem. "The whole lot of them seem to be off the fang."

"What's that mean?" Laura asked. She had picked up quite a few Scottish expressions in the time she'd been here, but this was a new one to her.

"Not up to their usual skill or power level," Fergus translated.

"They're awfully squirmy," Bridget observed.

Molly cocked her head, her gaze fixed on the players. "I was thinking the same thing. And they're itching themselves like crazy. Did you notice?"

Laura studied Henry. She'd been so focused on willing him to score a goal that she hadn't registered the way he kept running his fingers around the collar of his jersey and scratching the back of his neck, his arms, anywhere he could reach. She sank her teeth into her bottom lip. "I bought a different brand of laundry detergent last week. You don't think he's having an allergic reaction to it, do you?"

“Not unless you did the whole team’s laundry,” Harvey said. “They’re all acting weird.”

The opposing team intercepted the ball and pressed toward the end zone. Loch Mallaig’s left tackle barely managed to take down the opponent’s linebacker at the ten-yard line.

Larry the Loon jumped in front of the grandstand and urged fans to cheer on their team. Loch Mallaig managed to block their opponents and hold the score at zero until halftime.

Laura rose. “I’m going to talk to Henry and find out what’s going on.”

“I’ll come too,” Bridget volunteered.

By the time Laura and Bridget wound their way from the stands into the school, the team had already disappeared into the locker room. Laura spotted the team’s redheaded equipment manager hovering in the hallway outside the locker room door and thought he was acting unusually nervous—biting his lip, rocking from one foot to the other, glancing around the slightly open door every few seconds—so she nudged Bridget and said, “Let’s see what he knows.”

The young man grimaced when Laura and Bridget stopped in front of him.

“What’s going on?” Laura asked as they approached. “My nephew is on the team, and he and the other players seemed pretty itchy out there.”

The teen’s head bobbed affirmatively, but he said nothing.

Coach Bassett stormed out of the locker room, his ample height, barrel chest, and dark, slicked-back hair adding to his intimidation factor. “Brendan!” he bellowed at the now cowering teen. “Tell me right now—how did itching powder get inside the entire team’s shoulder pads?”



Brendan's face was white as a sheet. "I, uh . . ." he stuttered.

"Speak up," Coach Bassett demanded. "You're in charge of the equipment. It's your responsibility to ensure no one tampers with it."

The boy attempted to stand taller. "I cleaned all the pads and hung them back in place after the last game, but anyone could've gotten to them between then and now."

"You should have checked the equipment before the boys dressed today," the coach barked.

A petite blonde strode up to them, hands fisted. "Aren't you being a little too hard on Brendan?"

"I can take care of myself, Tina," Brendan hissed under his breath.

"Don't let them push you around." Tina glared at Coach Bassett. "It's not as if anything like this has ever happened before. It wouldn't occur to *anyone* to scrutinize the inside of the shoulder pads for powder residue. Besides, if anyone should have noticed, it's the players when they put them on."

Coach Bassett gazed coldly at the girl for a moment, but her logic was sound. With an aggrieved sigh, he addressed Brendan. "The boys hit the showers to try to scrub the stuff off. They can wear their practice pads for the second half of the game. You break out the new jerseys, then clean every scrap of equipment they wore today."

"The jerseys are in the supply closet," Brendan stammered, gesturing to a door down the hall.

“Then you’d better get them out of there,” Bassett said impatiently, tossing him a set of keys.

Brendan scurried down the hallway without glancing at Tina. She gave the coach one last spiteful glare, then spun on her heel and left the way she’d come.

A teacher passing them in the hall muttered to the student beside him, “Those would be the jerseys that cost the track team a new pole vault pit.”

“Are you behind this, Coach Nelson?” Coach Bassett shouted after the teacher.

Coach Nelson spun around. “Behind what?”

“The itching powder in my boys’ jerseys.”

Nelson chuckled. “Is that why they looked so pathetic? No, I wouldn’t pull a prank like that for such an important game. I may not like that you’ve managed to hijack the entire athletic department’s budget, but I wouldn’t jeopardize our school’s chance at going to State over it.”

Coach Bassett’s single nod indicated he believed him, and Nelson and the student moved on. Bassett peered skeptically at Laura. “May I help you?” he asked, his tone clipped.

“I’m Laura Donovan, Henry Donovan’s aunt. I came in to find out what was wrong and if there’s anything I can do.”

Bassett snorted derisively. “Pray the showers get rid of the itch.” He strode to the locker room and pushed through the door.

Laura and Bridget started back out to the field. Before they got to the door, the mascot burst through it in a flurry of faux feathers.

“Is the team coming?” the loon asked Brendan, who was approaching the locker room with a cardboard box in his arms that must have held the new jerseys. “Halftime is almost over.”

Brendan filled in the mascot on what had happened.

The mascot removed his headgear and chuckled, his bright blue eyes dancing with amusement. “That’ll teach the guys to think twice before picking on you.”

“I didn’t do it, Kit!” Brendan insisted. “You know I wouldn’t.”

“Sure.” Kit shrugged. “But the point is you *could* have, and that’s a power over them those guys need to know about if you want to get any respect from them.”

Brendan frowned, then mumbled something about the team jerseys and disappeared into the locker room. The mascot replaced his costume’s headgear and trotted past Bridget and Laura toward the door. He burst through it and released a birdcall, earning a few answering cheers from the fans mingling on the path.

“Poor Brendan,” Laura said as she and Bridget followed Kit through the doorway. “It sounds like he’s being bullied.”

Bridget nodded. “In my experience, football players have a bad habit of exploiting their big-man-on-campus persona by picking on the school’s geeks.” When Laura frowned, Bridget added, “Don’t worry. I don’t think Henry’s like that.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Laura checked the countdown clock on the scoreboard. “We’d better get to our seats. The second half is about to start.” Granted, it couldn’t start until the team was dressed, but she hoped that wouldn’t take long.

Fortunately, when they returned to their seats, both teams were marching back onto the field and play began shortly. Once settled on the bleachers, Bridget and Laura filled their friends in on what had happened.

“Who do you suppose was behind the prank?” Carol asked.

“One of their opponents, I imagine,” Laura said.

The fans surged to their feet with a deafening roar as Henry, the Loons’ running back, broke through their opponent’s defensive line. A player took him down five yards from the end zone.

Laura shuddered, but did her best to not betray her anxiety over the hit.

With thumb and finger to his lips, Fergus let out an ear-piercing whistle, then joined the clapping. “Seems as if the team’s anger over the prank has ignited something in them.”

“Like rocket fuel,” Harvey agreed.

“About time,” Joyce grouched. For such an affable woman, she took her high school sports very seriously—often to the amusement of her friends and family.

Maisie jumped up and down. “Do we get to catch the candy now?”

The other children’s eyes lit up at the question.

Laura chuckled. “If they can get the ball another few yards.”

On the next play, the quarterback feigned a pass to one player then spun and snapped the ball to Henry in the end zone for a completion. The crowd leaped to their feet, bellowing with excitement.

“Now?” Maisie shouted.

“Now,” Carol said, and all the children in the stands dashed to the front of the bleachers as fans tossed them candy. The kids caught most, then scrambled after the ones that fell to the ground. Unfortunately, Gavin came up empty-handed and appeared close to tears.

Larry the Loon must have noticed, because he scooped up some from the ground below the stands and handed them to the dejected little boy. Gavin dashed back to his grandma and proudly displayed what the mascot had shared with him.

“They chose a real sweetheart to be their mascot,” Molly said.

The children settled back in their seats to enjoy their candy and await the next touchdown. And the Loons did not disappoint. By the end of the game, they’d racked up three touchdowns and trounced the Marauders twenty-one to three.

As the rival teams shook hands, Laura hurried to the field to congratulate her nephew.

Henry's grin lit his whole face. "We did it!"

"You certainly did." Laura beamed. "I'm so proud of you."

"Is it okay if I go out with the guys to celebrate?" Henry asked.

"Of course," Laura said. "Just make sure you're home before midnight. We have church in the morning."

As she watched Henry run off to catch up with his buddies, Laura spotted Karl Bassett having a heated exchange with the Marauders' coach.

"I know you were behind that prank, Parish." Coach Bassett's deep voice carried across the distance to where Laura stood. "If you try anything else like that, I'll make sure you never work in football again."

"I had nothing to do with it," Parish shot back. "But I wouldn't expect you to believe me. Clearly you haven't changed. Your false accusations already got me fired from one job—a job you neatly took over, I see."

"And I'm doing it far better than you did." Bassett jerked a thumb toward the scoreboard. "As you can see."

Not interested in hearing more from the feuding coaches, Laura left the field. She caught up to Molly and Fergus in the parking lot, where they were talking and laughing beside his Range Rover. "Sorry, Molly. I didn't mean to keep you."

"It's no problem," Molly said.

"Laura, we were talking about getting dessert at King's Heid Pub," Fergus said. "Would you like to join us?"

Laura knew better than to intrude on the lovebirds' date. "Thanks for the invitation, but I think I'll pass. Although I'm sure it'll be delicious."

Fergus chuckled. "Considering you make our desserts, I'm sure you're right."

"I'm ready when you are, Fergus." Molly grimaced slightly. "Laura, do you mind driving the LaSalle back to the bakehouse? It's parked down the block."

Laura wrinkled her nose dramatically, then laughed. “Fine, but I wouldn’t do it for anyone else.”

Laura got the keys from Molly and saw the pair off. As she was starting down the sidewalk, her phone dinged with an incoming text message. She checked the screen and was surprised to see that Bridget had texted her. *Come to the boys’ locker room.*

Laura considered asking for an explanation, but she decided instead to just do as Bridget had asked. Inside the school, the halls were deserted, all students and athletes having cleared out in record time. Laura found the boys’ locker room and knocked on the door.

No answer.

She nudged it open. “Hello?”

“Over here,” Bridget’s voice came from inside.

Laura’s heart hiccuped as she glanced both directions down the hall to ensure nobody saw her. Seeing no one, she ducked inside. The door clanged shut behind her and she jumped. If the custodian locked the locker room door before he left, they’d be trapped inside for the rest of the weekend. She studied the narrow windows that edged the top of one wall. She might be able to wriggle through one, but how would they get up there? She shed her jacket, wadded it into a ball, and propped the door ajar.

“What are you doing?” Bridget asked as she joined Laura.

“Ensuring we don’t get locked in here. What are *you* doing?”

Bridget held up a couple of small plastic bags, her eyes bright. A white powder coated the inside of each bag. “I got to thinking that if I could figure out what the itching powder is made from, I might be able to determine where it came from and who bought or made it.” She jiggled the bags. “I managed to scrape these samples off a couple of the benches and the floor. Lucky I had these in my bag.”

“That forensic science major sure is coming in handy, isn’t it?”

Bridget grinned. “Exactly. You know the police won’t investigate what seems like a high school prank, but I’m not sure that’s all it was.”

“Coach Bassett would agree with you.” Laura picked up a crumpled piece of paper and started toward the trash can. “I overheard him—”

“Wait,” Bridget interrupted. “Let me see that. It could be a clue.”

Laura assessed the narrow yellow sheet. “It’s a carbon copy of a parking ticket.”

“Whose?”

Laura squinted at the smudged information. “I can’t tell. I can only make out a couple of numbers in the license plate. It’s dated days ago for parking in front of a fire hydrant on Balmoral Lane.”

“Must be the one by the library.” Bridget took the paper from Laura. “I’ll hang on to it. Might prove someone was in here who shouldn’t have been.”

“Good point,” Laura agreed.

“Now, what did you overhear the coach say?” Bridget prompted as she tucked the ticket into another plastic bag.

“Coach Bassett accused Marcus Parish of covering the uniforms with the itching powder, no doubt to ensure his team won the game and maybe as payback for Loch Mallaig High firing him.”

“What did Coach Parish say?”

“He denied having anything to do with it, naturally.”

Bridget stuffed the bags into her jacket pocket and resumed scrutinizing the benches. “In one of my tutoring sessions with Henry, he mentioned that the Loons’ quarterback, Jason Johnson, was assaulted on his way home after a game.”

“He never told me about that.” Laura’s heart thumped, worrying that something similar could happen to Henry. Was this how a mom felt when she sensed that her child was in danger?

“He probably didn’t want to upset you. Jason wasn’t seriously

hurt, but Henry said he could've been if Henry hadn't happened by when he did."

"And you think the two incidents might be connected?"

Bridget shrugged. "This year's Loons have a real shot at making it to the state championship. For all we know, this could be part of a systematic attempt to undermine the team and keep them from getting there."

Laura frowned. "You really think so? An assault is a lot more serious than a summer-camp itching powder prank."

"You saw some of the parents out there. People take their football seriously. A lot of these kids have their hearts set on playing at the college level. They're probably planning to fund college with football scholarships."

Laura pictured the fervor with which some of the parents were shouting at the players to run faster, tackle harder, play smarter. She sighed, "I guess testing the powder wouldn't hurt. I think it's great you've acquired the skills to do it."

Bridget swelled with pride for a moment, then her expression became thoughtful. "I wonder if the assault culprit is a member of the team they played the night the QB was attacked. Maybe someone who figured if he could stop the Loons here, his team wouldn't have to face them in the district final."

"Will that other team be in the district final?"

"It probably depends on if they won their own qualifier game tonight," Bridget said.

Laura found the Loons' game schedule on a far wall and scanned the list, refreshing her memory about how teams made their way through the complicated tournament system. If a team's regular season record was good enough, they would advance to the district, then regional, then state tournament, each one with its own single-elimination system. The goal, of course, was to become state champions.

“It would seem more logical that one of the Marauders attacked the QB, since losing today’s game shuts them out of the tournament.” Laura tapped the name on the schedule. “Maybe one of them came to our last game prepared to target the QB of whichever team won, since that’s who they’d face today.”

“If that’s the case, Parish couldn’t be clueless. The guys would’ve boasted about it.”

“Maybe,” Laura said. “But Parish would have made a point of ignoring them because he wouldn’t want to know, or at least appear to have known.”

“Even if he did know,” Bridget said.

“Exactly.”

Bridget straightened, apparently satisfied that she’d collected all the evidence she could find. “It’d be good if it turns out to be one of the Marauders. Now that they’re shut out, they’d have nothing to gain from trying anything else.”

Laura furrowed her brow, a dark thought prickling the back of her neck as she thought about the fight she’d overheard between Bassett and Parish. Sure, the Marauders wouldn’t have anything to gain as a team—but their bitter coach might get the revenge he could be seeking.