

A Scotia MacKinnon Mystery



A Deep

Blue Farewell

"If I'm ever in deep trouble, I'll race to [Scotia's] office."—Carolyn Hart

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## A Deep Blue Farewell

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### chapter 1

#### The first Tuesday in May

The Second Law of thermodynamics is that everything tends toward disorder, and chaos theorists have suggested that the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil might precipitate a tornado in Texas.

This may be so.

With the clarity of hindsight, I admit that the strength of the brandy served in Henley's Bar on Kodiak Island may have precipitated the recent tragic disappearance of Tina Breckenridge in the San Juan Archipelago of Washington State two decades later.

It 's not impossible.

Twenty years in law enforcement and private investigation have convinced me that life is nothing if not disorderly and chaotic.

My name is Scotia MacKinnon. I'm a private investigator in the small town of Friday Harbor on San Juan Island. Chaos theory was not foremost on my mind the first Tuesday in May as I trudged down the second floor corridor of the old brick county courthouse a little after nine a.m. I was, in fact, attempting to ignore the acrimonious complaints my body was registering over the twenty-six asanas I had just subjected it to in my Bikram Yoga class.

I was also dwelling on the abrupt ending to the bucolic sailing weekend I'd spent with my significant other, Seattle maritime attorney Nicholas Anastazi. It was a weekend that had been rudely interrupted by an hysterical plea from Nick's ex-wife who had been arrested on a D.U.I. charge. Just as I was replaying Nick's hasty departure by float plane, leaving me to bring *DragonSpray* from Montague Harbor back to Friday Harbor in the wind and pouring rain, and collided with a body that came hurtling backward out of the County Commissioners' office.

“This island is not a harlot! And it’s bloody well time you pimps stopped trying to sell it to the highest bidder! Over my dead body are a bunch of jerks in Gore-Tex jumpsuits going to take over American Camp. There are eaglets in the nests and newborn kit foxes on the prairie. Are you all a bunch of dunderheads?”

It was the very angry figure of Abigail Leedle, her tall, sinewy body clad in faded blue denim overalls and a brown barn jacket, a thick plait of white hair hanging down her back. Abigail is a retired teacher and a wildlife photographer, an octogenarian who has spent her life among these rocky, forested islands. I clutched at the wall for support, regained my balance, and recovered my worn leather portfolio from the floor. Abigail slung a faded red rucksack over one sloping shoulder.

“Sorry, Scotia, I didn’t mean to knock you over.” She nodded at me with narrowed blue eyes.

“Not a problem, Abby.”

“Mrs. Leedle, I’m really sorry. I just can’t discuss the matter with you.” The tall, thin Commissioner from Orcas Island stepped into the hallway, his voice pleading. “But please do not get upset. They’ve promised not to disturb the foxes or the eagles.”

“I don’t give a rat’s toenail what they’ve promised. What about the Indian paintbrush and the Nootka roses?” Abby stalked down the hall toward the stairway. “I’ll see you in court, young man,” she threw over her shoulder. “Your daddy would roll in his grave if he knew what you’ve agreed to.” She shook her head in disgust, her sandals slapped along the corridor, and she disappeared down the wide stairway.

I made my way past a woman in a red suit and a tall, bearded man in a black leather jacket outside the County Clerk’s office, and reflected that Abby wasn’t alone in her outrage. The Commissioners’ decision to allow On the Edge, a major manufacturer of upscale outdoor wear, to do a catalog photo shoot on the pristine prairies of the island’s national historic park was not a popular one. Last week’s Letters to the Editor in the three island weeklies bore vociferous testimony to the general belief that the decision was a capitulation to the tourism interests. I nodded to the woman in the red suit, a Friday Harbor attorney I had done an investigation for a few months ago.

I'd heard she was representing On The Edge. The tall man with her moved away from the wall and extended a hand.

"Ms. MacKinnon? I'm M. J. Carlyle. We've never met. I need to talk to you as soon as possible. It's about my sister, Tina Breckenridge. Would it be possible for me to come by your office this morning?"

I returned his handshake. Tina Breckenridge was a local islander who had disappeared from her sailboat recently. No body had been found and a memorial service had been held yesterday. I took in Carlyle's lightly tanned face and windblown hair, the thick creamy turtleneck sweater under the elegant leather jacket. Not exactly local attire, even if he was wearing wrinkled and less-than-clean blue jeans. I mentally reviewed my morning's obligations which included my least favorite task of report writing, followed by lunch with a friend. I was about to wind up two investigations and no new clients were hovering on the horizon.

"I'll be back in the office by ten, if you'd like to come by. I'm upstairs in the Old Gazette Building."

"Yes, I know," he said. "I'll see you at ten." He returned to the attorney in the red suit. I made my way to the Prosecuting Attorney's office, handed in my surveillance report on a child custody case. Back downstairs at the licensing office, I wrote out a check and stood in line to get the renewal licence tags for *DragonSpray*, the thirty-eight foot, sloop-rigged sailboat that is my home. Ten minutes later, the collar of my fleece jacket turned up against the cold wind blowing up off the harbor, I scurried across the Court House parking lot. Large and ominous gray clouds scudded overhead. It was a day half way between winter and spring. Rain was predicted for tonight. I wondered why On The Edge hadn't waited until summer for the photo shoot. I also wondered how I could help M. J. Carlyle. From what I'd read in the newspapers, Tina Breckenridge had drowned.

I have a small second-story office in the historic, brown-shingled Olde Gazette Building on Guard Street where I do mostly routine investigations for lawyers and insurance companies. The first floor of the building is occupied by a naturopathic physician from Orcas Island and by Zelda Jones who runs a computer graphics and consulting firm called New Millennium Communications. Zelda provides me with computer assistance in connection with my

investigations and -- like many islanders who work several part-time jobs to keep bread on the table — she's recently added events arranging to her entrepreneurial endeavors.

There was a crackling fire in the tiny wood stove at New Millennium and I was greeted by the scent of fresh coffee and an operatic aria — Puccini, I think —, neither of which was unusual. M. J. Carlyle was already lounging in the upholstered chair beside Zelda's scarred walnut desk. Which was also not an unusual phenomenon. In the years that I've had an office in the building, a number of men have spent time lounging beside her desk, some handsomer than others, some more smitten than others by the pretty, zany, and unpredictable young woman whose antics border on the eccentric. Zelda was in Asian garb today: gold-and-red embroidered Mandarin jacket, black pajama pants, red stockings and black Mary Jane's. The hair color du jour was Old Cherrywood; her hair style a neat bun punctuated with two black lacquered chopsticks. I moved over to the coffee machine, noticing that the red fleece-covered futon in the corner was unoccupied. I wondered what had happened to Dakota, Zelda's black Labrador.

"Edie wants to do a crew party on Saturday," Carlyle was saying. "I know she needs help." He put his coffee cup down, reached for a Post-it pad on Zelda's desk and scribbled a number. "Call her. She likes to do exotic parties."

I filled a yellow cup that said "It if has a truck and testicles, don't trust it," and moved over to Zelda's desk. It sounded like the man in the black leather jacket was two clients in one. Carlyle unfolded his six-foot-something frame from the chair and smiled at me. The smile was warm and full of charm — he looked astonishingly like a model in a recent Got Milk ad, sans the moustache. But the face looked tired and deep lines bracketed his mouth.

He followed me up the narrow stairs and stood while I unlocked the door that said S. J. MacKinnon Investigations and Research. I switched on the overhead light, draped my jacket on the coat rack, and motioned him to one of the white wicker chairs in front of my desk. The warmth from the small radiator provided a pleasant

counterpoint to the wind-tossed maple tree outside the old casement window.

Carlyle declined my offer to hang up his jacket, set his attaché case beside his right leg and glanced around. My office is modest in the extreme. I've never replaced the old oak desk abandoned by the last tenant and neither the apricot-colored art deco lamp nor the wicker chairs would ever make their way onto the pages of *Architectural Digest*. My only floor covering is a multicolored braided rug over the old plank floor. I was chagrined to see that the leaves of the tall Ficus in the corner were turning yellow. When plants do that I can never figure out if it's because of too much water or not enough water. I stole a glance at my new client's leather jacket and wished I'd worn something a little more classy than my dark green sweater over blue jeans.

I reached for a yellow lined pad and pen. "What can I do for you, Mr. Carlyle?"

"Call me M. J., please. I grew up here. It makes me feel old to be called Mister." The smile disappeared from his handsome face and he took a deep breath. "You probably know I'm with the crew from On The Edge. We're shooting out at American Camp. But the matter I wanted to see you about is my sister. I want you to find out why she disappeared."

"I thought she had an accident with her sailboat." I opened the bottom desk drawer and removed my tape recorder. "I'd like to record our conversation."

"Sure." He reached for his attaché case, extracted two pieces of paper. He handed one of them to me, a newspaper clipping from last week's *Friday Gazette*. "It was no accident, never mind what the official record says!"

I scanned the article, remembering that there had been an extensive air and sea search involving not only the local sheriff's department, but also U. S. and Canadian Coast Guard cutters and helicopters.

***Sea Search for Missing Friday Harbor Woman Abandoned***

*San Juan County Sheriff Nigel Bishop announced today he is abandoning the search for Tina Breckenridge of Friday Harbor whose 38 ft. sailboat, Alyone, was found abandoned near Sucia Island on April 20 by a commercial fisherman.*

*Tina was raised on San Juan Island and moved with her parents to the Ballard area of Seattle when she was ten. She attended Shoreline Community College, worked as a boat builder in Ballard and as a deck hand on crab boats in Alaska. At the time of her disappearance, she was the owner of the Roche Harbor-based Pleiades Sailing School for Women.*

*In addition to her husband, Paul Breckenridge, Tina is survived by her son Stephan of Friday Harbor, a brother, Michael James Carlyle of Seattle, and an aunt, Patsy Malone of Seattle. A memorial service will be held at the Congregational Church in Friday Harbor on Monday, April 30.*

“Why do you think it wasn’t an accident?” I asked.

“Because she knew boats inside and out. We both grew up on a sailboat. She’s built boats, she’s raced boats, and she did the single-handed Trans-Pac twice. There wasn’t even a storm the night she disappeared.”

“She could have had an accident,” I said. “She could have slipped and hit her head and was unconscious when she went overboard. Even if she was conscious, she would have drowned very quickly in these waters.”

“Yeah, forty-six degrees or something like that. But it still doesn’t compute. Tina always wore a life jacket and made her crew do the same. She was a complete nag about it.” “If she didn’t fall overboard, what do you think happened to her?”

By way of reply, he handed me another piece of paper. It was an e-mail message from *pleiades@bluewater.net* to *carlyle@ontheedge.com*, dated April 18, two days before the *Alcyone* had been found drifting near Sucia.

*Big brother: Could we get together when you come up for the hearing? My little problem has become a big problem. Love, T.*

“Do you know what she meant by her ‘little problem?’”

“When I was up here in January, she was depressed. She said it was stuff with Stephan, that they were seeing a counselor and she’d work it out.”

I glanced at the *Gazette* article. “Stephan is her son.”

“He’s fifteen, a freshman. He started getting into trouble last year.” He frowned. “The truth is, I was so preoccupied with my personal

problems and the politics of getting our permit for the shoot here, I didn't push to find out what was going on."

"You didn't talk to her after you got the e-mail?"

"No," he said ruefully. "I got here on Sunday, after they found the boat."

"Where were Stephan and —" I consulted the newspaper article again. "—Paul, Tina's husband, when she disappeared?"

"Stephan was staying with a friend and Paul was over in Sedro Wooley with his mother. She's in bad health. He was in the process of moving her over here."

"To live with him?" Tina wouldn't be the first wife to have bailed out when her mother-in-law moved in.

"That's what he intended, but after Tina disappeared, he decided it would have to be the new assisted living center."

"Did Tina and your brother-in-law have any marital problems?"

"Not that they ever shared with me. Paul's a fisherman. He's not the most communicative guy in the world. And very hard-headed about a lot of things. He's usually gone four or five months a year up in Alaska." He hesitated. "Tina did say she was frustrated and burned out from trying to be both mother and father to a teenager."

I could relate to Tina's burnout: I'd struggled through two intervals of single parenting: for three years after Melissa's father decamped when she was four until I married Pete Santana, a fellow cop, and another four years after Pete was killed until I married Albert.

"The *Gazette* says your sister fished in Alaska. Was that on Paul's boat?"

"No. Tina and I went to school with Paul here before our parents moved to Seattle. When Tina was twenty-two, she and a friend went off to Alaska to look for jobs on a crab boat. Just before they spent their last five dollars, they ran into Paul. He helped them get jobs on a crab boat out of Dutch Harbor. Up in the Aleutians. Her friend did the cooking, Tina worked the deck. In the Bering Sea, in the winter." He shuddered. "She was out of her frigging mind. But the king crab market was exploding and she made a lot of money. So did Paul."

Crab fishing off the coast of Alaska — either in the Gulf of Alaska or in the Bering Sea — is easily one of the most dangerous occupations on the planet. Between 1976 and 1984, for reasons still unidentified,

the king crab population was prolific. Last January I accepted the assignment of tracking down a divorced father five years in arrears on child support. My search led me first to the port of Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands and then to Kodiak on Kodiak Island. It was in Kodiak, at Solly's Bar, that I'd finally found my quarry. And learned that in the bonanza days of the '70's and '80's a berth as a crewman had been worth a thousand dollars a week and a good skipper of a high line crab boat could easily have made a million dollars a season. But I'd heard of only two other women with the courage and strength to manhandle a crab pot that weighs seven hundred and fifty pounds . . . when it's empty.

"When did Tina and Paul get married?"

"Right after Tina's first year in Alaska."

"Does Paul have a crab fishing boat?"

He shook his head. "No. The one Tina worked on belonged to a guy from Seattle. After the crab fishery diminished back in the 80's, Paul bought his own boat and switched to gillnetting. Salmon and cod out of Bristol Bay."

"Sounds like Tina's made of really tough stuff."

"She is. That's why I don't buy that she fell overboard."

I had to agree with him. Any woman who could survive the brutal cold and forty-hour, around-the-clock shifts on an ice-covered deck of a king crab boat in the Bering Sea probably hadn't come to grief on the inland waters of the Strait of Georgia.

"Your sister is missing, M. J. When an adult goes missing and there's no evidence of foul play, that person is usually not around because he or she made the decision not to be around. If your sister didn't fall overboard or have a boating accident, then either she made a conscious decision to leave Friday Harbor and go elsewhere, or she's been the victim of foul play."

"She would never just go off and leave Stephan. She adores him."

"So that leaves foul play."

"Yeah," he said slowly, sighing. "That's the conclusion I've come to. And it makes me sick."

"Aside from her last e-mail, did Tina ever mention any trouble with anyone on the island?"

He shook his head.

“Any enemies that you know of?”

“Like who? This is San Juan Island, not New York City. My god, all she did was take care of Paul and Stephan and do her gardening and teach sailing. Who would be her enemy?”

It was true that my question would have been more appropriate in an urban environment. On San Juan Island, an ‘enemy’ was likely to be a neighbor whose horses annoyed your cattle, or who was jealous that your homemade apricot chutney got a bigger prize than hers did at the county fair. Not exactly motives for homicide.

“What other family do you and Tina have? Any other brothers and sisters?”

“There’s just the two of us. My mother died two years ago. My father, well . . . I’m not sure.”

I looked at him questioningly.

“My parents got divorced,” he said softly. “That’s why Tina and I and my mother moved down to Seattle. A while later our father . . . just disappeared. As far as I know, we never heard from him again.”

“And Tina never kept in touch with him?”

“ . . . I think she hated him. She never forgave him for going away.”

“Aunts, uncles, cousins?”

“Just Aunt Patsy, my mother’s sister. She never married. She lives in Seattle. I saw her yesterday at the memorial service. She was very upset.”

“Best friends?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“I assume Tina had a car. Where was it found?”

“At Roche Harbor. Paul said it was in the marina parking lot. The sheriff went over it. It’s out at Paul’s place now.”

“What about a purse or any personal effects? Anything missing?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Paul has them.”

“What exactly do you want me to do for you?”

“Nobody seems to know what Tina did or where she was the night before the boat was found off Sucia. I met a friend of yours at the memorial service. Jared Saperstein. He said you might be able to help find out what happened to her. Will you?”

Jared Saperstein was a retired international free-lance journalist, now the editor and publisher of the *Friday Gazette* and one of my best friends on the island.

I hesitated and glanced at the newspaper article. “The Sheriff may be right, you know. Your sister may have fallen overboard and drowned. I’ll see what I can find out, but you may be spending money for nothing.”

“It’s okay. I need to know what happened.” Carlyle pulled a checkbook and what looked like an address book out of the attaché case. He wrote out a check and handed it to me. “Your assistant told me what your fee is. This is a retainer.”

The check was for five thousand dollars, written on an account at a Seattle bank. I folded it, put it in the top desk drawer, and pulled out a copy of my *Contract for Investigative Services* form. Carlyle scanned it, signed it, and returned it to me. I handed him my business card.

“Does Paul know you were going to talk to me?”

“I told him last night. He wasn’t very happy about it, but he said you could call him.”

“Do you happen to know Tina’s Social Security number?”

“Actually, I do.” He leafed through the address book and supplied it.

“Her address and date of birth?”

“November 8, 1967. Their address is 189 Hyacinth Lane.”

“Was there an insurance policy or a will?”

“Paul says no.”

“Did Tina have any employees or partners in the sailing school?”

“One employee, a woman instructor. Her name is Katy Quince. I think she lives out near Roche Harbor with her husband. She’s in the phone book.”

“A canvas maker?” A woman named Quince had made a new mainsail cover for *DragonSpray* a few years ago.

“I think so.”

“Where can I reach you?”

“I’m at the Topsail Inn.” He pulled a business card from the pocket of the leather jacket, wrote a number on it. “My cell phone. Call me anytime if you have anything.” He stood up. “Tina’s all the family

I've got left. To be honest, I feel guilty. Like I was just too busy to listen to her.”

He picked up the attaché case, shook my hand, and left.