



Scottish
Bakehouse
Mysteries

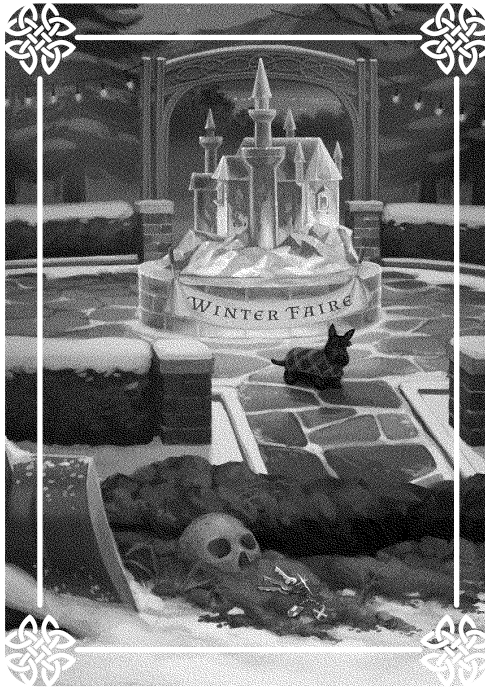
In Grave Danger



Elizabeth Penney



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Series Creator: Shari Lohner

Series Editor: Elizabeth Morrissey

Cover Illustrator: Kelley McMorris

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The February wind might bluster and the temperatures plummet, but inside Superior Bay College’s kitchen classroom that Sunday evening, all was warm and cozy. Better yet, the room was filled with the enticing aroma of roasting cacao beans.

Molly Ferris took a deep, appreciative sniff, smiling at her business partners and best friends, Carol MacCallan and Laura Donovan. The trio—known affectionately around Loch Mallaig, Michigan, as the Bakehouse Three—owned Bread on Arrival, a popular destination in the quaint, Scottish-themed town. When they’d learned that professional-level chocolate-making classes were on the Loch Mallaig Winter Faire schedule, they had jumped at the chance to learn new skills and have some fun. And eat lots of chocolate over the course of the four-day workshop.

At the front of the room, celebrity chocolatier and former local resident Devon Macintosh stood in a casual stance, muscular arms crossed. The camera operator, a young man with close-cropped auburn hair and a pleasant, freckled face named Cole Keith, hovered to one side, focused on catching the cable star’s every move.

Devon’s piercing blue eyes twinkled. “Listen carefully, class. I’m about to share the foundational concept that drives my business.” All two dozen students seated at long tables leaned forward, and Molly exchanged excited glances with Carol and Laura.

After a dramatic pause, Devon went on, “If love had a flavor, it would be chocolate.” He broke into a huge, handsome grin when

the group of mostly women giggled. “You might say they’re the perfect pairing.”

“Especially on Valentine’s Day,” a woman seated up front said. “That’s why I’m here. To make chocolates for my husband.”

The camera operator filming the class for Devon’s cable show swiveled his viewfinder toward the woman, who blushed and patted her hair. Interest in the class had skyrocketed when people learned it would be televised.

“Who else in this class is planning to make Valentine’s chocolates for a loved one?” Devon’s gaze swept the room. “Anyone want to share?”

Molly gave Carol a gentle elbow, hinting that she should speak up. They’d been friends since college, and the idea for the bakehouse adventure was sparked during their thirty-year reunion. Of the three friends, Carol was the only one who was married. Molly was a widow but in a relationship with a wonderful man named Fergus MacGregor, who owned the luxurious Castleglen golf resort. Always-single Laura was dating handsome widower Trent McKade, and Molly thought this one might stick.

Carol lifted a hand. “I’m going to try.” Her resonant laugh rang out. “They’ll probably come out as blobs, but hopefully they’ll taste okay. Good thing Harvey isn’t fussy.” Harvey, a mostly retired journalist, enjoyed life in Loch Mallaig, especially the fishing.

“You’ll be surprised how quickly your skills improve,” Devon said.

Molly decided to chime in. “I’m also making chocolates for a special guy.” Even the thought of him gave her a thrill that reminded her of the crush she’d had on him when they’d met as teenagers while she was vacationing in town. They had been friends for a long time, and in recent months had become much more.

“Nice,” Devon said. “Is this special guy your husband?”

Molly felt her cheeks heat up at the question. She didn’t quite dare

to admit her deepest hopes. “No, he isn’t,” she finally said. “But we’re very close.” Now Carol gave Molly an elbow, communicating that she knew Molly’s words were an understatement.

“I think all your loved ones are going to enjoy your confections.” Devon made a discreet gesture toward his assistant, a plump, young woman with curly brown hair. After she fiddled with a controller, the screen behind the instructor lit up and music began to play.

The words *Devon Macintosh, Chocolates by the Bay* floated into place on the screen. *Chocolates by the Bay* was the name of Devon’s famous San Francisco confectionery, as well as his show.

“Tonight, we’re in lovely Loch Mallaig, a crown jewel of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula,” Devon said, speaking into the camera. “The UP is renowned for its natural beauty, outdoor sports, and wonderful hospitality.” The audience burst into applause at his compliments. After the clapping died down, he went on. “Thank you for joining me for a special episode of *Chocolate 101*. With us are local residents eager to learn more about making chocolate—and to spend time with me.” The group roared approval.

The classroom door squeaked open and everyone craned their necks to see who the latecomer was. Bakehouse employee and college senior Bridget Ross shrugged her shoulders in apology. She slipped into the room and, after glancing around, headed for Molly’s table.

“Sorry I’m late,” Bridget whispered, stowing her bag under the table. She picked up the apron at the place setting, which held the equipment and kitchen tools they would be using soon, and slipped it over her head. She smoothed her glossy black hair into place, which today sported a pink streak. She made a wry face. “My study group went long.”

“You didn’t miss much,” Molly whispered back. “We’re just getting started. I’ll catch you up after Devon finishes his intro.”

Someone in the room gasped, grabbing Molly's attention. Devon stood at the workstation up front, a machete in one hand and a large cacao pod in the other. With one swift, perfect strike, he split the pod down the middle. Holding up the halves to show the white, oval beans, he asked, "Who would guess what depth of flavor these beans hold? If they're processed correctly, that is."

As the class watched with rapt attention, Devon took them through the scientific process of making the world's favorite confection. While being carefully monitored, beans were fermented, dried, roasted, shelled, and ground to make a chocolate liquid. He illustrated each stage with a small sample.

"This is the magic stuff right here," he said, passing around a bowl holding a shiny, brown liquid. "Now a decision is made. Does it become cocoa powder or eating chocolate?"

"Eating chocolate," the class chorused.

Devon joined in the laughter. "All in good time. We're going to break for a few. Help yourselves to refreshments in the hallway and we'll reconvene soon to cover a key technique." He waited a beat, then spoke in a deep, mock-serious voice. "Tempering."

Everyone groaned and laughed again, chatter breaking out as the students stood and stretched.

"That was the most fascinating lecture on chocolate I've ever heard," Laura said. "I love to learn about the science behind food." Laura was a trained chef and head baker at Bread on Arrival.

"Me too," Bridget said. "And we're fortunate to have a great food scientist on the faculty here." She nodded toward a woman who seemed to be in her thirties, sporting a pair of red cat-eye glasses and glossy, light-brown hair pulled into a ponytail. Like everyone else in the room, she was dressed for winter in slacks and a sweater. "That's Dr. Dunbar, one of our professors, chatting with Devon and his assistant."

“Didn’t Dr. Dunbar arrange to have Devon come for the faire?” Carol asked. “I thought I read that in the newspaper.”

“Yes, she did,” Bridget said. “Devon actually went to school here before moving on to culinary school. I heard that he’s been friends with Dr. Dunbar since college.”

“He’s certainly done well for himself,” Molly said as the small group moved in unspoken unison toward the classroom door.

“That’s for sure,” Laura said. “His show is one of the most popular on the cooking channel.”

Molly eyed Devon, still talking to Dr. Dunbar. “I wonder if we can get a mention of Bread on Arrival in this episode somehow,” she mused, her marketing wheels turning. While Laura and Carol did the bulk of the baking, Molly handled promotions and other day-to-day operations for the bakehouse.

“How about bringing treats for class refreshments tomorrow?” Carol suggested. “Maybe he would give us a shout-out.”

“I like that idea,” Laura said as they got into line for that evening’s snack. “Doesn’t the show usually feature local color from their location?”

“Probably why holding it now was such a good idea,” Bridget put in. “The Winter Faire will provide lots of good footage. My friends who major in video production call it B-roll.”

Laura’s expression was thoughtful. “I’ll come up with something really spectacular.” She picked up a dry cookie, which was obviously store-bought. “I think we can do better than this.”

Carol laughed. “No kidding. Who wants coffee? I’ll pour.”

“I’ll take decaf,” Molly said, echoed by the others.

The outside door at the end of the corridor opened, allowing a blast of cold air to enter as a short, burly man strode inside. He snatched off his wool cap, revealing a balding head.

“What’s Blane Tully doing here?” Bridget muttered. “Certainly not taking a class from Devon.”

“Why’s that?” Molly inquired, watching as the man worked his way through the crowd, moving against the grain. He looked somewhat familiar, as if she’d seen him around town.

“He owns a candy shop,” Bridget said. “Tully’s Treats.”

“Oh yes, I’ve been there,” Molly said. She’d tried the place when she first moved to town but hadn’t been very impressed with the selection, although a few things were good. She refrained from sharing that right now, in public.

Blane edged his way into the classroom, where he joined Devon and Dr. Dunbar, still standing near the doorway. Judging by the frowns on all three faces, none of them were happy to be together. So why had Blane come to Devon’s class?

“How’s school going so far this semester?” Laura asked Bridget.

“It’s a mixed bag,” Bridget admitted. “I’m taking advanced forensics, which I love. Chemistry, which is challenging but okay. And Senior English.” She groaned. “With Dr. Pryde.”

The Bakehouse Three exchanged glances. As relative newcomers to town without many ties to the college, they weren’t familiar with the faculty.

“Is he tough?” Molly asked.

“That’s an understatement,” Bridget said. “I normally love English, but he’s super picky about our papers. I’m working on a big one right now.” She laughed. “Generations of Superior Bay students have endured his class. We need it to graduate.”

“So he’s been around for a while?” Carol guessed. “I had a few instructors like that myself. Once they get tenure, they seem to build a reputation for being extra tough.” She shared a reminiscent laugh with Molly and Laura, who’d had similar experiences.

The young woman assisting Devon popped out into the hallway. “We’re ready to begin,” she called over the hum of voices. “Please come back in.”

People tossed empty coffee cups and crumpled napkins in the garbage can near the door as they filtered back into the classroom. Molly noticed that Blane and Dr. Dunbar had taken seats at the rear of the room, as onlookers rather than participants.

Cole moved into place again behind the camera, and at the assistant’s signal, Devon swung into action. “Welcome back,” he said brightly. “In this section of the class, you’re going to try your hand at the key technique involved in making chocolate candies—tempering.”

The words had barely left his mouth when a heavy gust of wind battered the building, sending a spray of snow against the windows. The lights flickered once, then twice. The students groaned.

Devon frowned anxiously at the ceiling. “I hope we don’t lose power.”

“If it does go out, the emergency lights will come on,” Dr. Dunbar said. “We’ll be able to exit, at least.”

Molly sighed in resignation. Power outages were always a possibility in the Upper Peninsula, especially during a winter storm. She’d experienced more than her share.

“And class will be over.” Devon sounded glum. “But let’s cross our fingers and keep going.” He held up a hairnet. “Before we handle food, please put one of these on.”

After everyone put on the hairnets, joking and mugging for the camera, Devon demonstrated how to chop chocolate for tempering as the students copied his movements. He explained that tempering stabilizes cocoa butter so the finished product would be smooth with a nice texture.

“In a shop, we use special equipment, and you can use a microwave at home,” he said. “For the sake of simplicity tonight,

though, we're going to temper with a double boiler. In professional applications, steam and water have the potential for disaster, seizing the chocolate. But we're only doing small batches, so if we need to start over, we will."

Molly was glad to have experienced cooks at her table. "Are you two going to help me?" she asked Carol and Laura. "I'd hate to have my chocolate seize up."

"I'll be happy to, if necessary," Laura said. "It's happened to me, and it is not pretty. It turns into a hard, grainy lump."

Each station was set up with a hot plate, a stainless steel pan partially filled with water, and a glass bowl. Under Devon's instruction, Molly heated the water, then suspended the glass bowl in the pan to melt the chopped chocolate.

Every minute or so she stirred, the goal being to melt any lumps. Laura walked over and peered at Molly's chocolate, then checked the candy thermometer clipped to the bowl. "You're doing a great job. This is spot-on."

"Once your chocolate is melted," Devon said, "we're going to seed it with the rest of the chopped pieces, bit by bit. You don't want to move too fast during this step or else the fat will bloom, or separate at the wrong time and cause problems. Stop adding when you bring the mix down to the right temperature, between eighty-eight and ninety degrees since we're using dark chocolate. If there's some left over, that's okay."

Molly's batch was right at ninety degrees when a huge gust of wind hit the building. A loud thud sounded right outside, heavy enough to shake the walls.

"What was that?" someone called out in a frightened voice.

The overhead lights flickered and went out, and a few people screamed.

“Calm down,” Dr. Dunbar commanded. The red glow of the emergency lights provided barely enough illumination to see her stern expression. “I think a tree fell.”

“A tree? It must have been huge,” another student said. “Let’s go check it out.” She hurried toward the coatrack, followed by others.

“Hold on,” Dr. Dunbar called out. “Don’t go out there.” But the students didn’t listen.

“Want to go see what’s happening?” Carol asked her friends.

“Why not?” Molly said, switching off her hot plate so it wouldn’t still be on when the power returned. “I think class is over for tonight.” She gave her perfectly tempered chocolate a rueful glance. “I hope I can replicate that tomorrow.”

“Practice makes perfect,” Laura said. “You’ll get a feel for it.”

The foursome removed their aprons and hairnets, grabbed their coats, and filed down the hallway with the others on their way outside. The wind was fierce, blowing gusts of heavy snow right into their faces. With exclamations of dismay, people bent their heads and trudged around the building to where a massive maple lay, tangled roots aloft.

Bridget switched on her phone’s flashlight, playing the light across the fallen tree. When the passing beam caught something white gleaming amid the dark earth, she gasped. “What is that?”

Molly waded through a snowbank toward the tree, causing clumps of snow to fall into her boots. Intent on getting a better view, she ignored the discomfort.

“It looks like a skull,” Molly said, her heart lurching with horror. “Someone is buried under there.”



“Buried? You mean a body?” a woman cried out.

Molly scanned the group huddled together in the storm, faces hidden by hoods and hunched shoulders. “I think so, but I’m not totally sure. We need to see it closer.”

No one volunteered for this task. Even Devon, Blane, and the camera operator were hanging back, instead of taking charge as many men liked to do.

Carol slid her gloved hand around Molly’s arm. “I guess it’s up to us.”

“We need to keep our distance, though,” Laura warned, a shudder in her voice. “Just in case.”

Bridget took the lead, her brave light leading the way. “Exactly right. We were talking about crime scene management in class last week.”

Crime scene? A chill ran down Molly’s spine. Had they stumbled across another murder? Since moving to Loch Mallaig, she and her friends had found themselves involved in one case after another. This time, they’d been innocently making chocolate when a huge tree came down—one with a body hidden among the roots, it appeared.

Because the closer Molly got, the more she saw that the object was unmistakably a skull. She halted and fumbled in her pocket for her phone. “We’ve seen enough. I’m calling 911.”

Molly’s words rippled through the crowd, creating a buzz of confusion and curiosity. She tried to tune them out as the call went through.

“Please state your name. And what’s your emergency?” an unfamiliar female voice asked. Molly didn’t know the night dispatcher.

“If it’s a power outage, believe me, we know.”

“Molly Ferris. And yes, we’ve lost power at Superior Bay College.” She had to put one hand to her free ear to block the howling wind. “A big tree came down, thankfully not hitting the building. But when it did . . .” She swallowed. “It exposed a skeleton. It might have been there for years, if not decades.”

“A skeleton?” The dispatcher’s tone was wary. “An animal?”

“No. I’m afraid not.” Molly closed her eyes against the horrible sight still etched in her mind. “Chief Thomson knows me well and he’ll believe me.”

The dispatcher didn’t argue further. “We’ll send a car right out. It might take a few minutes, though. We’ve had a lot of calls tonight.”

Over by the building, Dr. Dunbar was herding the students away with the help of Devon and Blane. It was a good move, since they would only be in the way if they stuck around. This death was far too old for them to be considered witnesses.

“I understand,” Molly replied. “We’ll be in room 114 of MacArthur Hall.” It was too stormy to stand out here and wait. At least they could keep vigil inside the classroom since the windows overlooked the scene. Perhaps they could put a light out here to mark the spot before the fast-falling snow filled in the exposed hollow under the tree.

When Molly returned her gaze to the fallen tree, Bridget was about three feet away from the skeleton, bent over with her phone. Carol and Laura were standing next to her.

“Bridget,” Molly called, trudging as fast as she was able through the deep, dense snow. “What are you doing?”

“See that?” Bridget asked, unperturbed by Molly’s abrupt question. She moved the beam, revealing a gleam of silver. “That’s a Superior Bay College key chain.” She snapped a picture before showing them the enlargement. “You can tell by the pattern.”

Although the object was crusted with dirt, Molly could discern the familiar Superior Bay College emblem done in blue and red enamel paint on the silver base. That might answer one question. Unless a key chain had ended up in the ground next to a body after the fact, the crime could be dated to after the college's founding.

"Good clue, Bridget," Molly said. "Make sure you tell the police about it." She scanned the area. The students were gone, but Dr. Dunbar was stomping through the snow toward them.

"Did you get ahold of the police?" she barked at Molly.

"I did, and they'll be here as quick as they can," Molly said, keeping her tone level. No doubt Dr. Dunbar was feeling the weight of responsibility around this event. "Can we get some kind of light to mark the spot? And a tarp to cover the body?" She glanced up at the sky and the flakes still bucketing down. "If we don't do that, it will be buried in snow by the time the police arrive."

Dr. Dunbar gave a grudging nod. "I'll see what we can rustle up."

"We'll be waiting in the classroom," Molly said. "I want to talk to the police when they get here."

"Why?" Dr. Dunbar asked. "Surely they can take it from here."

They could and would, but Molly was still reluctant to leave. "We've worked with the police before," she said. "Chief Thomson knows we're good witnesses."

Dr. Dunbar rocked back on her heels. "You've worked with the police?" She crossed her arms. "What are you, private investigators or something?"

"No, we run a bakehouse." Molly indicated her partners. "Bridget works for us, and she's also a student here." Bridget opened her mouth and, guessing she was going to mention the key chain, Molly gave her a subtle headshake.

"For some reason or another, we tend to get involved with solving crimes," Carol said. "And it's happened again, apparently."

Dr. Dunbar frowned toward the downed tree. “You think it was foul play?”

“What else could it be?” Laura asked. “There’s a skeleton buried under a tree.”

The professor continued to study the site, teeth worrying at her bottom lip. Then she turned abruptly. “I’m heading back inside for a spotlight and a tarp. Are you coming?”

On the way in, they met Blane Tully coming out. He greeted them with a nod. “I’m leaving,” he told Dr. Dunbar as he continued walking. “No point in hanging around.”

“See you later, Blane,” Dr. Dunbar called after him. “Thanks for coming by.” Her voice held the sweetest tone Molly had yet heard from the gruff professor. Maybe Blane didn’t annoy her the way Molly and everyone else seemed to.

The corridor was eerie under the dull red glow of emergency lights, and although it was far warmer than outside, Molly fancied she could already feel a chill creeping through the walls. It wouldn’t take long now that the heat was out.

In the classroom, Devon’s assistant stood at the front of the room, staring with displeasure at the workstations still littered with equipment, dirty utensils, and fragments of chocolate. “And who gets to clean up this mess?” she grumbled. “Three guesses.” She jabbed a thumb toward her chest.

“Oh, lighten up, Robina,” Devon said. The chocolate star was leaning against the front table, ankles crossed and arms folded. “It won’t take long.”

“Says the person who doesn’t have to do it.” Robina pushed a cart forward and began loading used dishes on it.

“Leave it,” Dr. Dunbar said. “You can’t work in the dark. I’ll get some students from the culinary program to help you tomorrow morning. They can run everything through the dishwasher.”

The camera operator was putting away his equipment. “What a shame about the power going out. Everything was going so well.” He coiled some wires. “Got some great shots of the class.”

Devon straightened, his interest caught. “Want to go through the footage back at the resort? Assuming they still have power.”

“If you’re staying at Castleglen, they have backup generators,” Molly said. At his surprised expression, she added, “I know the owner very well.”

Understanding dawned on Devon’s face. “The special man in your life?”

“Good guess,” Molly said with a laugh. Speaking of Fergus, he should be along soon. She’d grabbed a ride to the class with Carol, and Fergus was going to take her home. With their busy schedules, they had to be flexible about spending time together. Not that it mattered to Molly. She loved every moment she could get with him.

While the Bakehouse Three plus Bridget waited, they watched Dr. Dunbar and a janitor she’d found set up a spotlight outside near the tree. The maintenance man also spread out a long tarp, gently covering the body as if tucking it into bed.

In the distance, flashing lights announced the arrival of the police. A rush of relief went through Molly. Soon they’d be able to hand off responsibility for the poor skeleton to Loch Mallaig law enforcement. The local force would have the sad task of excavating the body and identifying the remains, then informing relatives and figuring out who had buried the victim on the college grounds.

Molly prayed that answers would come swiftly and justice would be served. She also sent up a prayer of gratitude that a grieving family would be able to put a loved one to rest.

The outer door in the hall opened, followed by the sound of voices. One stood out clearly above the babble—Fergus. Molly’s heart leaped with joy.

“We’re gathered in the classroom up here,” Dr. Dunbar was saying as footsteps sounded in the hall. “Molly Ferris placed the call.”

The professor, Chief Owen Thomson, Officer Greer Anderson, and Fergus entered the room. “Too bad the power’s out,” the tall, hazel-eyed chief said. “That’s going to hamper things.”

“We’ll have to call in some generators,” blonde, athletic Officer Anderson said, then sighed. “And doing forensics in a snowstorm? It couldn’t get much more difficult.”

Fergus spotted Molly and gave her a wave. She edged around the officers, who were now being introduced to Devon and his team, and ran into his arms. “I’m so glad you’re here,” she whispered. Tears of shock and sorrow burned in her eyes. “We found a skeleton under a tree that fell down in the storm.”

He hugged her tightly, his embrace warm and comforting. “I heard. How terrible.” After releasing his grip, he kept an arm around her shoulders. “Ready to go home?”

“Am I ever.” Molly gave a little laugh. She couldn’t wait to get back to her apartment above the bakehouse and see her sweet Scottie, Angus. “But first I need to talk to Chief Thomson. Oh, and Bridget found a clue.”

“Already?” Fergus shook his head. “Why am I surprised? She’s been learning from the best.”

Molly smacked him lightly. “I never get involved on purpose.”

“I know that.” Fergus pulled her close and teased, “It’s your special talent.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Molly laughed again, noticing that the tension in her chest had eased. Being with Fergus automatically made her feel better, as if she could face anything with him by her side. And although life in Loch Mallaig was grand, challenging times seemed to abound, at least for Molly.

While Officer Anderson interviewed Devon and his companions, Chief Thomson made his way over to Molly, who had rejoined her friends. “What a night,” he said, greeting them with a nod. “Power’s out all over except for a few blocks downtown. Your bakery is all right.”

“What a relief,” Laura said. “Molly could have stayed with one of us, but I was worried about the perishables. Thanks for letting us know.”

“I understand you made quite a discovery tonight,” Thomson went on. “Tell me what happened.”

Molly and the others explained the sequence of events. “Most of us went outside to check out the tree,” Molly said after detailing its thunderous fall. “And that’s when we saw the skeleton.” When she said these words, Fergus gave her shoulders an encouraging squeeze.

“At first we weren’t sure what it was,” Carol said. “But we knew it was strange.”

Molly swallowed at the memory. “That’s when we realized we’d better call 911.”

“Molly kept us a good distance away,” Bridget said. “But I did manage to get a photograph of something interesting.”

Chief Thomson raised one brow in disapproval, but instead of scolding the young woman, he asked, “What was it?”

Bridget brought up the photograph on her phone and showed it to him. “This key chain was under there. It’s got the Superior Bay logo.”

Behind them, Dr. Dunbar gasped, then said, “Sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to let you know that the forensics team has arrived.”

Bridget groaned. “I wish I could watch them work. Even if it is snowing like crazy out there.”

When Chief Thomson gave her a funny look, she said, “I’m taking advanced forensics this semester. I’m going into forensic science as a career.”

The chief sighed, shifting his feet. “I wish I could, Bridget, and perhaps you can get an internship. But right now—”

“I get it,” Bridget said without resentment. “I’m only a civilian.”

Chief Thomson glanced through the window at the crime scene, obviously anxious to move forward with the investigation. “That’s all for now, ladies,” he said. “Feel free to head home.” He strode away, Dr. Dunbar at his heels. Officer Anderson had already left the room to greet the forensics team.

Robina approached them and announced, “We need to secure this room.”

Molly and the others got the hint. They gathered their bags and belongings and left the classroom as a group.

“What a night,” Carol said as they trooped down the hallway. “From chocolate to murder.”

“I wonder who that poor person is,” Laura said. “Bridget, did you ever hear of any missing students or teachers around here?”

“I think I did, once,” Bridget said. “You know how college students talk.” She trailed behind, fingers busy on her phone. A moment later, she cried, “Aha! I think I have something.” She paused. “Or not.”

Everyone stopped walking. “Tell us, Bridget,” Molly urged. “It’s got to be more than we know now.”

“Okay, here we go,” Bridget said. “A student named Marla Bannerman supposedly drowned in the lake eleven years ago.”

“Drowned?” Carol repeated, her tone confused. “That’s certainly not the cause of death here.”

“Unless she drowned and someone buried her,” Molly amended. But even the best forensics team wouldn’t be able to prove that from a skeleton. Unless a bone was broken or a weapon found, a bullet or arrow tip for example, it could be almost impossible to determine cause of death for a skeleton.

“Hold on.” Bridget was still scanning the site. “She disappeared and they never found a body. I’m guessing that’s why they think she went into the water.”

“I remember hearing about that too,” Fergus said, which wasn’t surprising since he had lived in Loch Mallaig all his life. “Such a tragedy. She was barely twenty.”

“How devastating.” Molly couldn’t help but think of her own daughter, Chloe, a twentysomething veterinarian in Milwaukee.

“Very,” Laura said. “And you could be right, Bridget. Maybe it is Marla under that tree and they were wrong about her drowning. But we don’t even know yet if the person is male or female, or their age.”

“You’re right,” Bridget said, her face glowing with excitement. “Isn’t it cool that they can get so much information from a skeleton? In addition to gender and age, they can find out when they lived, their diet, if they had certain diseases and previous broken bones.”

“That is amazing,” Fergus agreed. He pushed the door open, holding it so they could exit. “I think you’ve found your passion in life, Bridget.” Fergus was fond of Bridget, having gotten to know her well since she was good friends with his son, Neil, who worked in management at Castleglen.

“Me too,” she said happily, sailing through the doorway into the snowstorm.



The Range Rover’s windshield wipers provided a steady beat as Fergus drove Molly home from Superior Bay College. Molly sat huddled in the passenger seat, staring out into the swirling snowflakes.

Without taking his eyes off the slippery, snow-covered road, Fergus asked, “Doing okay over there?”

“Not really,” she admitted, realizing she was still in shock. “I can’t wrap my mind around it yet.”

“Totally understandable.” His voice was soothing. “I’ll have you home soon.”

“Thanks, Fergus,” she said. “I’m glad I’m not driving tonight.” Although Molly had driven in her share of snowstorms, she preferred not to, especially at night.

“Anytime, my dear,” he said with a tip of his head. “Fergus MacGregor at your service.”

That made her laugh, as he had no doubt intended. She forced her mind away from the night’s sad discovery. “On another topic, did you and Neil sign up for the iceboat races?”

Fergus grinned. “We sure did. Fortunately, this storm won’t amount to much, even if it seems wild right now.” A team of volunteers had been meticulously keeping the racecourse on Loch Mallaig’s namesake lake clear of snow all season.

“I can’t wait to watch you race,” Molly said, although she had some trepidation. Iceboats whizzed along at highway speeds. “My sport is much more boring.”

Fergus threw her a smile. “Snowshoeing is a challenge in its own right.”

“True.” Molly laughed. “I’m used to ambling along on my snowshoes, not running.” But she’d wanted to participate in the outdoor events beyond being a spectator, fun as that was. Since she couldn’t operate a snowmobile, dogsled, or iceboat, and she was pretty uncoordinated on cross-country skis, snowshoeing had been her only option.

“I’ll be there to cheer you on,” Fergus said. “What time does it start?”

Molly brought up the faire schedule on her phone and gave him the particulars. “What a great lineup,” she said, glancing over the list.

Besides the races, the schedule offered an ice sculpture contest, a skating exhibition by local dance troupe The Leaping Lowlanders, various games, vendor booths, and lots of delicious food. The capstone event was a formal Valentine's Day dance at King's Heid Pub, Castleglen's upscale dinner restaurant, which Molly was attending with Fergus.

"The Winter Faire is a big draw this year," Fergus said. "The resort is almost fully booked."

"Good news," Molly said. "I'm sure Bread on Arrival will be busy too." Many of the activities were being held in Dumfries Park, right behind the bakehouse. As they'd experienced during past events, visitors loved exploring the town's quaint shops and eateries.

When they approached downtown, Molly saw to her relief that the electricity was on, as Chief Thomson had said. Streetlamps glowed along the sidewalks and bright windows provided a note of cheer in the dark winter night.

"Here we are." Fergus steered into Bread on Arrival's drive. The bakehouse was located in a former funeral home—a pale yellow Victorian complete with turret, gabled roofs, and gingerbread trim—which had inspired its name.

A few lights twinkled downstairs in the bakehouse, and the silhouette of a dark head with pointed ears was visible in a window upstairs in Molly's apartment. Molly usually left a lamp on for Angus so he wouldn't feel so lonely without her there.

"The welcoming committee knows I'm home." Molly indicated the window as she and Fergus got out of the Range Rover. Their plan was to enjoy a hot drink while watching a favorite television show. Not the most exciting date, but wonderful all the same.

Inside the second-floor apartment, Molly greeted Angus with pats and ear scratches. Then, while Fergus took over, she moved toward the kitchenette. "Coffee, tea, or hot cocoa?" she asked.

“Hot cocoa sounds great, thanks,” Fergus said. With Angus tucked under one arm, he switched on the television and settled on the sofa.

Molly filled two mugs with cocoa and topped them with marshmallows. The mugs went on a tray with a plate of snickerdoodles and napkins.

“I’ll never view cocoa the same way again,” Molly said as she set down the tray on the coffee table.

“Why’s that?” Fergus’s blue eyes lit up when he noticed the cookies. “Those look good.”

“They are. Laura made them.” Molly sat on the sofa. Angus, who loved to be the center of attention, curled up between them. “Back to your question. Devon explained how cacao beans are processed and that, at a certain stage, they either become cocoa powder or chocolate.”

“I didn’t know that,” Fergus said. “It’s interesting. Oh, the show is on.”

They sat companionably in the warm room, sipping cocoa and watching the show, Angus snorting and snuffling as he napped. Outside, the wind continued to howl, but gradually the snowflakes thinned and then stopped.

Despite how cozy it all was, however, Molly sensed that Fergus had something on his mind. It wasn’t that he was distant, exactly, but he wasn’t as relaxed and responsive as usual. A couple of times, he didn’t laugh at a funny line. And Fergus never missed a joke. She thought about asking him what was going on but hesitated. *What if I’m imagining things? Maybe he’s tired. Or, more likely, thinking about the resort.*

When the program ended, Fergus stretched with a yawn. “Well, I suppose I’d better get going. I have a long day tomorrow.”

“Me too.” After switching to a local station for the weather forecast, Molly nudged a sleeping Angus aside and stood.

She was escorting Fergus to the door when a news announcement caught her ear. “Students at a chocolate-making class made a startling discovery tonight,” the anchor said.

Molly and Fergus exchanged surprised glances and stopped to listen.

“High winds in the area have caused power outages and downed trees tonight,” the newscaster went on, “including at Superior Bay College in Loch Mallaig. The remains of a young female were discovered under a two-hundred-year-old maple that succumbed to a strong gust.”

The footage on screen changed to Chief Thomson being interviewed at the scene. The chief’s expression was pinched with cold and the seriousness of his report. “The coroner was able to make several determinations pretty quickly,” Thomson said, “namely the approximate age and gender of the victim.”

“Are there any clues to her identity?” the reporter asked. “Or how she came to be buried there?”

Chief Thomson shook his head. “We’ll be following all possible leads. But we do know this—our Jane Doe has a fractured skull. She was a victim of foul play.”