

JAYNE E. SELF

A
SEAGLASS
MYSTERY

MURDER IN HUM HARBOUR



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HUM
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Jayne E. Self

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MURDER IN HUM HARBOUR

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Dedication

To my amazing husband Harvey, to my friends who endured years of listening to my stories, and to The Word Guild which has supported, encouraged and taught me so much. Thank you.

Thanks also to Staff Sergeant Blair Bannerman for sharing his expertise on police matters; my editors, Tracey Fockler and Jamie West, for their guidance and expertise on writing; and Nicola Martinez, for all her work bringing my first novel to fruition.

Let all who have breath Praise the Lord!

Praise for Jayne E. Self

“[Jayne’s] love of words and passion for the story are obvious in the way she writes.”

~Cec Murphey, author of
NY Times Bestseller ‘90 Minutes in Heaven’

1

I learned something new about myself the day I found Doc Campbell. Dead bodies freak me out.

A cold fog shrouded the world that morning and after the weekend storm, the silent waves nuzzling the shore seemed insanely gentle. I kept my head down, studying the wet gravel as I walked. Anywhere, at any moment, a brilliant sliver of sea glass might catch my eye. Sea glass is a treasure to be gathered, hoarded and sparingly used in the jewelry I create. I spotted a slice of violet and crouched low, unable to believe my good fortune. Violet sea glass is among the rarest of jewels.

Beyond Hum Harbour's breakwater a foghorn sounded, its eerie echo raising the fine hairs on the back of my neck. A breeze whispered among the invisible evergreens on the hillside above me, and I looked up in time to see the fog shift ever so slightly.

I'd reached the end of the beach where ancient granite rocks guard the harbor mouth. They rise like a giant whale's back above the low tidal waters. Impaled on their slick black surface I saw the ghostly silhouette of a large boat. Stuffing the bit of violet glass into my gathering bag, I crept closer.

"Hello? Anybody there?"

The whole spooky scene seemed more fitting of a movie than my daily stroll along the beach, and my heart beat faster. Nothing seems alive on a foggy day. I

usually find the sensation comforting, even cozy. But this morning it unnerved me.

"If you're there, please say something. I'm coming up to see if I can help." It might sound crazy warning a derelict cabin cruiser I was approaching but I didn't want any nasty surprises.

And surprised I was, because when I got close enough and read the name painted on the boat's hull, I knew whose boat this was.

"Doc? Are you in there?"

Doc Campbell is, or was, Hum Harbour's only doctor for the past thirty-some years. He'd just retired. In fact, his bon voyage party was Friday night, and he'd set off for the Caribbean at the crack of dawn the next morning. So what was his boat, the Medical Convention, doing here, on the rocks, on Monday?

Slipping, sliding, I scrambled up the rocks until I was above her and could see into the boat.

"Doc? Can you hear me?"

I tried to make sense of what lay before me. Wedged firmly on the rock, the Medical Convention listed badly to port. Several inches of water pooled in her lowest point, otherwise the deck looked neat as a pin. Crates were safely battened down, the tiny lifeboat securely fastened along the stern. The only sign of trouble, apart from the boat's obvious position on dry land, was the oddly-shaped lump propping the cruiser's cabin door open.

I leaned closer, then recoiled in shock. Doc Campbell lay face down in the pooled water, his pewter hair plastered against his skull, his broad shoulders motionless.

Heart in my throat, I ran.

2

“Slow down, Gai.” My brother Andrew, one of Hum Harbour’s three police officers, eyed me suspiciously as I crashed into the police station. “What is it this time?” He turned back to the box of donuts beside the coffee maker.

I waved towards the harbor and gasped for breath. “Doc’s boat. I think he’s dead.”

Andrew’s rust colored eyebrows furrowed as he bit into an apple fritter. “What are you talking about? Doc’s probably in Maine by now.”

“No, he’s not. His boat’s stuck on the rocks by the Murray place and he’s lying on the deck. I don’t think he’s breathing.”

Andrew studied me, trying to decide whether or not to ignore me.

I might be twenty-four but to Andrew I’d always be his irritating little sister and seldom worthy of serious consideration. “This is no joke, Andrew. Hurry up and get down there before the tide turns.”

Rose McKenna, receptionist, secretary, radio dispatcher and all around office administrator, wagged her index finger in his direction. “Hop to it, MacDonald, or I’ll let your little secret out of the bag.”

My brother rolled his eyes and reached for his hat. Everyone in the family knew his secret. Andrew was studying French on the sly, hoping to make it into the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. He’d successfully

passed the first level of interviews but flunked the French language requirement. So he'd hired a tutor in hopes of improving his performance. Time would tell.

"Don't forget that crime scene kit," said Rose, digging in the cupboard beside the photocopier. "You won't want to make an extra trip."

She pulled out a black suitcase. Its luggage tag read Crime Scene Kit in English and French, though why French I had no idea. No one in Hum Harbour, not even Andrew, spoke Canada's second official language.

Andrew grabbed a second donut instead.

"Come on," he said, pointing with his head. "Well take the car, park in Ross Murray's drive and hike to the beach from there. You can show me exactly where to look."

Ross Murray lives in the palatial mansion at the end of the road. It's appallingly modern compared to everything else around Hum Harbour. The cop car crunched to a halt on the curving pebble drive and I jumped out of the passenger seat as soon as it stopped. Andrew disembarked more slowly.

Although no one emerged from the house as we rounded the garden, they'd know we'd been by. Our footprints left flat marks on their perfect lawn.

The fog blanket still covered the hillside. We took the stairs to the beach and turned left. In fifty meters or so we reached the rocks but we could see Doc's boat at about twenty-five. Andrew whistled.

"OK. So there's a boat." And when he climbed aboard he sighed. "And there's Doc."

I hugged myself tight, trying to hold in my shivers. In a way I'd been hoping I was wrong about Doc being dead. I liked him and had truly enjoyed the

five years I'd worked as his medical receptionist.

Doc was handsome in a roguish sort of way, with a salty sense of humor and unkempt hair. True he liked to imbibe a bit—unfortunately, a lot of folks around here do—but Doc usually kept his drinking to the weekends when he sailed off on the Medical Convention for a little R&R. The liquor seldom affected his work.

Andrew hunkered down beside Doc and slid his fingers inside Doc's collar. He fumbled, as though he couldn't find a pulse and finally gave up. Pulling out his cell phone, he flipped it open with a flick of his wrist and keyed in the number with his thumb.

I held my breath as it rang through.

"Hey, Rose, we've got a situation. Get me some back up, and you might as well send the boys around."

'Send the boys' stopped my heart. Rose's family owned McKenna's Funeral Parlor. Any mention of the boys referred to Rose's two sons who did all their pick-ups.

I tugged at my hair. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. He's been dead for at least twenty-four hours."

"How can you tell?"

"He's cold. Rigor's passed."

I scrubbed away tears with the back of my hand. "You should have listened to Rose and brought that suitcase. We could have started processing the crime scene before the others get here."

"That's not how it works, Gai. First on the scene secures the scene, makes notes and waits for back up and the coroner. Besides, what makes you think it's a crime?" He scanned the boat. "Looks like an accident to me. He was probably drunk, stumbled, and knocked

his head on something.”

“How do you know he was drunk?”

“When wasn’t he drunk on the Convention? Besides, just take a deep breath.” Standing on tiptoes, I leaned towards the boat and sniffed. “I can’t smell anything.”

“No? Well, I can, and he still smells like a distillery. Another sure sign he was pазooed.”

“You shouldn’t talk about him like that.”

Andrew shook his head at me. “Get a life, Gai. You know as well as everyone else Doc retired early so he could dodge Sam’s malpractice suit, which wouldn’t be happening if Doc kept sober. And there’s an empty twenty-sixer wedged under him. What more proof do you need?”

I wasn’t impressed with Andrew’s cavalier attitude. “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“Sure. You fetch the crime scene tape from the trunk of the car and I’ll make notes like I’m supposed to.”

“What kind of notes?”

“Time of day. Who called it in. What I see as first up.” He pointed his pen. “Like that bottle, the rope holding the wheel in place. See?” Andrew indicated the taut length of cable that anchored the steering wheel to the pilot’s chair.

“Is that what made him run aground?”

“Nah. Maybe. I dunno. More likely it just means he was down here in the cabin drinking instead of watching where he was going.”

I studied the boat’s deck too, trying to pick up the kind of details Andrew was looking for. “Is that an apple core?” I pointed at the brown mass floating in the pooled water in the deck’s corner.

Andrew turned.

“And that, by the ladder. It looks like jewelry.”
Something silver was caught on the bottom rung of the ladder to the upper deck.

Andrew bent down. “How did you see that?”

“Professional training.”

My brother snorted. He didn’t consider jewelry making a profession.

He tapped the item with his pen and examined it. “It’s an earring. Looks like the kinda stuff you make. You sure you didn’t climb around in here before you fetched me?”

I stuck out my tongue. Fear of boats is an intolerable phobia when you grow up in a fishing village. It made me an easy target for teasing, which I usually ignored. “Throw me the car keys and I’ll go get your tape.”

I gladly scurried back up the hill. Staring at Doc’s body made me queasy. No longer the dashing silver-haired gent who brightened my days, he looked like one of those inflated figures after the air had seeped out. As I rifled through the car trunk looking for Andrew’s tape I almost apologized to God for such an irreverent thought. Then again, maybe that was the way He actually saw us.

I took my time on the beach stairs. Let Andrew scribble his notes. I was in no hurry to rejoin him. The fog was rolling back like window blinds and patches of brilliant blue sky would soon be visible. Already I could see the wharf, the fish plant and the cluster of old buildings that formed the village of Hum Harbour. The cross atop the church steeple appeared as I watched. May, like most months in Nova Scotia, enjoys versatile weather. That’s one of the peculiarities of

coastal living.

Commotion behind me interrupted my thoughts. Willie and Dale from McKenna's Funeral Parlor were trying to retract the stretcher's wheels before carting it down the wooden staircase. It was a comical routine worthy of a campfire skit, and I shuddered imagining them hauling Doc back up those same stairs.

Lord, please don't let them drop him!

I hurried the crime scene tape to Andrew, who ignored me and continued scribbling his notes. Meanwhile Willie and Dale dragged the stretcher along the beach.

Behind them trod the coroner, identified by the word 'coroner' plastered across his windbreaker in reflective lettering. Hum Harbour's new doctor took the rear. He, the new guy, gazed across the harbor as though he had all the time in the world, which I guess he did. I mean, Doc wasn't going anywhere.

"Why is he here?"

Andrew flashed me an inquisitive look. "Who? Grant? Helping the coroner, I guess. You gotta problem with that?"

I did. Geoff Grant's reappearance in Hum Harbour was as welcome as a cold sore. OK, not quite. He could come home and visit any time he wanted. It was the fact he'd moved back and taken over Doc's practice I objected to. To make matters worse he was now my boss. I didn't like taking orders from Geoff Grant any more than I liked taking them from my brothers, and I felt like a traitor every time I obeyed. I shook my head. "Why does the coroner need help?"

"Gimme a break, Gai, how should I know?" My brother flipped his note pad closed. "Look, I've got enough to keep track of here without you hassling

me." He checked his watch. "Don't you need to be at work or something? What time does the clinic open?"

"Nine o'clock," I answered tartly, passing him the crime scene tape.

"Then hop to it or you're gonna be late."

He was right, of course. Monday's are an important day at the clinic. There are catch-up appointments, filing and billing, mail to sort. Geoff Grant brought a different work ethic, a different schedule and a whole different set of expectations to my job. At my age, I should be adaptable. It irked me that I found Geoff Grant and his changes so disturbing.

"Gailynn, good morning," Geoff said pleasantly.

I swallowed. Another thing I hated was the way my stomach reacted whenever he said my name. At any time the deep timbre of his voice turned my head, but when he said my name, well, my insides did this strange little flip thing which I'd yet to acceptably interpret. I fixed him with my best, blank face.

"I'd appreciate it if you could clear my appointments for the day. I've been invited to assist Dr. Brimmon with Doc Campbell's autopsy. He assures me it'll only take a couple of hours, but I think its best to clear my day, just in case."

"In case?"

"There can always be complications or delays."

Andrew nodded knowingly. "See, you can go now, Gailynn, we don't need you anymore. I'll get your statement this afternoon. Come by the station, will you? Save me tracking you down."

"Thanks." I glared at my brother. "If the clinic's quiet I'll be there around two." I spun on my heels and my ponytail whipped around like, well, a pony's tail. The effect was childish and I immediately regretted

letting Andrew get under my skin. As I clambered off the rocks I heard Geoff Grant say, "I get the distinct impression your sister doesn't like me. Know why?"

"I expect it's got to do with Lori Fisher. Remember her?"

He groaned. "Oh, yeah, I remember Lori."

I wondered what exactly Geoff Grant meant by that.

3

I was in no condition to start work at a doctor's office. I still wore my grungy, smelly jeans and I was chilled to the bone, so I headed home. My cat, Sheba, greeted me enthusiastically as soon as I stepped inside the front door of Dunmaglass.

Dunmaglass is my shop. I used my first paycheck at Doc's as down payment on a neglected stone building on Hum Harbour's Main Street. It's about one hundred fifty years old, has two tall narrow stories with thick rock walls and a big window facing the street. I have the main floor set up as my shop, featuring my sea glass jewelry. I also display some stained glass panels and blown glass vases, both by local artisans. I truly believe Dunmaglass will be famous someday, but until then I'll keep working at the clinic. After all, a girl's got to eat.

My apartment is above the shop. When I'm at work, Sheba prowls the two floors. She's my guard cat, twenty-three pounds of pure black sinew. She has a white star on her forehead that reminds me of an exotic gem, hence the name Sheba, after the queen. Most mornings Sheba joins me on my seashore hikes. Today something in the air suggested she stay home.

I walked across the shop while she twined through my legs.

"Wish I'd listened to you," I told her. "Maybe Doc

would still be alive." That, of course, was ridiculous. But if I still thought Doc was alive didn't that make it almost the same?

I scooped Sheba into my arms and buried my face in her warm fur. Tears burned my eyes.

"Lord, you know how much I hate when things change. Couldn't you have stopped this?" I talk to God out loud when I'm home alone. Unfortunately, He never answers in kind.

Instead, Sheba wriggled free and raced for the stairs. God's way of reminding me I didn't control the world any more than I controlled my cat, I guess.

She meowed.

"I'm coming," I muttered, following her up the steep steps.

She pawed open the kitchen cupboard. Sheba chose which can she wanted and I opened it. That was our agreement. As she ate and my coffee brewed, I had a very long, shower. When the hot water and my tear ducts eventually ran out, I toweled dry, donned my uniform and headed to Doc Campbell's, scratch that, Doctor Grant's office.

I had graduated from high school with no life goal apart from never wanting to leave home, which is hardly an admirable ambition in this day and age. So when my best friend Lori Fisher's mom suggested I consider taking over her job at Doc Campbell's office, I thought, "why not?" and signed up for a ten-month course at the local college. In no time I became a certified medical receptionist.

When I started my course, I didn't realize Lori's mom had been diagnosed with cancer. She always seemed so healthy and full of life I imagined she was simply prodding me into the kind of low-pressure

career I could handle. Not that Ellen Fisher was any slouch. Quite the opposite. I knew Lori got her brains, and her love of medicine, from her Mom. I think Ellen would have been a doctor if she'd had the opportunity. Tragically, she passed away this past winter, not living long enough to see Lori settled in Doc Campbell's medical practice—which didn't happen, anyway. Instead, just when we all thought Lori would step into the good Doc's shoes, he went and sold the practice to Geoffrey Burton Grant, of all people.

Doc's office is on Blair Street. It's a single-story shake cottage, your typical Nova Scotia kind of house with an add-on veranda to shelter the front door from the worst of the weather and give people a place to kick the snow off their boots in winter. Mounting the steps, I collected the mail from the box marked Douglas Campbell MD and unlocked the front door.

I stepped inside and switched on the lights. I'd done this same thing five mornings a week for the last five years, yet suddenly the routine felt foreign.

I scanned the waiting room as if seeing it for the first time. In a way, it was the first time, at least the first time without the possibility of Doc Campbell striding into the room with his joke of the day. Most of his jokes were awful, but kids loved them. Nothing calmed and distracted a sick kid more than a lousy joke. Their moms loved Doc for it.

I hung up my coat and booted up the computer. As it hummed to life, I sifted through the mail, absently flipping the junk flyers into the recycling bin, slicing open the bills and assorted correspondence. I