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Bakehouse
Mysteries™

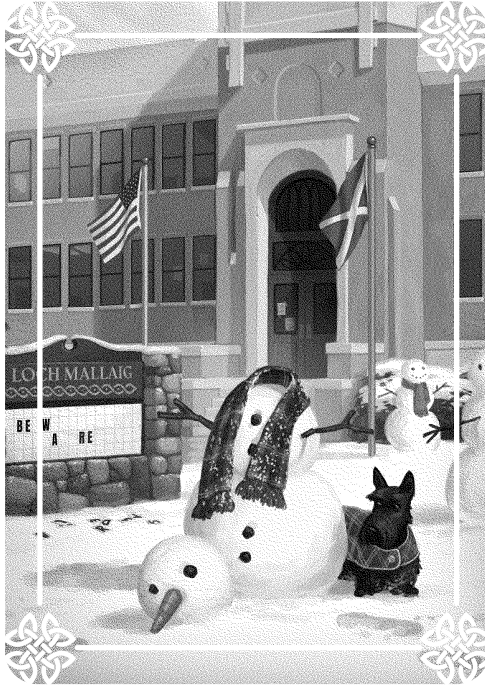
Heid and Seek



Jan Fields



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Heid and Seek

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Although Loch Mallaig Elementary School had a heating system, the classroom where Carol MacCallan sat beside her husband, Harvey, felt chilly to her. She wondered for a moment if she might be coming down with something, then cut her eyes to the windows and shifted her suspicions to the delicate ice crystal patterns forming there. They reminded her of the paper snowflakes that hung from strings all around the room. Northern Michigan in January was dauntingly cold every day, and Carol missed the steady warmth of the kitchen at her bakehouse, Bread on Arrival, where she would normally be on a Friday. However, nothing would have kept Carol and Harvey from visiting the school that morning.

Harvey squirmed in his small chair, bumping his wife's arm. Carol gave him a frown.

"These chairs are not made for a man my size," he whispered.

They aren't made for a woman my size either, she refrained from saying. Instead, she shushed him and pointed her gaze to the front of the room, where a little boy with almost shockingly red hair and a face full of freckles grinned and held up his hand-drawn poster.

"My hero is my dad," the boy said. "He's an accountant, so he has to do hard math all day long." The way he said the last bit amused Carol. Clearly hard math was a terrible adversary to face.

The little boy stopped talking and waved his poster around, still grinning. The teacher's aide, Raimie Phillips, spoke up. "Kent, can you tell us what makes your father a hero?" she asked.

Kent gave her a bewildered grimace. “He does hard math all day long . . . on purpose!”

Carol chuckled under her breath. Kent obviously did not share Carol’s love of mathematics, a love that had inspired her to pursue a Master’s degree in the subject so many years ago and propelled her into a long career as a high school math teacher.

Carol saw the teacher’s assistant struggle for a moment to suppress her own giggle.

“Yes,” Raimie said. “And why does he do that?”

The little boy’s face brightened. “So he can pay for all of my sister’s shoes.”

The adults in the room burst into laughter, and Kent tilted his head, not quite understanding why. Then, after a moment, his bright grin bloomed across his face again.

“Thank you, Kent,” Raimie said, the corners of her mouth still twitching. “Now we will hear from Gavin Gilmore.”

To a smattering of applause, Kent raced over to an equally freckled woman and thrust the poster into her hands before dropping into the chair beside her. The woman admired the poster, whispering to her son as he beamed at her.

Carol watched the young teacher’s aide with approval. She handled the children well. Though Carol had spoken with her twin grandchildren’s teacher several times at functions like this one, this was her first time seeing their classroom aide. She was certain both her daughter, Jenny, and her husband, Craig, must have spoken with the teacher’s aide on many occasions, since they were both deeply involved in their children’s education, and not simply because Jenny was a teacher herself. Jenny and Craig Gilmore were the kind of parents Carol had loved seeing when she was teaching, since involved parents often meant the students had strong support at home.

Carol would guess the aide's age to be early twenties. She wore a straight, beige dress and a hand-knit cardigan in natural pastels. Slender with a wide mouth, Raimie had dark-blond hair that she wore parted on the side and pulled tightly into a ballerina bun.

Beside Carol, Harvey sat up straighter as their grandson marched to the front of the room. Carol couldn't help but smile at the child's slightly disheveled appearance. She suspected Jenny had tried extra hard to make Gavin presentable for Hero Day, but his once-neat necktie was now wildly askew and his shirt hung untucked except for a small section in the front. Still, his dark eyes danced as he reached the front and bowed deeply for the audience.

"Ham," Harvey whispered and Carol elbowed him, but not hard. She rather agreed with the assessment. Gavin did love being the center of attention.

Their grandson held up his poster and announced, "This is my grandfather, Harvey MacCallan. He used to be a newspaper reporter. Superman was a reporter too." He tapped a flapping cape on the oddly proportioned figure he'd drawn. "That's why Grandpa is wearing a cape. I don't think he wore a cape at work, but he probably should have, because that would have been awesome."

Carol cut a sideways glance at Harvey and saw he was beaming proudly.

"My grandfather got tired, so he came to live here with my grandmother," Gavin continued.

"Tired?" Raimie asked.

"Retired," Harvey insisted with a bit more energy than strictly required. Carol almost laughed aloud. Far be it for anyone to see Harvey MacCallan as a tired, old man.

"Right, *retired*," Gavin nearly shouted in triumph. But then his face crinkled in confusion. "But don't you have to be tired to be re-tired?"

Again the audience laughed while Raimie bent to whisper in Gavin's ear. His face smoothed, then he stood up extra straight and held up one finger, the classroom signal for silence. When the laughing fell away, Gavin finished his presentation. "My grandfather still writes sometimes and also makes fishing lures, but mostly he is a chicken wrangler, which is tricky because chickens are descended from dinosaurs, so they're scary sometimes."

As the applause and laughter met the end of Gavin's presentation, Carol leaned over to whisper to Harvey. "Chicken wrangler?"

Harvey shrugged. "He called and asked what my job was now. I didn't know he was going to put my answer in a report for school."

Carol patted his arm. "Serves you right for being too clever."

Gavin took two bows before Raimie gently pushed him toward his seat. He gave his grandparents a grin and trotted over to sit down beside his twin, Maisie. Behind the twins, Craig perched on another of the tiny chairs, looking every bit as uncomfortable as Harvey, and he patted Gavin's shoulder.

Maisie was sitting extra straight and her eyes shone with worry. Carol knew she loved speaking as much as Gavin once she was into it, but she suffered from more stage fright than her brother. Carol wished she sat close enough to give the girl a hug, or that Jenny hadn't had to proctor an exam for her high school chemistry students that morning.

Raimie called Maisie up to the front, and the little girl squared her shoulders and rushed toward the spot Gavin had held moments before. She stared directly at her grandmother, her eyes wide. Carol gave her what she hoped was a supportive smile. Maisie's lips quirked a bit, and she held up her poster.

The drawing was neater than her brother's, and the coloring of the figure had been done carefully. It showed a slightly lumpy person holding a cupcake in one hand and a magnifying glass in the other. For

the figure's head, Maisie had pasted an actual photograph of Carol's face. The combination of drawing and photo was a little disquieting, but Carol made an effort to concentrate on the compliment of being her granddaughter's hero.

"This is my grandmother, Carol MacCallan," Maisie said, her voice much quieter than Gavin's had been.

"Please speak up so everyone can hear you, Maisie," Raimie said gently.

Maisie raised her chin and increased her volume. "This is my grandmother, Carol MacCallan. She's a superhero because she has a secret identity. Most days she is a mild-mannered baker, but sometimes she's a detective who solves *murders*." Maisie dropped her voice to a dramatic stage whisper for the last word.

Carol felt her supportive expression freeze to her face as she recovered from the shock at her granddaughter's words. She had no idea that Maisie thought she was some kind of detective.

"Even though my grandmother is a superhero, I didn't draw her in a cape because she would never wear anything that silly," Maisie said, casting a reproving frown toward her brother, who simply made a face at her. "My grandmother is more like Sherlock Holmes, only she doesn't wear the funny hat either. But she does solve lots of crimes."

Carol winced, giving up on radiating support and settling for not showing how aghast she was at this assessment.

"Is your grandma a police officer?" Kent shouted from his seat.

"No, silly," Maisie replied, equally loud now, and she shook her head as if disappointed at Kent's assumption. "She's a baker. I said that. Solving crimes is her secret identity. Police officers aren't secret."

"Inside voices," Raimie reminded them both firmly. "Do you have anything else to add, Maisie?"

The little girl shook her head, setting the beads in her hair swinging.

“Nope. My grandmother is my hero. Oh, and she’s super nice too.” With that, she hurried to her seat, where she and Gavin began pushing one another surreptitiously.

“Sherlock,” Harvey whispered in Carol’s ear.

“At least I’m not a chicken wrangler,” Carol replied primly. Then she ignored him completely and focused on the remaining presentations without letting him distract her, even though he continued to fidget in his seat every so often.

As soon as the last presentation ended, a lovely young woman with huge, dark eyes stepped up to the front. It was the twins’ teacher, Kendra Layville. Kendra also wore her hair pulled tightly against her head, though it formed a soft, black puff at the back instead of a ballerina bun.

Carol knew the twins adored their teacher, though they were both quite enthusiastic about all the adults at Loch Mallaig Elementary School, which Carol took as a huge commendation for the school.

“Thank you all for joining us for such a special day,” Ms. Layville said, “As you’ve seen, the children have worked hard to honor the heroes in their lives. And I especially want to thank Raimie Phillips, my teacher’s aide, for all that she’s done to make this a great day for the students and their families. Now, I hope you’ll all stay and join us for some refreshments.”

The young woman had barely finished that last sentence before Harvey rocketed out of his uncomfortable, tiny chair. He held out a hand to Carol, which she appreciated since her seat was very low to the ground. She was rather proud of standing without a groan. The bitter cold of January did no favors for her knees.

She and Harvey headed over to congratulate the twins on their impressive reports. “I enjoyed the way you worked ‘chicken wrangler’ into the report,” Harvey told Gavin.

“It was one of the best parts,” Gavin said, and Carol almost laughed aloud at her grandson’s total lack of modesty. She thought it would be nice to be so confident about everything.

“I want you to know that I’m not the least jealous that Gavin chose you instead of me as his hero,” Craig informed Harvey in a somber tone.

“It’s hard to compete with a grandfather,” Carol said, patting Craig’s arm.

“That’s for sure,” Craig agreed, his countenance making it clear that he admired his father-in-law nearly as much as Gavin did.

Carol felt a tug at her arm as Maisie’s voice asked, “Did you see my picture?” She held up the drawing with Carol’s oversize head pasted on.

Carol suppressed a grimace. “I did. And I could tell you worked hard on it. The coloring is perfect.”

Maisie brightened. “I made the dress blue. Blue is beautiful.”

“It is,” Carol agreed.

Gavin began to tow Harvey toward the snack table, and Maisie cast a glance full of wistful yearning in that direction. “Do you want a cookie?” she asked her grandmother.

“Not right now,” Carol said.

Maisie’s face fell. “Are you sure? I could go get you one. We’re not supposed to have any of the treats until our guests are served.”

“I see. Well in that case, you’d best get one for me and one for you too.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Craig said. “I hate to miss a good cookie.”

Maisie grabbed her dad’s hand and tugged him across the room as her grandmother watched with a smile. Carol was proud of her grandchildren, and she knew the credit for their generous hearts belonged to the excellent upbringing they were getting. Jenny and Craig were doing a terrific job, and Carol was incredibly happy that her daughter had chosen her husband well.

Carol was struck with a memory of Jenny at about Maisie's age, standing before her mother with her hands on her hips and announcing she was never going to have children.

"Why is that?" Carol had asked.

"Because they're messy," Jenny said. "Every one of them. They can't help it. You should keep that in mind when you see my room."

Carol chuckled to herself. Jenny had passed that same personality along to her son.

"Mrs. MacCallan?"

Carol turned to see the young teacher's aide wringing her hands nervously. "Hello, Raimie," Carol said. "Please, call me Carol."

"Thank you. I was hoping for a chance to talk with you. I've been impressed by some of Maisie and Gavin's tales of your sleuthing."

Carol winced. "My grandchildren have rather vivid imaginations. They don't lie, mind you, but they do embellish a bit."

Raimie's expression remained serious. "Children do," she said. "But I've also read about your help with police cases in the *Crown Press News*."

"Oh my," Carol said. "That paper has an even more lurid imagination than my grandchildren. Honestly, Raimie, I wouldn't put too much stock in what they print." That was an understatement. Though Harvey insisted on subscribing to nearly all the newspapers in the region, he often mocked the *Crown Press News* for its tabloid nature and love of gossip.

The young woman's eyes filled with tears. "I was hoping you'd help us. We need it."

"What's wrong?" Carol asked, softening immediately. She had never been able to walk away from someone in need.

Raimie swallowed and dashed at her eyes. "I can't talk about it here. Could I come to the bakehouse tomorrow and speak to you privately?"

“Of course,” Carol assured her. She knew her best friends and partners in the bakery, Laura Donovan and Molly Ferris, wouldn’t mind if Carol took a moment to listen to the young woman’s problem. They were as quick to help as Carol. It was part of what made working with them at Bread on Arrival so wonderful. They shared a love of the people of Loch Mallaig, a town they’d moved to in their fifties, which had adopted them as if they were lifelong residents.

Raimie reached out to touch her hand, relief plain on her face. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Over Raimie’s shoulder, Carol noticed a scowling man watching them from the open door of the classroom. She had never seen him in the twins’ classroom before.

The man was older than Raimie, appearing to be about thirty. He wore a crisp white shirt and a navy waistcoat. Between his clothes, his well-cut dark blond hair, and his neatly trimmed beard, he struck Carol as a man who cared a great deal about his appearance.

Carol realized she hadn’t heard the last thing Raimie said to her. “Hmm?”

Before Raimie could repeat herself, the man strode over and stopped beside her, whispering in her ear. Raimie paled slightly in response to whatever he said, and she stepped back from the man.

“It was nice to see you, Mrs. MacCallan,” Raimie said. “I love working with your grandchildren.” Then she hurried away, casting one last frown toward the man before heading to the refreshments table.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Carol said to the man.

“My name is Byron Quayle,” he said in a reedy tenor. “My classroom is next door, and sometimes Kendra and I combine our classes for outings and such. Your grandchildren are so bright and clever.” From this proximity, Carol noticed the man’s pale blue eyes were a little too close together, and with his hawkish nose, he reminded Carol of a preening rooster.

“Thank you,” Carol said. “We’re quite proud of them.”

“As well you should be,” he agreed.

Though everything he said was complimentary, Carol found she wasn’t warming to the man, probably because of how Raimie had reacted to him. Carol gave herself a little mental shake. *Don’t jump to conclusions. He’s probably perfectly nice.*

Carol knew from experience that teaching was a job best pursued by those who enjoyed the company of young people. That was part of what had motivated her in her own career before she’d retired to embark on the new adventure of owning a bakery. It was hard for her not to give the benefit of the doubt to anyone who’d chosen to make teaching their profession.

“So,” Carol said, gesturing toward the refreshments table, “did you come to get a cookie?”

“Not specifically,” he said, following her wave. “But now that you mention it, I think I see a chocolate chip cookie with my name on it.” Without waiting for her response, he headed for the table.

On the way across the room, the teacher crossed paths with Harvey, who eyed him appraisingly. When Harvey reached Carol, he handed her a peanut butter cookie on a napkin. “Who is that guy?”

“A teacher named Mr. Quayle,” Carol said. “His classroom is next door.” She waved the cookie. “I thought Maisie was bringing me a cookie.”

“She was petrified with indecision about which one to bring,” Harvey said. “So I rescued her. Not that I expect that the particular cookie I got you could compare to the ones at Bread on Arrival.”

“I’m sure it’s fine.” Carol took a bite and found Harvey’s assessment was right. The cookie barely tasted of peanut butter and was entirely too sweet. Still, it was a cookie after all, so she took another bite.

“What did the teacher want to chat about?” Harvey asked.

“Nothing,” Carol said. “In fact, I don’t think he was interested in talking to me at all.” In fact, she couldn’t shake the impression that Byron Quayle had come into the classroom for the sole purpose of putting a stop to Raimie talking with Carol. She drew a deep breath to tell Harvey as much, but bit back the words as the twins raced over.

“The cookies are great,” Gavin said. “But not as good as yours.”

“That’s nice of you to say,” Carol replied quietly. “But maybe you should say it more quietly. Whoever made them could get hurt feelings.”

Gavin cocked his head to one side. “Why? I said they were great.”

“That you did,” Harvey told him as he clapped a hand on his grandson’s shoulder. “By the way, are you going to give me that poster you made? I’ll get it framed.”

Gavin’s eyes went wide. “Framed like a famous painting? That would be cool.”

“You can have mine,” Maisie said as she beamed up at her grandmother. “In case you want to frame it too.”

Carol pictured her pasted-on face watching her crookedly from a wall in her house. “That sounds lovely,” she lied gently. “I’ll hang it in the office at the bakery. Then Molly and Laura can enjoy it too.” *And it will give me fewer nightmares.*

Maisie obviously felt that was even better than Harvey framing Gavin’s picture because she made a smug face at him. Harvey quickly stepped in to be sure the twins’ competitive streak didn’t devolve into a squabble in the classroom.

Carol listened to them, but she was watching Raimie hand out some rather lopsided cupcakes across the room. The young woman had been truly worried about something. Carol couldn’t help thinking that whatever had upset Raimie, somehow Byron had made it worse. She hoped she’d find out exactly what was going on when Raimie came to the bakery on Saturday—and that she could help.



Baker's hours began early every morning, so it wasn't exactly surprising that Loch Mallaig was quiet as Carol drove through town on the way to Bread on Arrival from her lakeside cabin. Still, middle January in Loch Mallaig carried a kind of crystalline silence as the night's darkness clung tenaciously despite the coming dawn. Only people with no choice ventured out before sunrise broke, bearing the illusion of warmth. Carol loved the quiet of early morning, but the cold sometimes made her feel achy and out of sorts.

She pulled into her regular spot at the bakehouse and spotted Molly Ferris and her Scottie dog, Angus, heading toward her. Angus wore an adorable plaid coat and four black booties trimmed in the same plaid. He didn't seem to be enjoying wearing the booties since his usual bouncy gait was clumpy and awkward. He lifted his tiny paws high in the air, as if trying to pull them free of the boots.

Carol swung open the door of her white Chrysler 300 and gasped at the sharp cold that met her. *How is it that I never get used to that?* She braced herself and hopped out, trying to put on a brave face to show what a hearty Michigan native she was. "Molly," she called out, proud that her voice didn't shake. "I love Angus's booties."

Molly stopped and tugged at the pale blue scarf wrapped around her neck. "Thanks. Too bad Angus hates them."

"Better to have annoying booties than frozen toes," Carol replied.

As if in response, Angus plunked down and began chewing at the bootie on his foot. Molly bent and scooped him up. "We'll

be inside in a minute, and I'll take them off," she promised the grumpy dog.

Carol reached into the car, grabbed her purse and they headed inside. Even though the bakery had been closed since the previous afternoon, the air inside still carried a mix of cinnamon, fresh bread, and chocolate. Carol wondered how long it would take for the building to lose the lovely scents if it ever had a new incarnation.

The old pale-yellow Victorian that held both Bread on Arrival and Molly's cozy apartment had been through more than one total transformation over the years. Though once a private residence many years before, its first transformation had been to become Bailey's Funeral Home, which had been Loch Mallaig's largest funeral parlor for many years until the owner died in a car accident and the Victorian went on the market.

Carol, Molly, and Laura had snapped it up eagerly. Though they'd each had their own reasons for wanting a life change, the idea of opening the bakehouse together was born at a college reunion when the three former roommates came together again and reignited a dream they'd talked about so many years before. Now the dream had come true, and they all knew they'd made the best possible choice for them. Bread on Arrival was more than a business—it was home.

They'd transformed the building into a bakehouse, but kept nods to its past in their business name, Bread on Arrival, and their unique delivery vehicle, an antique LaSalle hearse. They had successfully established the bakeshop in a town proud of its Scottish heritage as the place to buy a variety of Scottish-inspired goodies, including cookies, breads, and other pastries. Their scones alone sold out nearly every morning.

Laura arrived shortly after Carol, and Molly trundled downstairs from settling Angus in her apartment. They were soon wrist-deep in

bread dough, scone batter, and the normal morning bustle. While they worked, they chatted about the weather and tidbits from the newspaper. They never lacked something to discuss, though they were equally comfortable with a companionable quiet where they became lost in the work of baking.

By the time the morning batch of breads and rolls were done, the faint scents of the bakery had grown deeper and richer to fill the air and make Carol's stomach growl. "I'm going up front to grab a scone," she said. "Anyone else want one?"

"No thanks," Laura said. "I made myself a huge country breakfast this morning to fortify my body against the cold, and I suspect I will never have to eat again."

"I'll take a scone," Molly said. "My bowl of oatmeal has worn off. Get me a cranberry-and-orange scone if there are any left, okay?"

"Absolutely." Carol planned to get one of the savory scones for herself. They'd recently added a scone Molly had named "farmer's breakfast," with bacon, cheese, and chives. The thought of it made Carol's stomach growl again.

To her delight, she was able to nab the last farmer's breakfast scone and a cranberry-and-orange for Molly. More were on their way from the oven shortly, so she didn't feel guilty about cleaning them out.

Hamish Bruce, their handyman and part-time bakehouse helper, eyed the scones in her hands. "Running off with the goods again, are you?"

Carol winked at him. "Absolutely."

Hamish grumbled something after her, but she paid him no mind. She knew he simply loved to grumble and growl. None of them took him seriously anymore. When Carol had first met Hamish, she'd found him a little off-putting, but once she found out his secret—that his crusty curmudgeon act hid a tender heart—she learned to ignore his prickly moments.

Since Hamish was a fixture in Loch Mallaig, none of the bakehouse's patrons were put off by his grumbling. In fact, some of the older patrons sometimes teased him about it, then laughed at his growly replies.

Carol was nearly to the doorway leading toward the kitchen when she heard her name.

"Mrs. MacCallan?"

Raimie Phillips was crossing the room from the front door, her expression hopeful. Carol was shocked to see Byron Quayle behind her, along with Kendra Layville and a third teacher that Carol had seen around the school but didn't know.

"Let me take this scone to my friend Molly," Carol said, gesturing toward the hallway. "You can come on back to the kitchen if you want."

Raimie bobbed her head. "That would be great."

"If we must," Byron said, his tone instantly reminding Carol of Hamish, though she suspected the teacher really was as disgruntled as he sounded.

She led the group into the kitchen. She thought they could sit around the packing table and chat. January was often a slow time for their mail order business after the rush of the holidays. They tried to enjoy the momentary lull, since Valentine's Day would crank up sales for some of their more romantic treat offerings, including lavishly decorated sugar cookies and simpler heart-embossed shortbread. They even made heart-shaped strawberry scones that locals always raved about, even though Laura used frozen strawberries since fresh berries in February were about as out of season as possible.

Carol gestured toward the packing table. "We can sit here and chat. Can I get you some coffee?"

Raimie and the others all eyed Molly and Laura with open doubt. "I had hoped this would be private," Byron said.

Carol winced. She should have told Molly and Laura about the teacher's aide's request. She'd honestly forgotten. It had struck her as odd when the woman asked, but it had faded in importance in Carol's mind. Now she wouldn't blame Laura and Molly if they felt a little put upon.

"I was about to run up and check on Angus," Molly said cheerily. She grabbed her scone on the way out of the room. "Thanks so much, Carol. I'm going to eat it upstairs with a cup of tea. It'll be a nice break."

Molly breezed out of the room as if this were the best offer she'd had all day. Laura frowned at the teachers for a moment before returning to her work.

"Maybe we should hold off and do this another time," Byron said.

"No!" Raimie yelled. "Please."

Laura groaned and set down the knife she was using to chop walnuts. "Fine. We're not that busy. I could take a break." As she left the room, she cast a last glance at Carol, which was more curious than annoyed.

Relief ran through Carol. Once Laura found out what was going on, she was sure to forgive her. Of course, that meant Carol needed to learn what was going on first.

She gestured toward the chairs near the table, but as the teachers were choosing seats, she spoke to the fourth woman whose name she didn't know. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Carol MacCallan."

The woman was a few years older than Raimie, but had the same slender build. She had large dark-rimmed glasses that emphasized her small face and wore her long, brown hair loose under a pale blue knit hat. "I'm Geneva Owenby," she said. "I teach the next grade up from your grandchildren."

"It's nice to meet you," Carol said, then settled into a chair. She scanned the group, noting that three of the faces were hopeful. Only Byron's features remained guarded.

“Is there some kind of problem at the school?” Carol asked gently, her eyes on Raimie since she was the one who’d asked for the meeting.

Before Raimie could speak, Byron scoffed. “Some people think so.”

The twins’ teacher, Ms. Layville, quelled him by saying, “Byron, if you can’t be helpful, I have no idea why you came. Let us tell Mrs. MacCallan what’s been happening.”

Amusement tugged at the corners of Carol’s lips. She’d heard that tone from dozens of teachers and had used it herself when dealing with disruptive students in the classroom. “Call me Carol, please.” After everyone responded likewise, she asked, “So what *has* been happening?”

Kendra cut her eyes toward Raimie, who nodded. “Someone has been getting into the school at night,” Kendra explained. “We know because things have been taken from the teacher’s cupboards.”

“Things?” Carol repeated.

“Food mostly,” Geneva spoke up.

Carol raised her eyebrows. “You keep food in your storage cupboards?”

Kendra chuckled. “It’s not as odd as it sounds. We stock special treats for students with food allergies. No one should go without when we celebrate special occasions.”

“I agree,” Carol said, admiring the sentiment. She’d taught older students who didn’t really have classroom parties anymore, so this was not a problem she’d ever had. She was glad these teachers were so caring. Glad, but not surprised. In Carol’s experience, most teachers cared deeply about their students.

“Since the items don’t have much value,” Geneva said, “we didn’t see it as a police matter. However, the idea of someone having easy access to the school after closing is more than a little scary. There’s never been proof of a break-in beyond the missing food.”

“Food that could have been snatched by a student,” Byron said. “Or even the janitor. There’s no reason to think the school is being broken

into at all. I agree with the administration that the teachers simply need to store the stuff more carefully. I don't think your intervention is necessary."

Carol resisted the urge to glare at the rather domineering man. "I can understand why teachers are concerned about someone breaking into the school."

"But no one broke in," he insisted, punctuating his remark with a slap on the table. "And we don't need the kind of public attention this is going to draw. What happens when this leaks to the press? Parents will think their kids aren't safe at the school."

"What makes you think involving me will mean bad press?" Carol asked, struggling to keep her tone neutral.

"Haven't your past escapades ended up in the paper?" he retorted. "And hasn't that been great for business here?"

Carol blinked in shock at the clear accusation in the words.

"Please, Mrs. MacCallan," Kendra said. "Ignore Byron. We all do." She spoke right over his aggrieved huff. "He promised to behave or we wouldn't have brought him. We're sorry."

"It isn't your fault," Carol said. "But I'm not sure what you want me to do about the food."

"It isn't the food alone," Raimie said. "Someone raided the lost and found and took everything from it except for a small pair of sneakers and a three-ring binder. And those items are stored in the school office, not in a classroom."

"Doesn't prove anything," Byron muttered. "The office isn't a bunker. And kids will get up to mischief."

"Plus," Geneva said, ignoring Byron, "the kindergarten classroom lost two foam mats that the kids rest on during quiet time. The mats aren't exactly cheap, though these were badly worn and the school intended to replace them soon anyway."

“The administration has bought new locks for the kindergarten storage,” Kendra said. “And they’ve made it plain that’s all they plan to do.”

“That’s not enough,” Geneva said urgently. “I’m scared. Someone is getting into the school at night. Some teachers arrive early or stay late when we need time for special preparation. Now I’m scared every time I have to be at the school alone.”

“Are the disappearances the only indication that someone has come into the school?” Carol asked.

“The only physical one,” Raimie said. “But a few days ago, I was last to leave the building because I’d been hanging up decorations for Hero Day. I heard footsteps in the hall.”

“The janitor,” Byron muttered, but again everyone ignored him.

“I called out. If it had been the *custodian*,” she said with a sharp glance at Byron, “he would have answered. Jed would never do anything to frighten us. There was no response, but the footsteps stopped. I was scared to death.” She trembled visibly at the retelling.

“I believe you,” Carol said. “What do you want me to do? Should I go to the administration?”

“No,” the women spoke almost in unison, obviously horrified.

“If you have to do anything,” Byron said, “you must do it quietly.” The other teachers murmured agreement with him.

“We were hoping you could investigate,” Raimie said. “The way you’ve done for other people.”

“I’ll have to speak with Molly and Laura about this,” Carol said.

The group didn’t appear happy with that, but Kendra finally spoke for them. “We trust you. Do what you need to do to find out what’s going on.”

Byron’s jaw clenched, and his mouth formed a thin, straight line of disapproval. It was obvious he didn’t trust her, but he didn’t offer any dissent.

“Would you be willing to start tonight?” Raimie suggested. “We’re confident that the intruder will break in tonight, since it’s Saturday and the building has been empty all day. The weekends would be a good time for that.”

“I’ll talk it over with Molly and Laura and come up with a plan,” Carol promised, but she could tell they had hoped for something more decisive on the spot.

“Thank you for even considering it,” Geneva said. “I hope you can find out what’s happening.”

“If anything is,” Byron said, then stood and left the room, apparently feeling they were done. With a slightly dispirited air, Geneva and Raimie trailed after him. Only Kendra stayed behind.

“I’m sorry for Byron’s attitude,” Kendra said.

“That’s hardly your fault,” Carol said.

“I have to admit, I was almost as hard to convince as Byron,” Kendra said. “Especially about involving you. Jenny will be furious if she finds out I was part of encouraging you in any kind of sleuthing.”

“Jenny does worry sometimes,” Carol said, mildly. “But she won’t hear about your involvement from me.”

Kendra thanked her, then pressed a card into Carol’s hand. “This has my cell number on it. If I can do anything to help—like get you access to the building—call me. We need this solved. I’m tired of jumping at shadows once the kids leave for the day. That’s not like me.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Carol promised.

With a last thanks, Kendra left. She’d barely cleared the hallway before Molly and Laura hurried into the kitchen.

“I thought I would burst from curiosity,” Molly said. “Are you going to tell us?”

“You don’t have to,” Laura added, though her expression was every bit as eager as Molly’s.

“Of course I’ll tell you.” Carol related the conversation with the teachers as concisely as she could. “Despite Byron Quayle’s dismissive attitude, I believe something must be going on. Teachers don’t usually jump at nothing.”

“Do you think one of the teachers could get us inside the building?” Laura asked.

“Kendra said she can,” Carol replied, then held up the card. “She gave me her number.”

Laura grinned and folded her arms over her chest, unmindful of the puff of flour that accompanied the gesture. “In that case, we need to do a stakeout and catch the intruder. Tonight.”

Molly winced at Laura’s mention of a stakeout. “Fergus and I have a date planned, but I could call and see what he says. Knowing Fergus, I think he’d want to be part of it.”

Carol mulled that over. The teachers had been leery of word spreading, but Fergus MacGregor was as trustworthy as they come. Not only did he have deep roots in Loch Mallaig, since his family had long owned the Castleglen golf resort and lodge, but he also had the honor of dating Molly. Anyone Molly trusted couldn’t help but be a winner. Carol wouldn’t mind having him along for security. “You should call.”

While Molly did so, Laura and Carol stood a discreet distance away, though Carol couldn’t miss seeing how Molly’s cheeks pinked and her eyes glowed as she talked to Fergus. She thought of the early days of dating Harvey, when a simple chat on the phone could leave her feeling happy all day.

“Are you going to invite Harvey?” Laura asked, as if she’d read her friend’s mind.

“I don’t plan to *invite* him,” Carol said, “but I doubt I can exclude him. He can be protective in these situations.” She massaged her temples.

“I wish I didn’t have to tell him. Then he could profess ignorance when Jenny finds out and is mad at both of us.”

“Does Jenny really worry that much?” Laura asked.

Having never had children, Laura hadn’t faced the tendency for adult children to get bossy as soon as they began to notice their parents aging. *Not that Harvey and I are old by any means*, Carol asserted internally as if mentally arguing with Jenny already.

“Yoo-hoo?” Laura waved a hand at Carol. “Earth calling Carol.”

“Sorry, my mind was wandering. Yes, Jenny can be a serious mother hen sometimes. I personally think she’s repaying us for being strict in her teen years.”

Molly joined them, still beaming. “Fergus is on for tonight.”

“In that case,” Laura replied, her tone suddenly all business, “do you suppose we could bake something?”

Molly and Carol promptly agreed and they all got to work, though they still discussed the details of the stakeout off and on throughout the rest of the day. By the time they closed, they had a plan, and Carol had called Kendra to arrange for her to meet them at the school at eight to let them in.

Now all Carol had to do was figure out how to tell Harvey.