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Bakehouse
Mysteries™

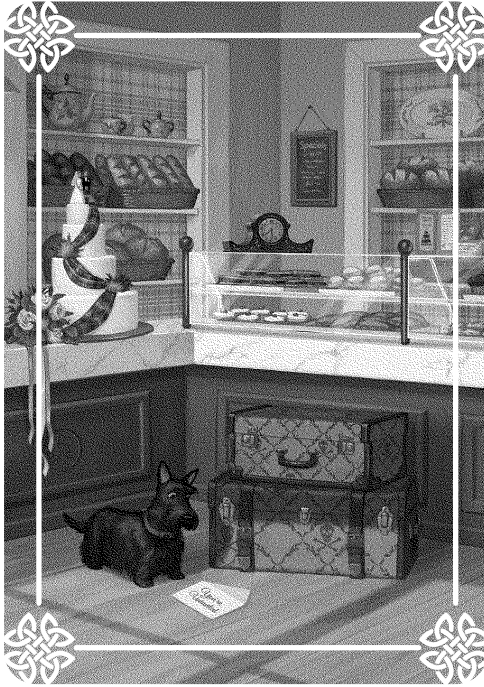
Wed on Arrival



Rachael O. Phillips



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Molly Ferris made a wry face that multiplied in the bridal shop's infinite mirrors, which also reflected the abundant ruffles enveloping her petite frame. "This is definitely not the dress," she said to her bridesmaids. With the salesperson out of earshot, she added in a whisper, "All these ruffles make me look like a canopy bed."

Laura Donovan and Carol MacCallan shook with barely concealed laughter.

"I made a cake that was almost identical to that dress once," Carol said, straightening her face. "It fed 400."

At that, the women broke into a fit of giggles reminiscent of their long-ago days as college roommates at Newkirk College. Now, more than thirty years later, they co-owned Bread on Arrival, a popular bakehouse in Loch Mallaig, Michigan, that honored the Upper Peninsula town's Scottish heritage. The friends had left the bakehouse in their part-time employees' capable hands this freezing Saturday to search farther afield for Molly's wedding dress. With her June nuptials approaching and after not finding the right gown at local formal wear shop Happily Ever Efter, Molly had agreed to a crack-of-dawn flight to Grand Rapids. She fervently hoped she would find *the* dress that would dazzle her groom, Fergus MacGregor.

This ruffled behemoth wasn't it.

A dozen more dresses generated new objections: Too flashy. Too lacy. Too plain. Too boxy. Too tight. Most of the current trends would have suited Molly's daughter, Chloe, a veterinarian in her late twenties

who lived in Milwaukee, but they didn't work on fiftysomething Molly. With a sigh, she resigned herself to the fact that she wasn't going to find her perfect wedding dress in Grand Rapids either. Maybe a trip to see Chloe was in order . . .

"Let's go to the Olympia for lunch before our next dress appointment," Carol suggested once Molly was changed out of the last disaster.

"Greasy hamburgers and French fries?" Laura, a former New York City chef, wrinkled her nose, but there was a twinkle in her eye.

"Absolutely," Molly and Carol said in unison, earning a chuckle of agreement from Laura.

After devouring their lunch, Laura admitted the Olympia Diner still had a way with grease. Despite the cold and having half an hour to spare, they decided to burn off their meal with a walking tour of the Newkirk College campus. All three wanted to see how their alma mater had changed—or stayed the same—since their time there. Near the end of their tour, they came across the old brick building that had housed their cramped, but cozy apartment.

"College students still live here." Laura pointed to windows showcasing drying laundry and political slogans.

"I hope they have as much fun as we did," Molly said wistfully.

Carol squeezed Molly's hand, then Laura's. "I hope, like us, they're friends for life."

"Like my dad says, 'The three Scottish hens are still on the loose!'" Molly grinned, then checked her watch. "Now it's time for the hens to keep shopping."

The final bridal shop featured gowns that appeared intergalactic, with astronomical prices.

"I'll shop online for a while," Molly said as they drove their rental car to the airport, hoping she didn't sound quite as sullen as she felt.

This process had seemed easier when she'd been preparing for her first wedding, which had led to a happy marriage cut tragically short when her late husband, Kevin, had died of an adverse reaction to antibiotics. She was every bit as excited this time around, but the dresses seemed to fit a bit differently thirty years later.

Still, time with Laura and Carol had made the whirlwind trip worthwhile. And tomorrow night, after a week in Chicago, Fergus would come home to Loch Mallaig. To her.



The next evening, Molly warded off the March chill by cocooning herself in a fuzzy throw blanket with her Scottish terrier, Angus. "I hope the snow doesn't delay Fergus's flight," she said to him.

Excited at the mention of one of his favorite humans, Angus hopped off the sofa. With a sharp bark, he ran to the front door of Molly's apartment, which was on the second floor of the grand yellow Victorian that housed the bakehouse.

"He's not here yet," she said. According to the itinerary he'd given her, his flight wasn't due to land at the Houghton County Airport for another hour, so she wouldn't see him for a while yet.

Undaunted, Angus whined and pawed furiously at the apartment door.

"You need to see for yourself?" Molly rose from the sofa and walked to the door to humor him. The moment she opened it, Angus dashed downstairs into the dark bakehouse. As she followed, she heard someone knocking loudly at the front door.

All Loch Mallaig knew the bakehouse wasn't open on Sunday. Had Fergus caught an earlier flight? She saw a form on the other side of the stained glass window inset in the door, but the porch light wasn't on

so she couldn't tell if it was him. At the prospect that he was early, her heart pounded out a joyful jig, and she swiftly unlocked and opened the door while Angus pranced at her feet.

It wasn't Fergus. Instead, Molly faced a small, white-haired woman with heavy makeup and several large, baby-blue suitcases. Hunched in a carrier, a large cat hissed at Angus, who recoiled from the verbal assault.

While Angus hid behind her legs, Molly tried to summon a smile for the stranger. As Bread on Arrival's resident marketing authority, she prided herself on always being a cheerful ambassador for their business. "Good evening. Our bakehouse is closed, but can I help you?"

The woman patted Molly's cheek. "My goodness, Molly, you do favor your mama, even with that brassy blonde hair." She beamed as she introduced herself. "I'm your mother's cousin, Ada Mueller, come to stay a while."

As the cat continued to hiss, Angus released a brave bark in response, igniting a fresh wave of growls and snarls from the cat.

"There, there, Olivier," Ada soothed. "I'm sure that nasty dog will stay outside while we're here."

I'm sure he won't. Not in this weather. Still, as Molly tried to remember details about this relative, she infused friendliness into her voice. "Did Mom tell me you'd be coming? I'm afraid I don't recall her saying anything."

"I haven't talked to Janet in ages," Ada said cheerfully, "but as I was going through my old photo album, I saw that picture of you in your little bathtub and it reminded me of the old days."

Molly winced. How many copies of that embarrassing photo had her mother circulated?

"Such a little darling," the visitor gushed. "I told myself, 'Ada, it's high time you got acquainted with your younger kin. She lives so

close and you haven't even seen her in forty years.' So here I am." She shivered and gazed pointedly past Molly. "Goodness, it's cold out here. And Olivier's health is so fragile."

Angus growled a sharp denial. Molly agreed. The Siamese looked like he could take on the world.

"Could you carry the suitcases inside, please." It was a command rather than a request. When Molly eyed the wheelless luggage and hesitated, Ada added, "I can't leave these bags outside. Someone might steal them."

Reproaching herself, Molly tugged on one suitcase's handle. Had Ada packed it full of bricks? And how had this elderly woman hauled these from that big Cadillac parked at the curb?

Ada read her mind. "A nice police officer walking past carried my bags here."

"How lovely." Molly gripped a handle with both hands and yanked, but the suitcase barely budged.

A familiar male voice called from the sidewalk, "Can I help?"

Molly glanced up, joy and dismay jockeying for the upper hand. Fergus *had* taken an earlier flight. However, his expression said this wasn't the reception he'd imagined.

"Just what I need—a big, strong, handsome man," Ada crowed. "Carry these inside, please, and while you're at it, upstairs to the apartment."

Hugging Olivier's carrier, she pushed past Molly.

Molly put a hand on Fergus's arm to stop him, intending to tell him not to go any farther than the threshold with the luggage. When Ada released Olivier from his carrier, however, the Siamese immediately went to Angus's favorite cushion by the fireplace and made himself right at home—and Molly had a sinking feeling Ada would do likewise before the evening was through.



“She didn’t call beforehand?” Carol’s dark eyes sparked with contempt on Molly’s behalf as the Bakehouse Three shared coffee in their functional yet cozy bakery kitchen the next morning.

Molly shook her head. “Because she’s family, Ada thought that wasn’t necessary.”

“I still let my parents know before showing up,” Laura said. “Ada’s not even a close relation.” She eyed Molly. “Are you sure she’s your mother’s cousin?”

Molly rubbed her neck, which was aching after a night spent on the sofa bed with an edgy dog. She really didn’t want to mention her naked-baby photo, so she shared the conversation she’d had with her mother, Janet Kirkpatrick. “After Ada went to bed, I called Mom. She said my description of Ada matches up with the Christmas cards she used to send. As kids, they played together at family reunions. Mom mentioned one story Ada told me about how they were caught sneaking into a drive-in movie.”

Laura gasped theatrically and fanned herself. “Janet Kirkpatrick snuck into a movie? Wonders never cease.”

Despite her weariness, Molly grinned in amusement at the thought of her saintly mother doing something so mischievous. “Apparently so. Anyway, they grew apart and haven’t really kept in touch since my folks moved to Iowa years ago. Mom verified that Ada lives in a retirement community in Midland, Michigan.” She shrugged. “I suppose it’s not unusual for her to want to find her cousin’s daughter considering we live in the same state.”

“She still should have called,” Carol declared.

“I’ll bet Ferguson was thrilled to meet her,” Laura remarked drily.

Molly sighed. “He was too polite. He invited her to join us for supper at Neeps and Tatties, which she did. And after he went home, she kept me up late chatting.”

Fortunately, neither Ada nor Olivier had stirred this morning, despite Angus’s indignant protest at his imprisonment in the upstairs office. Hopefully, tonight would go better.

At that thought, Molly brightened. “Fergus asked me over this evening. I don’t think he included Ada in the invitation.”

Laura raised an eyebrow. “Does Ada know that?”

“You won’t have to tell her,” Carol offered. “I’ll invite her for supper.”

“Would you?” Molly clasped her hands.

“You are the queen of kindness, Carol,” Laura said.

Puckers suddenly appeared in Carol’s smooth forehead. “You don’t think Ada will bring her cat, do you? He and Pascal wouldn’t get along.”

Molly didn’t want to picture how Carol’s timid kitty would fare against Ada’s spitfire feline. “I hadn’t thought about leaving Olivier and Angus alone upstairs. I’m sure Fergus won’t mind if Angus tags along.”

“He’s a very cute third wheel, but you haven’t had alone time with Fergus in a week and you have wedding planning to do,” Laura said. “I’ll bring Angus to my house tonight for a sleepover. I don’t do obnoxious relatives, but Angus is always welcome. He needs a break too, and he loves it at my house.”

“Where bacon strips fall magically from the sky,” Molly finished with a grin. “He’ll be so happy. Thank you both.”

“Now that that’s settled, we’ve got work to do,” Laura said as she waved their to-do list in the air. “The Loch Mallaig Bonny Bonspiel starts this morning, you know.”

Molly rolled her eyes at the mention of the bonspiel, another name for a curling competition. The sport was similar to shuffleboard

but played with stones on ice, and Loch Mallaig hosted an annual tournament while its namesake loch was still frozen over. “I wouldn’t dare forget. Fergus and his team have practiced for weeks. He said more teams than last year will play today in the opening matches.”

Carol gave a low whistle. “With their families and supporters, plus our normal Monday traffic, that should start our week with a bang. When does Fergus’s team play?”

“At ten this morning,” Molly answered.

“Do you want to watch?” Carol asked. “I’m sure we can find a way to spare you.”

“Have you seen Laura’s list?” Molly waved aside Carol’s concern. “He knows we’re crazy busy. Fergus would love it if I could make the semifinals tomorrow, but he mostly wants me there if his team makes the championship game tomorrow night.” She grinned. “He has a lot going on too. After the first curling game, he’ll compete in the Zippy Zamboni contest this afternoon.”

She and her friends chuckled. Serious curlers competed during this bonspiel, but the town added a few goofy events to entertain the visitors drawn to Loch Mallaig for the competition. In addition to the Zamboni race, a parade put on by local businesses and organizations would precede the curling tournament’s final match. Even Bread on Arrival had a float, which had been built by their handyman, Hamish Bruce, and Carol’s husband, Harvey.

“Laura, do you think we ought to call Joyce in?” Carol asked. “That’s a pretty long list.”

Laura scrutinized the checklist once more, then shook her head. “We can handle it.”

“A mercy, as my poor wife suffers from a wicked cold,” Hamish announced as he came in the back door. He brushed snow from his white hair as he hung up his coat.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Molly said. “Do you want to stay home with her?”

“I offered to,” Hamish replied. “I even brewed her my granny’s hot toddy with cod-liver oil. But Joyce said she wouldnae think of my missing work. She says all she needs is sleep, and she can do that quite well by herself.”

Molly suppressed a smile, wondering how much of Joyce’s insistence had revolved around trying to avoid more of Hamish’s grandmother’s home remedies.

The temperature this morning had risen to the upper twenties, so Molly went upstairs to the bakery office, where Angus greeted her enthusiastically. She bundled him in his warmest sweater and boots, then opened the doggie door that led to an exterior staircase. In an instant, the happy canine raced down the steps to the bakehouse’s fenced area, which they called the barking lot.

Leaving Angus to come and go, Molly shut the office door behind her. She paused before descending the stairs, but didn’t hear a peep from beyond her closed bedroom door, where Ada and Olivier had slept. With a shrug, Molly went back downstairs and dove into the morning’s work. For a time, she forgot about her unexpected guest.

More welcome visitors arrived throughout the morning. The customers who made Molly happiest were Fergus and his son, Neil, who was Fergus’s right-hand man at Castleglen, their family-owned golf resort. Dressed in curling uniforms—sleek, warm pants and parkas—the MacGregor men ate breakfast and greeted friends who came and went.

Though a line of customers consumed Molly’s attention, a silent conversation flowed between her and Fergus in the form of locked gazes and smiles. Seeing him always made her day, and she could tell by the twinkle in his eyes that he felt the same. She looked forward to

wedding planning that night, but she hoped, for part of the evening, they could duck details and simply enjoy being together.

With many patrons also participating in the bonspiel, the bakehouse filled with colorful team attire and fun braggadocio. Though Fergus had worked on his homebuilt machine for this afternoon's Zippy Zamboni contest and also his resort's parade float, he was in his element this morning as the skip, or captain, of his team. Molly joined in customers' grins when Fergus bantered loudly with Neil.

"How can you leave your own father's team?" Fergus chided. "Your sister would never betray me like this." Fergus's daughter, Blair, worked as a physical therapist in Indianapolis, so she lived too far away to step in for her brother.

"I'm sorry, Dad." The chuckle in Neil's tone belied his apology. "That recruiter just wouldn't leave me alone."

Grins became guffaws. Everyone knew Neil's avid "recruiter" was Bridget Ross, a Bread on Arrival employee interning with the police department as she finished up her degree in forensic science.

"Give up, Fergus," someone yelled. "Bridget's prettier than you!"

"True," Fergus admitted. "But my team's the best in the UP."

"Without me?" Neil snorted. "I don't think so."

"You'll think so when we win," Fergus flung back, then softened his appeal. "Neil. Son. You'd give up winning the bonspiel of the century for a pretty face?"

"Absolutely," Neil said. "If it belongs to Bridget."

A fresh wave of mirth met this traitorous declaration, which only increased when Neil's spritely girlfriend walked in, wearing a gray-and-orange curling uniform that matched his and sporting a coordinating orange streak in her black hair.

Head sagging, Fergus pretended to wipe away tears. "Bridget, are you sorry you stole my best curler?"

She gave him a pitying expression. “No.”

A roar of laughter shook the bakehouse walls. Bridget practically skipped out of the shop, Neil’s hand in hers. Molly joined in the laughter, knowing Fergus had found a newer resort employee to take Neil’s place.

Hamish had been holding his sides, but his belly laugh ceased. Molly followed his steely gaze to the doorway beyond the front counter, which led to the back hallway, kitchen, and bakehouse stairs.

Ada hovered at the threshold, cradling Olivier and fixing Hamish with an equally cold glare.

Hamish may have taken a liking to Angus and tolerated the Scottie being around the bakehouse, but Molly knew the avid bird-watcher would draw the line well before unknown cats. If she didn’t move fast, this could be a disaster.



Forcing a cheery tone, Molly stepped forward. “Good morning, Ada.” Her guest, still staring at Hamish, said, “Despite the ruckus that woke us, it does smell lovely.”

Hamish crossed his arms. “Perhaps you dinnae understand—” “The wonderful fragrances start the day right, don’t they?” Molly slipped between them, wishing she was taller so she could block their dueling glares.

Carol intercepted Hamish. “I think a light bulb has burned out on the front porch,” she said smoothly. “Could you look at it, please?”

Muttering, Hamish stalked to the front door while Carol welcomed the next customer.

Molly hurried toward Ada, lowering her voice. “The health department allows only service animals in food areas during business hours. Please take Olivier up to the apartment.” To soften her request, she added, “I’ll be glad to warm a scone or blueberry coffee cake for your breakfast.”

Ada’s heavily mascaraed and Olivier’s blue-marble eyes blinked in indignant unison. “Surely you do not expect my darling to spend the entire day in that apartment,” Ada said. “He is accustomed to a much larger, *warmer* space.” She coughed delicately. “We both nearly froze last night.”

“I’m sorry,” Molly said, willing her voice to remain calm. “Tonight, you might use the extra quilts I placed by the bed. The thermostat is right inside the apartment’s front door. Feel free to turn it up a few degrees during the day.”

Ada frowned but spun on her heels and started for the steps. Just as Molly was about to breathe a sigh of relief, though, Ada's voice rang out from the stairwell. "Blueberries upset my stomach. I'll take cherry coffee cake instead."

Molly tried not to grit her teeth. "Would you prefer pecan praline? That's the other coffee cake we're serving today."

"*Humph*. I suppose."

Molly returned to the counter, hoping to catch Fergus's eye, but he'd left for his first game. At least her cousin seemed to enjoy breakfast. While Hamish made himself scarce shoveling sidewalks, Ada even proved helpful, tackling dirty dishes and pans piled around the sink and keeping up a steady stream of chatter the entire time.

"If we can keep her and Hamish apart," Molly whispered to Laura, "we might live through the day."

"This new snow will keep him outside awhile," her partner replied. "I hope."

When Carol left for an appointment in Marquette that afternoon, a growing crowd kept Molly running. Usually Laura filled in, but she was baking for a special Chamber of Commerce event. Knowing Laura would want to concentrate and might not appreciate Ada's incessant talking, Molly realized she'd need to lure Ada out of the kitchen.

But could she deal with her cousin's help in the front? Could their customers?

Surprisingly, Ada worked the cash register without a qualm. "I was a restaurant hostess in my younger days." She quickly learned what was where and welcomed patrons with a smile. She and Mayor Tavish Calhoun hit it off especially well.

Laura finished her project and emerged from the kitchen to pour herself a fresh cup of coffee. "Are you doing okay?" she whispered to Molly.

“Overall, she’s been great. The customers like her.” Molly chose to forget that Ada had helped herself to more treats. She also chose to remember that growing old wasn’t easy, especially as Ada had remained single. Though she lived in a retirement community, maybe she’d been lonely.

An ancient truck backfired outside, interrupting Molly’s guilty thoughts. The decrepit vehicle collapsed into a parking spot. Its tall driver, an olive-skinned man with a wildly overgrown black beard, ragged clothes, and a tattoo peeking out from his shirt cuff entered. He stared hungrily at the pastries.

Automatically, Molly took a step toward the stranger, but admonished herself to let Ada earn her coffee cake, *éclairs*, and cookies. However, her cousin’s mouth had tightened into a prune-like frown. Ada turned her back on the customer.

Molly darted forward to fill the gap. “May I help you, sir?”

Shifting his weight uncomfortably, he glanced at Ada’s uncompromising back and pulled out a flat wallet. “Okay if I just have coffee?”

“Certainly. Although . . . this is your first time at Bread on Arrival, right?” Molly decided she’d improvise to make up for Ada’s rudeness. “Today, we’re offering new customers a free pastry of choice.”

“Really?” Even the beard couldn’t hide his smile.

Molly smiled too. But with a palpable sniff, Ada swept into the kitchen. No way would their “helper” get away with this. Molly cast a look at Laura, who took over the counter while Molly followed her cousin.

Still ramrod straight, Ada was at the sink drying a big cookie sheet, holding it like a shield.

Molly crossed her arms. “Ada, I need to speak with you. Upstairs in the office.”

“Climb stairs again? After you’ve kept me running all afternoon?” She shot Molly a chilly gaze, then sighed heavily. “Oh all right. I should check on Olivier, anyway.”

Ada went upstairs without any hint of difficulty. Molly paused to collect herself before following. As she reached the second floor landing, she heard the bedroom door click shut behind Ada, and the sounds of the older woman cooing at Olivier quickly followed.

Molly went ahead to the office, where she consoled Angus for his office confinement with an extra-long ear scratch. Olivier wasn't the only pet suffering from limited space.

"We'll go for a long walk later," she promised.

After waiting for Ada for quite some time, Molly left Angus in the office and knocked on her bedroom door. "Ada, please come out. We need to talk."

Silence.

Molly knocked harder. "Ada?"

When the door whipped open, Molly almost fell forward.

"I thought you might wait until Olivier finished his nap," Ada said acidly.

"I'll make it brief," Molly said. "Thank you for your help this morning. We appreciated the way you treated our customers. All except the last one."

Ada, though well past seventy, responded with a perfect teen eye roll. "I was doing you a favor."

Molly took a deep breath before responding. "A favor?"

"Certainly. Do you want to attract *that* kind of clientele?" Ada sniffed again. "And that new-customer 'promotion.' I don't remember your mentioning it. Did you make it up for that vagrant?"

"The man appeared hungry," Molly said.

Ada snorted derisively. "Are you running a business or a charity?"

"A business." Molly raised her chin. "A business founded on excellence. And kindness."

"You'll go bankrupt within the year."

“It hasn’t hurt us so far.”

“I have a headache.” Ada practically wilted onto the bed and curled up beside her cat, a clear dismissal.

Drained, Molly wished she could do likewise. Laura needed help, though, so she returned to the bakehouse. Laura didn’t ask questions, which suited Molly perfectly. Together, they served their remaining customers.

After they locked up and began cleaning the kitchen, Laura asked, “How did it go?”

“The way you’d expect.” Molly’s shoulders tightened again.

“You handled Ned’s situation perfectly,” Laura said.

“Ned?”

“Ned MacLeod. When I told Hamish what had happened, he introduced himself and found out Ned grew up in Marquette. He recently moved to Loch Mallaig and started working for Fergus, plowing snow.” Laura smiled. “You know Hamish. He can be a pain, but he cares about people. I think Ned felt welcome.”

Molly was thanking God for Hamish’s kind heart when their handyman burst in, spouting Gaelic that most definitely wasn’t a prayer.

“That woman,” he huffed. “That busybody. That, that—*bampot!* Molly, I dinnae want to belittle your kin, but I caught her snooping in the garage—”

“The garage?” Molly repeated in confusion.

“Sitting in the driver’s seat of the LaSalle as if she owned it.” Hamish, a retired history teacher, cherished the bakehouse’s 1939 hearse-turned-delivery-vehicle. “I told her she was not to enter any area without your permission.”

Molly could imagine Ada’s reaction to *that*.

“Such greed in her eye,” he continued to rant. “That hen is planning a joyride. Or worse.”

“Now, now,” Molly said gently. “You can’t blame her for being interested in the hearse, even if she didn’t ask permission to sit in it.”

“It’s an easy fix.” Laura gestured to the key holder by the kitchen door. “Let’s keep the LaSalle’s keys elsewhere during her visit.”

“An excellent idea,” Hamish said. “Perhaps we should move the entire key holder.” Hamish hurried to the garage for his toolbox before anyone could argue.

“That’ll keep him busy, anyway,” Laura said. “Let’s remember to tell Carol about the change.”

Molly nodded, then dropped into a chair at the break table.

Laura brought her tea. “Too bad Ada doesn’t have your mom’s kindness.”

“That’s not true,” Molly said. “Ada washed practically every dish and pan we used.”

“She should.” Laura shrugged. “Not only did she invite herself here, she sampled half the pastries in the place.”

“I certainly did not.”

Molly jumped almost as high as Laura.

Ada, plump arms folded across her chest, surveyed them with a righteous eye. “A little snack here and there is surely appropriate for a guest. Especially one working without pay.” She paused. “Particularly a family member subjected to abuse by a mere employee.”

A deep *harrumph* sounded behind Ada. “I may be a ‘mere employee,’” Hamish growled, “but I shall not tolerate exploitation of my kindhearted employers—”

“Ada, Hamish is a dear friend,” Molly broke in, “as well as an excellent handyman. Which brings me to the task at hand. Would you mind finishing the one we discussed, Hamish?”

Hamish stomped into the storeroom, slamming the door behind him.

Molly shifted back to a glowering Ada. “He didn’t mean to upset you,” she fibbed. “Hamish is just so conscientious about the bakehouse.”

“He thinks he owns the place,” Ada retorted. “You shouldn’t allow him to run over you.”

Molly plastered a smile on her face and ignored the irony of that comment. “Laura and I appreciate your help today. We couldn’t have managed without you.”

“I doubt you could either,” Ada said with a sniff.

Laura made a slight sound, but Molly poured on appreciation until her cousin’s tight mouth softened to a smug smile. Finally, Molly asked, “Did Olivier have a nice nap?”

“Oh dear, I must check on my darling.” Ada bustled upstairs without another word.

Laura gave Molly a wry smile. “That was a master class in diplomacy. The State Department should send you overseas.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Molly said, then paused when she heard Angus barking like a hound on a scent. Judging by his tone, he’d soon escalate to a nonstop howl. Molly grabbed her parka. “If you don’t mind finishing up, I’ll take Angus to play outside.”

“No problem,” Laura agreed. “You both deserve a breather.”

The anticipated howls began before Molly made it halfway upstairs.

Ada stuck her head out the bedroom door. “Molly. *Molly!* That vicious dog is scaring my poor kitty. If you don’t remove him this minute, I will call animal control.”

Now desperate for some fresh air, Molly grabbed a leash, strode into the office, and ushered a very eager Angus outside. While he romped in the fresh snow covering Dumfries Park, Molly sighed. How she wished there were such a thing as cousin control.