

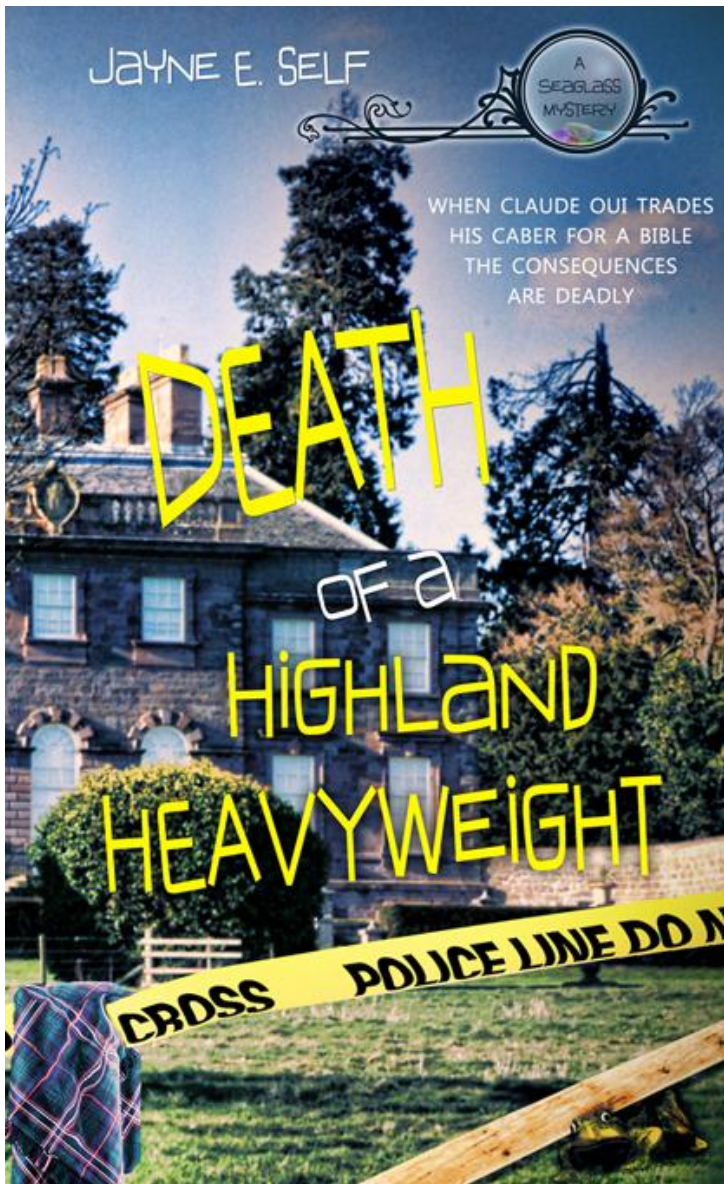
JAYNE E. SELF

A
SEAGLASS
MYSTERY

WHEN CLAUDE OUI TRADES
HIS CABER FOR A BIBLE
THE CONSEQUENCES
ARE DEADLY

DEATH
OF A
HIGHLAND
HEAVYWEIGHT

CROSS POLICE LINE DO NOT



DEATH OF A
HIGHLAND
HEAVYWEIGHT

Jayne E. Self

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DEATH OF A HIGHLAND HEAVYWEIGHT

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Dedication

God has blessed me greatly.

To the men in my life: my incredible husband Harvey,
my three amazing sons, Allan, Jamie, and Jon, and my
extraordinaire grandson, Cameron.

Thanks also to Jean, Tracey, Jamie, and Nicola, who
helped make this story happen.

Praise for Jayne E. Self

Murder in Hum Harbour

Jayne E. Self provides us with a fresh voice in mystery fiction. *Murder in Hum Harbour* is a fast-paced mystery filled with characters that might force one to look askance at one's own neighbors. ~ Janet Benrey, author Pippa Hunnechurch Mysteries

I read *Murder in Hum Harbour* with delight. The lively cast of characters brings this small Nova Scotia town fully to life. The main character—whose faith is tinged with humour and grounded in trust—was completely engaging. Twists and turns carry the reader along to the final surprising climax. The romantic subplots add zest. A job well done. ~ Rosemary Aubert, author of the Ellis Portal Mystery Series

I immediately fell in love with the main character. *Murder in Hum Harbour* is a lovely little cozy mystery which kept me guessing throughout. Jayne Self is an author to watch! ~ Linda Hall author of *Steal Away* and *Sadie's Song*

1

It started with the robberies. I doubt anyone would have noticed anything missing if Mom and I hadn't been browsing through wedding magazines at my place. We were searching for the perfect bridesmaid dress, one that would suit both my sister-in-law, Sasha, and my cousin, Ashleigh, when Mom mentioned she couldn't find her kitchen frog—you know, those little ceramic creatures that hold pot scrubby pads.

Ash is a frog fanatic. She collects frog everything, which was why frogs and bridesmaid dresses went together in Mom's mind.

"Come to think of it," I said, leaning back to see into my postage stamp kitchen, "I haven't seen mine for a while either."

I live above my shop, Dunmaglass, and after last year's break-in, I'd installed a mega security system. No one should be able to sneak in and abscond with anything—even my kitchen frog.

"We should report the thefts to the police. Andrew's been complaining that business is dull this summer."

My brother, Andrew, was one of three local law enforcement officers.

Mom closed the magazine and reached for a new one. "Don't go wishing for another crime spree, Gailynn MacDonald. We've had enough in this town to

last a lifetime.”

“I don’t think the Simmons brothers getting caught siphoning gas for their lawnmower constitutes a crime spree, Mom.”

“Neither is a couple of missing kitchen frogs.”

“You never know,” I said. “First kitchen frogs, then small appliances, freezers. Imagine the hoopla if we had a ring of freezer raiders on our hands.”

I clicked my tongue as Mom wiped laughter-tears from her cheeks.

“You laugh now, but mark my words, this is bigger than a couple of kitchen frogs.”

She pushed her new magazine across the table. “Look, I’ve found the perfect dress.”

I was doubtful, but Mom, an avid sewer, sees things I miss at first glance.

She tapped the picture with her finger. “All we need to do is change the shoulders, tuck the waist a bit, and lengthen the hem. We could even eliminate the lace ruffles, if you like.” She smiled triumphantly.

“And it’ll have to be lavender.”

“Purple?” She crinkled her nose with disdain.

“Lavender. Otherwise it’s perfect.”

And that was the last time I thought about missing kitchen frogs until I discovered Carrie Hunter-Oui administering CPR to her husband in the middle of her back hallway.

2

I was trekking home along the widening band of gravel seashore, silently lamenting the depressingly few pieces of sea glass I'd collected during my morning walk. What with plastic bottles and recycling, there were fewer and fewer bits of colored glass washing up on the beach. I suppose I could have seen the famine as the proverbial silver lining; less sea glass meant my jewelry would become rare, which meant I could hike prices. But I didn't find it encouraging. I liked making jewelry, and Dunmaglass—the exclusive distributor of my authentic sea glass jewelry—was doing very well that summer. I'd even hired Ashleigh to staff the shop while I was busy at the medical clinic.

I swung my arms as I marched, enjoying the way the sun electrified my diamond ring, and shunted sparks of rainbow light onto the wet rocks. It was going to be a warm day. Already the air felt thick enough to slice.

I'd reached the edge of town. Hunter Hall, Hum Harbour's oldest building, a rambling two-storey structure made of Scottish rock, towered above. The original owner imported the quarried stones direct from the holy land itself. These days, the place was part business and part house. Carrie Hunter-Oui, owner/manager of Hunter Monuments and Toys, lived on the premises with her famous husband, Claude Oui.

Claude—Wee Claude to his fans—was our

National Highland Heavyweight Champion. He could toss a caber further than anyone in the world and looked magnificent doing it.

From where I stood, I could see the last of the fishing fleet chugging past the giant rocks that mark Hum Harbour's entrance, and it reminded me that if I didn't get a leg on, I'd be late opening the clinic where I was medical receptionist. I'm pretty sure that's when the screaming started.

Shrill, hair-splitting shrieks, mixed with the unmistakable howls of a basset hound, erupted from Hunter Hall. I vaulted the stone retaining wall, jumped over the compost pile, and raced up the sloping lawn to the house. I've never taken Carrie for a screamer, she's too tall, so I knew whatever was wrong was dead serious.

I shoved open the French door, and almost tripped over the hound in my hurry to reach Carrie.

She was kneeling at the base of the stairs. Elbows turned outward, she leaned heavily on her hands, as she performed CPR on Claude. With each thrust, the gemstone she always wore around her neck flashed as it caught a beam of sunlight, as if blinking a warning. Between chest compressions, she threw back her head and hollered at the top of her lungs. Caber, the hound, howled in unison.

I could tell in an instant Carrie's technique wouldn't save her husband. Sadly, nothing would. The dark staining of his skin told me he'd been gone for a while. I grabbed the phone and dialed 911.

3

I managed to pry Carrie from her husband's side and drag her into the kitchen.

In the two or three minutes it took Andrew to arrive, sirens blaring, I plugged in the tea kettle. When Andrew's car screeched to a halt in front of the house, I let my brother in.

"You?" he shouted over Caber's mournful howl. Evidently, the dispatcher hadn't alerted Andrew that I was the one who called.

I led him to the base of the back stairs. Claude Oui was a Goliath of a man. Six-five, two hundred eighty-five pounds. Stretched out on the floor like he was, Claude took up most of the hallway, and apart from being dead, he looked pretty much like he always did. A kind, gentle-faced giant.

"What happened?" asked Andrew.

"I'm not sure. I heard Carrie's screams, and when I ran in, I found her doing CPR on Claude."

Andrew crouched beside the body. "Ambulance is on its way, though I guess there's no need to hurry."

I wrapped my arms around my waist, warding off a sudden chill. "I'm not sure how much Carrie'll be able to tell you. I think she's in shock."

"You think?" Andrew pushed to his feet.

"Can I cover him with a blanket?"

"Need to check the scene first." He squared his shoulders. "And talk to Carrie."

“She’s in the kitchen.”

Andrew had left the front door open, and Geoff—my incredibly handsome fiancé who also happens to be Hum Harbour’s only doctor—wandered in. He wore his jogging duds.

“I heard the sirens, saw Andrew’s car. What’s wrong, Gai?”

I closed and latched the door behind him. We didn’t need a crowd. “It’s Claude.”

“What? I just saw him last night.” Geoff hurried deeper into the house and found Claude, and howling Caber, in the hall. “Dear Lord,” he whispered and made the sign of the cross. It was something he’d picked up during his five years as a missionary in Africa. People found habits like that comforting, and everyone knows those poor people in Somalia needed all the comfort they could get.

Kneeling, Geoff gently closed Claude’s eyes. “This is my fault. I should have taken last night more seriously.”

“What do you mean?”

“I met Claude while he was out walking Caber, and he invited me back to the house to talk. I was still here when Danny-Boy Murdock stopped by.”

Andrew reappeared. “Murdock was here?”

“Came banging on the door around nine-thirty.”

Andrew scribbled in his notepad. “Know what he wanted?”

Geoff brushed his hand across his eyes. The gesture mimicked the way he’d touched Claude, as though closing his own eyes to the terrible scene before him. “He was upset about the Highland Ale endorsement. Murdock never thought much of Claude’s conversion or his plans to go to Ghana, but he

was eager to cash in on it. He'd expected Claude to endorse him as Highland Ale's new spokesman when he withdrew from the contract. So they argued."

"Punches exchanged?"

"Murdock knocked Claude down."

I gasped. "He what?"

Danny-Boy Murdock was also a highland heavyweight competitor, but he wasn't the athlete Claude was. It surprised me he could get the draw on Claude.

"It seemed harmless enough, at the time. I told Murdock to get lost before I called the police, then I checked Claude, as much as he'd let me. I thought he was fine." Geoff's worried frown deepened the clefts in his cheeks. "How could I have missed this?"

Pen poised in the air, Andrew focused on Geoff. "You think Claude's death was Murdock's fault?"

"I don't know. But with Claude's medical history, I should have been more insistent. I knew the punch and the fall could have serious consequences. But he promised to tell Carrie what happened as soon as she got home from her meeting, and she knew what symptoms to watch for. She'd take him to Antigonish at the first sign of trouble." Antigonish, a college town about a half hour away, had the closest hospital.

Not everyone knew that Claude suffered from PCS. Post Concussion Syndrome. It plagued a lot of big-name athletes, hockey players, football stars, boxers. Over the years Claude had endured his share of head injuries, but the most serious happened a year earlier when Danny-Boy beamed Claude during a hammer toss.

I don't imagine anyone could forget the incident. The bleachers were full, and more fans were cheering

from their lawn chairs or on blankets on the grass. Danny-Boy swung the hammer in an arc above his head, when suddenly the 22-pound ball broke from the handle and hurtled toward the other competitors. Wee Claude saw it coming and shoved two men out of the way. He got hit.

The shocked silence of the watching crowd still rang in my ears.

Everyone thought Claude was finished, and no one had the heart to go on without him, so they cancelled the rest of the competition. Miraculously, Claude rallied. He was out of the hospital within the week and went on to win that year's International Highland Heavyweight Championship.

Now Claude was dead, and Danny-Boy, once again, was involved. Maybe.

Andrew snapped his little book closed and popped it into his breast pocket. "Well, looks like Carrie must have missed something."

4

Andrew trotted back to the kitchen, and I followed, leaving Geoff and Claude alone. My brother's not the most tactful man in the world, and I didn't want him upsetting Carrie unnecessarily. Not on top of everything else.

He pulled out a chair and straddled it, his arms crossed along its ladder-back. "Carrie, can I ask you a couple of questions?"

She sat with her elbows on the kitchen's trestle table, her head in her hands. She looked up slowly. Scrubbing her palm across her face, she wiped away most of her tears.

"Carrie, tell Andrew what happened," I said in what I hoped was an encouraging tone.

"I came downstairs this morning and...and...there was Claude on the floor at the bottom of the stairs. I...he...oh, mercy." She sucked in a quivering breath. "I wasn't sure what to do. I've never taken CPR. I should have, I know I should have, but Claude's so vital and strong, I just never imagined..."

Rudely, the kettle's whistle blared. I ripped the plug from the socket.

Andrew flashed me an annoyed look as the silence echoed through the stone-walled kitchen. Maybe, like me, the sudden stillness reminded him of the last time Claude was hurt. "Did Claude tell you Murdock knocked him down last night?"

Carrie's eyes widened. "What? No. That man was here, in my house?"

Andrew inclined his head, yes. "So Claude didn't tell you to keep an eye out for any of his concussion symptoms?"

"I always keep an eye on Claude, ever since his diagnosis. Geoff says Claude's condition makes him fragile. He can't afford another head injury, so I've been especially watchful. It drives Claude crazy." Her face crumpled. "It drove ..."

"So he was fine when you went to bed last night."

"Yes. I went ahead upstairs, and he turned out the lights."

"What time?"

"I don't know. Eleven-thirty?"

"Claude joined you?"

Her cheeks flushed. "I fell asleep so fast. I was exhausted after the meeting last night. I'm really not sure." Last night's meeting of the Hum Harbour Daze festival Steering Committee, of which I am also a member, had dragged on until practically eleven.

Andrew turned to me. "You were at the same meeting, Gai. You can confirm Carrie was there?"

"Of course," I said, surprised. "It was our second last meeting. Lasted from seven 'til after ten-thirty. I still had a headache when I got up this morning."

Andrew nodded. "OK, you got home before eleven. You went to bed. Hear anything unusual during the night?"

"I slept straight through until six-thirty this morning. That's when I found Claude. I thought maybe he'd slipped on his way downstairs or something, so I tried doing CPR the best I could but..."

"You were doing fine," I said. "It was just too

late.”

Andrew’s eyes darkened sympathetically. “What time did Claude normally get up?”

“Five, when he was training.” A hint of a smile crossed her lips. “He was always training. He loved the games so much.”

The warble of the approaching ambulance’s siren drowned out whatever Andrew said next. “...will have to be checked by the medical examiner.” Andrew returned his chair to its place against the wall. “Gai, can you stay with her?”

“Of course.”

“Afterwards, Carrie, if you could have a look around the house, tell me if anything’s out of place.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Just need to make sure we don’t miss anything.”

Carrie dropped her chin into her hands. “Sure, whatever.”

I went back to making tea.

There was a fair bit of commotion as the emergency personnel removed Claude. I stayed with Carrie, like Andrew asked, and fed her tea and toast. She didn’t eat more than a bite, but the fussing gave me something to do. Carrie and I weren’t particularly close, and I didn’t want to impose on her grief. I didn’t want her to start screaming again, either, so I maintained a quiet presence, hoping it would be more conducive to calm than an overly sympathetic one.

The grandfather clock beside the dish dresser slowly ticked off the minutes.

In time, Andrew reappeared in the kitchen doorway and asked Carrie to join him. “I know this is hard,” he said. “But if you could stroll through the house and the shop, see if there’s anything disturbed or

missing.”

“You think Claude caught a burglar in the act?”

“Anything’s possible,” he said. “Just want you to tell me what you see.”

I followed Carrie and Andrew on their tour through the old house. I was curious. Hunter Hall always reminded me of a mausoleum. Probably because of the tombstones arrayed in the front parlor, the showroom of Hunter Monuments. As I surveyed the house, however, with its dark paneled walls, heavy brocade drapes, and blackened Jacobean antiques, I gained a new appreciation for the word creepy. Carrie’s whimsical folk art collection did nothing to lighten the ambiance. In fact, I thought it made it worse.

The back hallway seemed enormous without Claude, and the carpeted stairs were so steep I could barely make out the top.

“What do you see?” Andrew asked Carrie. “Anything unusual?”

She squeezed her face between her hands and looked around. “The carpet?”

“What about the carpet?”

“That step near the top. The runner looks loose.”

I saw nothing significant, but Andrew climbed the stairs to check. Second from the top he stooped and picked up a slim, brass rod. “Hmm.”

“What is it?” Carrie asked.

“Carpet rod’s just lying here. Runner’s not clamped down.”

Now that Claude had been transferred to the ambulance and taken away, Geoff reappeared. He draped his arm over my shoulders, and I leaned into him, hoping his body heat would stop my shivers.

"You think Claude slipped on the loose rug?"

"We'll wait and see what the medical examiner says." Andrew carried the slim brass rod down the stairs. "In the meantime, Carrie, I'll have an officer come by and take some pictures. OK? What else?"

She glanced around. "Nothing really."

Geoff said, "That candlestick on the hall table was at the top of the stairs when I was here last night."

I studied the item in question, part of Carrie's folk-art collection. It looked kind of like a totem pole made up completely of frogs, and it stood almost half a meter high. What was it with people and their frogs?

Carrie picked up the candlestick, a smile almost lifting the corners of her mouth. "Claude always says you stop seeing things around you when they're always the same. So we play this game where he's forever moving my frogs." She set it down, her fingers lingering over the candlestick's colorful surface. "He's right, you know. I usually keep the pair on the table at the top of the stairs."

"They were up top when I used the bathroom last night," said Geoff. "Where's the second one?"

Carrie spun in a slow circle. "It has to be here somewhere. I just have to look until I find it."

Andrew examined the one candlestick without touching it. "We'll bag this, check it for prints."

She did the face squeeze thing again. "I'm sure mine and Claude's will be all over it."

Andrew waved away her concern with a flip of his notepad. "I'm interested in other prints. We'll take yours for elimination purposes, though."

"Do you see anything else out of place?" I asked.

She wandered into her living room/great room. One entire end of the room was fireplace. You could