

A Scotia MacKinnon Mystery



The Dead

Wives Society

"Scotia MacKinnon is tough, clever, interesting,
and believable."—Carolyn Hart

Sharon Duncan

Author of A Deep Blue Farewell

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Prologue

Nowhere is it written that a private investigator has to like her clients. Not even a private investigator who hangs her shingle in the harbor side village of a remote Pacific Northwest island. I did not like Chantal Rousseau from the first moment I laid eyes on her. Or perhaps from the moment I first heard her name.

It was a hot Saturday morning in July. Very hot for the San Juan Islands, where the average summer temperature is seventy-two degrees. I had my head wedged into *DragonSpray's* engine compartment and was attempting to insert the pry bar between the engine block and the alternator so I could tighten the fan belt when the phone rang. I expected a call from only one person: Nicholas Anastazi, my significant other, a Seattle maritime attorney who was planning a birthday dinner party for himself at his house on Crows' Nest Drive and was flying up from Seattle that morning with one of his business partners.

I gingerly extricated my head, wiped my hands on a rag, and managed to grab the portable phone seconds before my voice messaging service would have snatched the call. It was Nick. He and Andy Cooper had arrived on schedule. Andy's wife Crystal had driven up several days ago.

"The dinner for four is going to be for six," he said. "Crystal Cooper coerced me into including a new Friday Harbor doctor. Her name is Chantal Rousseau and she's bringing her mother, who, according to Crystal, is a Berber tribes woman."

"Interesting. Anything I can bring?"

"It's all under control. But, Scotty, could you come early? I thought maybe we could spend some quiet time together before anybody else gets here."

"I'll be there by two."

Nick's house has a spectacular view of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the city of Victoria, British Columbia. He loves to entertain there.

Years of bickering over a property settlement with his former wife would have made the house beyond his budget, but after representing a Microsoft executive whose litigious nature exceeded his cash flow, Nick ended up with the house in lieu of a well-earned fee. It had been two weeks since I'd seen him: I wished it were just the two of us celebrating his birthday. I sighed, returned to the engine, finished the adjustments to the bolts that would tighten the tension on the fan belt, and checked the level of the transmission fluid.

DragonSpray is a 38-foot-sloop-rigged sailboat, my live-aboard home at slip G-73 at the Port of Friday Harbor. I bought her from a retired cruising couple after I moved to San Juan Island from San Francisco and hung out my shingle for "S.J. MacKinnon Investigations." *DragonSpray* was in Bristol condition when I bought her. About the only expenses I'd incurred—except for the ongoing challenge of maintaining the brightwork—were for every-other-year haul-outs and bottom painting.

The transmission fluid registered right where it should be on the dipstick and I checked the drip from the stuffing box, which appeared to be normal. One of the automatic bilge pumps and the radar had both been malfunctioning the last time Nick and I had been out cruising, and I'd noticed that the winches needed lubrication. The winches could wait for another day, the radar was beyond my expertise, and the bilge pump would have to be replaced on my next trip to Seattle. I closed the engine compartment and put the toolbox away. With a towel, a clean pair of sweats, shampoo supplies, and wild raspberry body lotion in a canvas bag, I headed up to the Port Building for a shower.

The sky was cloudless, the temperature around eighty-five degrees, and there was a light breeze out of the east. For the better part of the year, Friday Harbor is a sleepy port village of a few thousand souls located halfway between mainland Washington and Vancouver Island. It rains ten months out of twelve here and most travelers prefer to head for sunnier climes. But come July and August, summer sailors and power boaters arrive, the big white ferries disgorge masses of humanity onto Front Street, and both the main street and the docks at the port begin to resemble New York City at lunch hour. Just before I got to the ramp leading up to the main dock, I stepped around

two suntanned eight-year-olds attempting to lower a crab trap into the harbor. Outside the fish vendor's shack, I dodged a thin blond woman with an overloaded and out-of-control dock cart.

Half an hour later I was back on *DragonSpray* showered, shampooed, and fragrant. I put on a blue shirt and a pair of white shorts and regarded the long hanging locker that housed my schizophrenic wardrobe. On the left side of the locker were the denim skirts and cotton shirts, wool sweaters, bib overalls and blue jeans that comprised my working and boating wardrobe. By their side, on padded hangers, hung the velvet tops, silk skirts and the black, mid-thigh cocktail dress I bought a few months ago for visits to Seattle.

The two faces of Scotia MacKinnon.

I grabbed the hanger with the black dress, zipped it into my travel bag, threw a change of underwear and toiletries into another small bag and locked up *DragonSpray*, eager to see my beloved and learn more about the Berber tribes women.

My ten-year-old gray Volvo is not what you would call a performance car. It has more than 200,000 miles on the odometer, is usually covered with San Juan Island glacial fines, a.k.a. dust, and Nick has suggested numerous times that I replace it. I pressed the accelerator, turned the ignition key, and wanted to scream.

The battery was dead.

And for no good reason, Neither the lights nor the radio had been left on and I'd installed a new battery not more than six months ago. *Merde!* Now I'd be late arriving at Nick's, even if I could get the attention of Tom's Taxi within the next hour. Which on a Saturday in July was unlikely. I couldn't find my cell phone, which meant I'd probably left it on the boat. *Merde encore!* I scrambled out of the car and slammed the door in frustration. I was about to lock it when a faded red Morris Minor stopped beside me. The carrot-colored hair and grinning face of the driver belonged to Zelda Jones. Zelda is my office mate and on-call research assistant, a computer genius and graphics artist cum events arranger. Like the proverbial Cheshire cat, she often materializes at unexpected times.

"You look less than happy, boss."

"I'm due at Nick's in fifteen minutes and this effing car has a dead battery."

“Hop in; I’ll drive you.”

I frowned. “If I don’t get it charged now, I won’t have a way back to town on Monday. Nick will be flying back early with Andy.” Besides, an investigator with no vehicle is a poor investigator.

“Leave me the keys. I’ll have Sheldon take care of it and we’ll bring it out to Nick’s on Sunday.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, transferred my overnight and dress bags to the back seat of the Morris, and folded myself into the passenger seat. “You’ve saved my life.”

“Or at least given you more time for hot sex.” Zelda smiled wickedly, did a tire-squealing U-turn, and raced out of the parking lot and down the hill.

I buckled the seat belt, wondered about her mind reading skills, and inquired what had brought her into town. “I thought you had a big date with Shel tonight.”

“I do. He’s taking me to the Spinnaker for dinner.”

“So why the long face?”

“I just know he’s going to ask me to marry him.”

“Good grief, woman! I thought marriage was the number one priority in your life.”

She sighed and turned right onto Second Street without signaling. “I know, I know. He’s tall and handsome and makes beau coup bucks and half the women on San Juan Island, single or married, would kill for a date with him.”

Sheldon Wainwright was a ship’s pilot, stationed in Port Angeles on the Olympic Peninsula. When he wasn’t guiding container ships into the Strait of Juan de Fuca, he hung out at his aunt’s house in Cape San Juan, ever hopeful that his adoration of Zelda might be requited.

“But?” I prompted.

“But he’s so . . . predictable. So . . . ordinary. No surprises, no—” She floundered, uncharacteristically at a loss for words. We came to a brief stop at Blair Avenue and continued up the hill. “He’s like a husband. Always there.” She shrugged. “Besides, Jean Pierre’s on his way back to Friday Harbor.”

Jean Pierre was the hired skipper of a classic wooden yacht that had been anchored at Roche Harbor for several weeks in the spring.

Zelda and Jean Pierre had had a brief romance before the yacht left for Alaska.

“Anyway, the reason I came into town was to do some work on the O’Banion wedding.”

“The writer?”

She nodded. “Bronwyn O’Banion. She’s driving me crazy.”

“How so?” B. K. O’Banion was a local celebrity, a historical romance writer. Though judging from the one novel I read, there was more soft porn than history in her work. Bronwyn lived on neighboring Lopez Island.

“She’s changed her mind about the color of the table linens and now they’ve moved the wedding date up to two weeks from today.”

“Who’s she marrying?”

“Some wealthy dude from Portland. Name’s Wes Caswell. I’ll meet him this week when they write their vows. He’s taking her to the south Pacific for their honeymoon. Tahiti, I think. But he’s not the problem. It’s her. She wants everything to be perfect, like a happy-ever-after scene from one of her novels.”

“Where’s she getting married?”

“At the chateau she built on Lopez after she sold movie rights on the last novel. The wedding and reception are going to be in the walled garden.” She sighed, downshifted, and made a left hand turn onto Douglas Road. “And when I finish with the bride, I’m meeting Abby.”

“What’s Friday Harbor’s ex-con up to?” Abigail Leedle is a seventy-something retired biology teacher and a wildlife photographer. She and Zelda were the founding members of the Coronas, a group of environmentally-minded feminists. Last spring Abby took exception to a sportswear magazine that tried to do a photo shoot at one of the island’s historical parks and spent a brief sojourn in the San Juan County jail.

“She’s got a boyfriend.”

“Abby?!”

“He’s writing a book here and Abby’s renting him the studio over her garage. He’s one of the geologists that predicted the Mount Saint Helens eruption and now he’s tracking the Cascadia subduction.”

“What’s a Cascadia subduction?”

We turned right at the state park and headed up West Side Road.

The little Morris slowed and Zelda downshifted. “I’m clueless. Ask Nick.”

“Tectonic plates are the large crystal plates that move around on the rims of continents,” Nick explained. “The San Juans have their own plate. Someone told me the San Juan Plate is sliding slowly under the North American Plate. It’s called subducting. Actually, I’ve heard the rumor that the San Juan Plate is stuck and not sliding any more.”

“So we’re going to have a rather large tremor one day,” I guessed, watching Nick trim two large leeks, chop them, and add them to the olive oil in the soup pot. Small piles of minced garlic and chopped fresh ginger waited on the cutting board. “What’s on the menu tonight? Can I do anything?”

“The hors d’oeuvres tray is chilling. You’re going to assemble the salad while I do the soup. My butcher prepared the lamb so it’s ready for the oven. Crystal Cooper’s bringing a pilaf to honor her Moroccan friend. And I picked up the lemon granita at Tino’s Deli.”

“Tino’s old family recipe, I imagine.”

“Naturally. Handed down from his great-great-grandmother.”

“Where are the salad ingredients?”

“Bottom right-hand drawer of the fridge. Here’s the recipe.” He handed me a clipping from an old edition of Food and Wine. “And the salad bowl.”

I glanced at the clipping, found the greens, and moved to the wet bar. “Tell me about the Moroccan guests.”

“Chantal Rousseau is an internist and Crystal’s best friend. Her mother’s name is Raheela. As I understand it, Dr. Rousseau has accepted a job at the medical clinic in Friday Harbor and is in the process of moving up here with her mother.”

“How did Crystal meet a French Moroccan doctor? I thought her latest cause was adopting Bosnian orphans.”

“Crystal got incensed over the plight of the Afghan women, so she joined a human rights group in Seattle. Muslim Women United, or something like that. Chantal founded it.”

“Chantal is from Morocco?”

“She was born in Paris. Her father was French, a diplomat, I be-

lieve. Her mother's family are tribal Berbers. The parents met at brides' fair, whatever that is." He added the garlic and ginger and a pinch of salt, then peered at the recipe through his reading glasses.

I spread the wet leaves of romaine between paper towels and blotted up the moisture. "Do Berbers speak Berber?"

"Most Berbers speak a language called Tamazight."

"How erudite you've become, Mr. Anastazi."

He peered at me over the top of the glasses and grinned. "Crystal prepped me after she found out my knowledge of geography ended at the Himalayas and the Mediterranean Sea." He added a can of chicken broth and several cups of water, covered the pot, and began to set up the bar. "I've got a new client who also appreciates martinis. He just came back from London and said there are only two places over there where you can get a good martini. One is the American Bar off the lobby of the Savoy Hotel, where they charge fifteen dollars for the expertise. And the other is the Stafford Hotel in St. Jame's Place where the price is twelve dollars." He raised the sleeve of his shirt to check his watch. "Our guests are not arriving until six-thirty. I stacked the dishes and utensils on the table. You know where the wine glasses are. If you'll set the table, beautiful lady, we'll have time for a nap. That is, if you'd like a nap." He tilted my head back and gave me a long, suggestive kiss. "And in case I haven't told you recently, you have fabulous legs."

The Coopers, accompanied by two women, one late thirties, one approaching sixty, arrived at six-forty. The older woman, swathed from her ankles to the top of her head in a filmy blue garment, lived up to my image of a Berber tribes woman. But any preconceived notion I'd had of a Muslim feminist bore no resemblance to the feral, green-eyed female with long, long chestnut hair and exotic makeup who accompanied her. I took one look at Chantal Rousseau's ankle-length, silky white gown that bared one dusky shoulder and her hat—a toque, actually, with appliquéd flowers in shades of jungle green—and doubted that Friday Harbor was ready for such a creature. When I saw the expression Nick's face as the foursome came through the door, I knew I wasn't.

Andy made the introductions. Chantal's handshake was firm. Her

pale green eyes with their outer circle of dark green searched my face and then she turned to Nick with a dazzling smile. Raheela's handshake was limp and ladylike. Like her daughter, she had green eyes. but the dark hair under the filmy silk scarf showed many threads of gray. I stole another look at Friday Harbor's newest answer to Dr. Kildare, picked up the tray of fresh vegetables and yogurt dip, and began circulating with a forced smile on my face. While I trust Nick implicitly, Chantal Rousseau was quite a package or provocative femininity. Suddenly my sexy little black cocktail dress seemed awfully retro and I knew it was going to be a long evening.

A large woman, Crystal Cooper arranges her blond hair in a tight chignon. She bears a striking resemblance to her husband, Andy a graduate of Stanford Law. Their politics are also similar: activist, liberal, and articulate. Crystal and Nick's former wife were once—perhaps still are—best friends. Crystal's favorite dinner conversation revolves around remembrances of times past, often followed by meaningful glances toward me, the evil husband stealer. Which I wasn't.

When I first met Nick, I was working for a security firm in San Francisco. He was a six-foot-four, forty-something, George Clooney look-alike handling admiralty law cases for a California Street megasize law firm. I lost my heart the first time I saw Nick, but he was married. Several years later, one of the senior law partners died, one of the junior partners was disbarred for something unbecoming an attorney, and Nick's wife started a torrid affair with their financial advisor and asked for a divorce. Nick, along with two other associates, Andy Cooper and Tony Nakano, made a break for Seattle and set up their own firm there.

The Coopers moved over to the long windows overlooking the water. At the bar, Nick poured Bombay Sapphire gin from its distinctive blue container into a silver shaker. "Shaken not stirred," he proclaimed facetiously, adding the vermouth.

"Just like James Bond," Chantal murmured. Her voice was soft, her accent more French than Middle Eastern.

Nick gave her an appreciative glance. "Are you an Ian Fleming fan?"

Chantal looked at her mother. "We both are."

“I have all the Bond films on video,” Nick said, pouring the shaken-not-stirred libation into the waiting glasses. “Perhaps we should have a movie party.”

Over my dead body.

“We would be *enchantées*. Nicholas.”

She pronounced it “Neekolás,” and I thought I was going to be sick.

Nick handed the delicate crystal glasses around. Raheela declined the martini and Nick offered her a glass of Pellegrino water instead.

“A toast,” Crystal Cooper proposed. “To Friday Harbor’s new physician and to the liberation of all women in veils. May they enjoy health, wealth and love.”

As we raised our glasses, I saw Raheela frown and something like a shadow pass over Chantal’s smooth, dusky face.

Over the lemon granita and coffee, while Nick gave Raheela and Chantal a tour of his video collection, Crystal suggested that perhaps I could help the two women “adjust” to island life. “Just help them fit in, Scotia. Chantal’s recently gotten divorced. Her husband was a Brit. She was mad about him and the divorce was devastating for her.”

Most divorces are devastating in one fashion or another. However, any sympathy I might have had for Dr. Rousseau’s marital trauma had flown right out window when she started fawning over Nick. Trauma from divorce was one thing; using Nicholas Anastzi—my Nick—for her recovery was another. I also suspected that the new doctor would not be open to the suggestion that if she wanted to fit into island life, she would have to wear underwear and discard her stiletto-heeled strappy sandals and iridescent gold eye shadow. Ergo, I didn’t pay much attention to her parting promise to call me. Or perhaps my memory lapse was caused by the interlude in Nick’s moonlight-bathed bedroom that followed the guests’ departure.

Thinking back on it now, I should have paid more attention.