

A Scotia MacKinnon Mystery



The Lavender

Butterfly Murders

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

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Author of *The Dead Wives Society*

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Chapter 1

I've never solved a murder in Mesopotamia, nor do I cultivate rare orchids. I enjoy a chilled dry vermouth and soda when the sun has fallen decently over the yardarm, but I've never resorted to the seven-percent solution. My name is Scotia MacKinnon. As a female gumshoe in the tiny Pacific Northwest village of Friday Harbor, I do resort to dogged determination, some well-honed law enforcement skills, a smidgen of luck, and early morning epiphanies. Despite all of these, the Dei Fiori case was the most puzzling I've encountered in two decades of law enforcement and private investigation.

My sojourn at the yoga retreat on neighboring Santa Maria Island was intended to be a vacation for seven days in May. Perhaps, strolling about the old stone courtyard with its clay pots of red geraniums and diaphanous azure butterflies, I was reluctant to recognize the incidents that plagued the retreat at the old Franciscan convent for what they were: a bizarre confluence of seemingly unrelated events that had been set in motion long before we gathered in Il Refugio with Joseph for *asanas* and readings from Rumi.

Even now, reclining in *DragonSpray's* cockpit, Calico purring in my lap, I watch a silvery crescent of new moon rise over the harbor and glance nervously up San Juan Channel toward that sparsely inhabited, darkly forested island where so many lives – my own included – were forever rearranged.

It all began when Zelda Jones, my red-haired part-time investigative assistant, dropped a Serenity and Light brochure on my desk with the suggestion that I sign up for the yoga retreat she was arranging for her newest client. In addition to providing esoteric computer research for my more obtuse cases, Zelda is a graphic artist and also does occasional events arranging. In this instance, her client was Mimi Rossellini, owner of the Hotel Dei Fiori on Santa Maria,

who, desperate to improve her cash flow, had hired Zelda to organize and manage the retreat.

The Dei Fiori was formerly a convent that housed a dozen or so Franciscan nuns. The sisters raised grapes, made wine, and grew organic vegetables, which they sold at the Saturday Market in Friday Harbor. Over the years the number of novitiates had grown smaller and the nuns older until finally the convent was closed and the three-hundred-acre property was put up for sale.

The Serenity and Light brochure promised a cornucopia of delights: tranquility and wildflowers, meditation and *pranayama*, therapeutic massage and five-star Italian cuisine. The last was to be provided by Chef Piero, Mimi's new husband.

Although the price of the retreat exceeded my usual monthly living expenses, and a previous encounter with Bickram yoga had been less than harmonious, I could think of three reasons why I should treat myself to a luxurious sojourn at the Dei Fiori. One, the San Juan winter had been long, dark and wet, as winters in the far reaches of the Pacific Northwest often are. Two, as a result of the recent settlement of an insurance fraud case, my savings account sported a hefty balance. And three, Nicholas Anastazi, a Seattle maritime attorney and my significant other of almost ten years, would be occupied with his daughter Nicole's wedding during the week of the retreat. The wedding was to be held at the posh Ranier Club in Seattle, and my name was not on Nicole's guest list.

I felt bad about that. Very bad.

My body and spirit needed sunshine and wildflowers and all those other sybaritic delights.

So I said to myself, "*Self, why the hell not?!*" and handed over my deposit.

Now, three months later, seated at the wooden refectory table in the second-floor dining room of the Dei Fiori, I contemplated the solitary orange, two squares of baked oatmeal, and the small white cup of espresso that constituted breakfast, henceforth to be known as *prima colazione*. When Mimi Rossellini fled to Italy after a messy divorce, she spent a month at a convent in Umbria before moving on to a friend's villa in Tuscany, where she wholeheartedly embraced Italian culture, including the language. Ergo, our retreat staff was

ostensibly required to be conversant in Italian. I say ostensibly, since I knew that Zelda's knowledge of Italian was limited to some choice lyrics from Italian opera. Last night's check-in was *ricezione*. After the evening repast – *la cena* – Mimi herded us across the cobblestone courtyard to Il Refugio for *círculo*, the evening “sharing circle” that reminded me of my daughter Melissa's long-ago kindergarten show-and-tell experiences. I am not a share-my-feelings person; my self-introduction was limited to my name and that fact that I lived in Friday Harbor aboard a thirty-eight-foot sailboat. On the way back to the hotel, Zelda told me that Mimi had wanted to end each day of the retreat with vespers, but Zelda had persuaded her to settle for something more secular.

I studied my horoscope for the day, tucked next to my plate – “fiery Aries should avoid confrontation and focus on peacemaking” – and turned to the printed agenda for Day One. Retreat participants would observe *prima colazione nel silenzio*, breakfast in silence. I bit into the baked oatmeal, so far unimpressed with *cucina italiana*, musing that the reason people lost weight at spas and retreats was probably that the food was inedible.

Natasha, the statuesque Russian woman with long chestnut hair who translated American romance novels into Russian, was a retreat participant as well as our resident massage therapist. She'd acquired her dual role—and had her registration fee waived—when the original therapist had cancelled two weeks earlier and Zelda had noticed Natasha's previous experience in the “Comments” section of the registration form. Natasha was seated at the far end of the table on my left, next to two women from California who were wearing matching chartreuse leotards. They had introduced themselves at *círculo*: Danielle, fifty-something, tall, Semitic, dark-haired; and her roommate Zoe, a petite, perky blonde, probably in her late thirties. Zoe couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds. She was a talk-show host for a Santa Barbara TV station, but I hadn't a clue as to what Danielle did for a living or the nature of the relationship between the two women. They were billeted next to me in the recently renovated west corridor of the hotel.

Across from Zoe sat a trim, brown-skinned woman with shoulder-length, shiny dark brown hair. She wore a faded coral-colored cotton

shirt over a black unitard. Although she was tall, around five foot eight, judging from the black eyes and the tawny tone of her smooth skin I'd noticed when I saw her at check-in, I'd guessed she had Hispanic and/or indigenous genes somewhere in her family tree. My guess had been confirmed when she had introduced herself last night in Spanish-accented English as a social worker from Los Angeles. Now she sipped her espresso and checked out the other guests from beneath long dark lashes. A fortuitous combination of Bridget Fonda and Sandra Bullock, she was named Andrea. Last night at *círculo* I'd noticed a green tattooed snake circling her left ankle. I found it hard to guess her age—thirty? thirty-five?—but judging from the firmness of her gluteus maximus and her triceps, I guessed she had access to a good fitness club. She felt my gaze on her, met my eyes, and smiled.

I glanced at the big clock on the stone wall. It was 8:32. I changed positions in my chair. My lower back was stiff from struggling to lower the mainsail in the rain and twenty-five knots of wind I'd encountered on my sail on *DragonSpray* from Friday Harbor the day before. I hadn't planned to sail to Santa Maria, but I'd cut the time short and had only ten minutes to lock up *DragonSpray* and walk from Slip G-73 at the Port of Friday harbor marina over to the ferry dock when my cell phone rang. I recognized Nick's caller ID number. I answered it, praying Nicole had had a change of heart and he was calling to say I'd been invited to the wedding after all.

"Scotia. Glad I found you. Aren't you working today?"

"I'm headed over to Santa Maria. The yoga retreat, remember?"

"Sorry, I forgot. I'm going in circles."

"How are the wedding preparations proceeding?"

"Nicole says there's a problem with the prenuptial agreement."

"What kind of problem?" I glanced across the water toward the green-and-white *Hiyu*. The last two cars were snaking into the mouth of the vessel. On the afterdeck, a tall, dark-haired figure in a windbreaker was speaking into a cell phone.

"Her fiancé doesn't want to sign it," Nick said.

"I see."

There were two or three seconds of dead air between us, then he asked, “Scotia, are you still upset with me because you weren’t invited to the wedding?”

Upset, no. I was livid. Furious. Seething. “I’m sure Nicole had her reasons.”

“And I explained them to you. How awkward it would be having you there with her mother.”

“You two were divorced ten years ago, Nick.”

“It’s Nicole’s wedding, Scotia. I couldn’t force her to invite you.”

I glanced through the open companionway at the ferry across the water and watched the last of the cars disappear into the car deck. The tall figure in the windbreaker was gone.

“I have to get on the ferry, Nick. There’s not another one to Santa Maria until Saturday.”

There was more dead air. “Nick, I have to hang up.”

“I’ll call you later,” he said abruptly. “Have a good time at the retreat.”

I hadn’t made it on the ferry. I’d punched the End button on the cell phone, resisted the temptation to hurl it into the harbor, and sat in the cockpit seething with frustration and disappointment. Jaw tightly clenched, I watched the ferry reverse out of the slip, turn, and head out of the harbor into San Juan Channel. Half an hour later, still angry, still frustrated, I’d reluctantly gotten *DragonSpray* ready to sail and headed up San Juan Channel, realizing that I’d committed myself to the retreat for all the wrong reasons.

I glanced again at the clock. 8:43.

To my left, Joseph Abbot, the tall, thin, ascetic Serenity and Light yoga director, mindfully peeled his orange. Joseph was Mimi’s brother, probably five years her junior, and, according to Zelda, a noted Sanskrit scholar. Next to Joseph was Tiffany Marr, a professional model with a passion for the color purple. Purple headband that controlled her mane of golden-blond hair, lavender cotton jumpsuit, iridescent mauve polish on her perfectly groomed fingers and toes. As my gaze lingered on the large, glittering, pear-shaped diamond on her third finger, left hand, she looked up from her oatmeal, met my eyes, then looked quickly away.

The chair on my right was empty. Last night Eric Szabo, a commercial photographer from San Francisco, had sat there. He'd never been to a yoga retreat and his enthusiasm for photographing the island's rugged topography had raised my dampened spirits. After *circulo*, we'd shared a cup of tea in the great room, chatted about his work and about my days as a security consultant in the city on the bay before I moved to Friday Harbor. Articulate, handsome, and courteous, Eric was the one person at the retreat I'd felt might be a kindred spirit. I missed him, and wondered if he'd decided to skip breakfast and get some early morning shots.

Beyond Eric's empty chair, Zelda Jones, her carrot-colored hair secured in a bouncy ponytail, was whispering behind her hand with Graham, the professor from Vancouver with blue-gray eyes and unruly, curly, dark gray hair. Graham was on sabbatical from the University of British Columbia to write a book about contemporary Latin American politics. His face was craggy and his eyes crinkled up when he smiled, as he was doing now. At the far end of the table, Natasha whispered something to Zoe and Danielle frowned.

I gazed through the long narrow windows that overlooked the courtyard, where tall bushes of dark purple lilacs bloomed and the gardener was preparing terra-cotta pots for flats of red and white geraniums. The gardener's name was Gus. He was sixty-something, with a head of thick white hair and a well-trimmed white beard. According to Zelda, Gus had lived on Santa Maria for more than two decades. Mimi had introduced Gus and the rest of the staff—sexy, dark-haired Antonio, driver and all-around handyman; and Rita, the chambermaid—at *la cena* the previous evening. Rita's attitude left a good deal to be desired, and none of the three appeared particularly enchanted to see us. I pushed away the plate of baked oatmeal, which is one of the two foods I most detest, took a sip of the espresso, and began to peel the orange, recalling the tidbits of history I'd gleaned from Zelda on the Dei Fiori and its innkeepers.

Mimi St. Clair, a San Francisco interior designer, had been divorced several years ago by her architect husband and replaced with a younger trophy wife. In Italy, after the cloistered month in Umbria, she attended cooking school and fell in love with an Italian chef. They were married three months later. Following a honeymoon

in Sardinia, Mimi and Piero, accompanied by Piero's Aunt Serafina, returned to the West Coast, Mimi purchased the old convent on Santa Maria with her hard-won divorce settlement, and the couple set about converting it into a hotel.

When the renovation schedule lagged and she hit a cash-flow crunch, Joseph suggested a yoga retreat which he would direct. The participants could stay in the west wing of the hotel, where the renovation was most nearly complete, and Mimi had contracted with Zelda to advertise and organize the event.

I'd met Mimi when I checked in, a tallish, trim woman who seemed to favor long, flowing skirts. Her salt-and-pepper hair was close-cropped and her beautiful face had weathered at least fifty years. Piero had made an appearance at *círculo* last night. As I'd watched him fold his slender, medium-height frame onto a cushion beside Mimi with a dazzling smile on his olive-skinned face, I'd understood Mimi's enthusiasm for Italian *objets d'art*. Even if this *objet* was at least fifteen years her junior.

I returned to reading the day's agenda. Following *prima colazione*, there would be a break, then a two-hour yoga session with Joseph in Il Refugio. Lunch would be served from 12:00 to 1:00. A lecture and practice of *yoga mudra* were scheduled at 2:00. massages could be booked with Natasha by signing the sheet on the bulletin board outside the dining room. *La cena* would be served at 6:00. *Círculo* would be held at 9:00.

I stole another look at the clock. One more minute of silence, then I intended to make a dash for the pay phone outside the dining room to check for voice messages. The Dei Fiori did not have phone lines in the guest rooms and cell phone service on the island was erratic at best. I finished the last section of the orange and rubbed my neck, which was stiff because I'd spent a good part of yesterday afternoon checking the trim of the sails and watching the wind vane on the top of *DragonSpray's* mast. The trip had been wet and uncomfortable, northwest up San Juan Channel almost directly into the teeth of the wind. I'd barely made it to the Dei Fiori dock before the late spring storm hit with a vengeance. All my muscles ached and I intended to book a massage. After which I wanted to meander

up the hill to the meadow of wildflowers. The Butterfly Meadow, the brochure called it.

The previous evening, at Mimi's request, Zelda had kept us after dinner to review the "etiquette" of the retreat: *silenzio* would be observed for the first thirty minutes of breakfast and lunch. Outside guests were prohibited, as were smoking and alcohol. Incoming phone messages would be posted on the message board, where we could also leave messages for each other. Because there were no phone lines coming into Santa Maria, the hotel had installed several three-watt cell phones that mysteriously worked off of a tall antenna and provided service for the two offices and one public phone. There was no cable service to the island, but TV programs were available courtesy of a satellite dish.

I had no quarrel with the *silenzio* dictum since I'm not fond of making early morning small talk with strangers; actually, I'm not fond of making small talk at any time. I didn't expect any outside guests. I don't smoke and I could survive without my afternoon vermouth-and-soda ritual. However, the phone message plan annoyed me. For better or worse, I'm not one of those people who can go on vacation and blithely cut all ties to business, friends, and family. I have a high need to be connected. The large black hand on the clock crept past the number twelve. Silently, I slid my chair away from the table and scampered across the wooden plank floor. I had almost made it through the French doors leading to the hallway when I heard the tinkle of a small bell and heard Mimi's dulcet tones.

"Scotia, I have a short *annuncio*. Would it be possible . . .?"

Feigning deafness, I opened the door and slipped into the hall, pulling the door shut behind me. I glanced at the message board. There were messages for Tiffany, Andrea, and Zelda, each one folded in half so that only the name of the guest was visible. Inside the antiquated wooden phone booth with its glass folding door, I perched on the round seat, dialed up my voice mail, and retrieved three messages. One from a new client who wanted me to find her biological mother; two from my daughter, Melissa, both of which contained a note of agitation. I dialed Melissa's number at St. Mary's College in the San Francisco Bay Area. She answered immediately.

"Mummy, you'll never guess who called me!"

The names of two departed boyfriends came immediately to mind, but I let sleeping dogs lie. “I give up.”

“My father!”

Her father? I blinked, speechless. Melissa had not heard from her father for eighteen years. No birthday cards, no Christmas cards, no telephone calls. Simon Butler, my first husband, tall and lean with golden-brown eyes, had left us when Melissa was five. I was a senior at San Francisco State University when he departed on a scuba expedition to the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean. The expedition was a graduation gift from his parents, and I had actually looked forward to having extra time to prepare for final exams and spend quality time with Melissa. The extra time had grown to several months, Simon took a job as a dive instructor and asked me for a divorce.

Mother? Did you hear what I said. My *father* called me. He’s back in Los Angeles. He wants to see me! He’s flying to San Francisco and we’re going to have dinner tomorrow night. Isn’t that cool?”

“I heard you, Melissa.” My brain felt like its neurons were encased in cold tar. “I’m sorry, I was just . . . surprised.” Also shocked. Maybe even dismayed. Why now, after eighteen years of no contact with his only daughter? Or perhaps he had other children now. And a wife. “How did he find you?”

“Through Grandma. He tracked her down on the Internet and found her e-mail address.”

“How do you feel about seeing him?” I asked stupidly.

“I’m a little . . . like nervous. Like except for the old pictures of him, I might not even recognize him.”

“It’s been eighteen years. I’m sure he’s changed. Is he coming out to St. Mary’s?”

“No, he doesn’t have a car. I’m meeting him in the city tomorrow night. He’s missed me and wants to get to know me. He says my grandma Butler would like to see me, too.”

That he couldn’t manage to rent a car and drive to the East Bay to see his daughter after eighteen years of silence was vintage Simon, but I said nothing. Through the window of the phone booth, I watched Danielle and Zoe, the two women in chartreuse leotards, exit the dining room, followed by Andrea, the woman from Los Angeles.

Andrea glanced toward the phone booth, claimed her message from the board, read it, and glanced at the phone booth again.

“There’s someone waiting for the phone, sweetie. Let me know how the dinner goes.”

“I will, Mom. I had a hard time getting you. How come it took you so long to call back?”

I explained about the telephone system at the hotel.

“That’s so lame. How can they run a hotel with no phones? Anyway, I’ll call you tomorrow night.”

I hung up the phone, paralyzed by the thought of Simon appearing after eighteen years. I stared at the phone blankly, wondering what his sudden reappearance meant for Melissa, and slowly became aware of a tattoo of noise outside the phone booth. It was Andrea, foot tapping impatiently on the scarred oak floor. I hadn’t returned the call to my client, but that would have to wait until my head was clearer. I opened the folding door and stepped out as Zelda came into the hall. Mimi followed her and the two women paused outside the French door. Zelda was frowning. As I turned toward the stairway, I heard steps pounding up from the ground floor.

“Il signore é morto. Lui é caduto! Il fotografo. Lui é morto.”

The barrage of Italian came from Piero’s Aunt Serafina. Face flushed, breathing hard, she grabbed at her long black cotton skirt and stumbled on the top step. Her braid had come unplaited and her long, graying black hair swung around her face.

Mimi whirled around. “What do you mean, *signora*? What man is dead? What photographer?”

“Il fotografo. On the long step to the beach.” Serafina touched her forehead. “He bleed.”

“It’s Eric,” Zelda said quickly. “The photographer from San Francisco. He wasn’t at breakfast. I told you those stairs to the beach were slippery. I’ll call the EMS unit.”

Mimi frowned. “But there was a chain across the steps. No one was supposed to go down there.” She glanced down at the courtyard. “Perhaps we should wait until we find out . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Call the EMS,” I said, racing down the stairs.