

PAULINE ROWSON

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Blood on the Sand

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BLOOD ON THE SAND

Pauline Rowson



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*To
Eileen and Bernard Haley
who gave me the joy of reading*

ONE

Wednesday

Eight o'clock in the morning, a grey light in the January sky. The sea the colour of frosted glass. Everything was perfect, Andy Horton thought as he stepped off his yacht and struck out along the pontoon of Bembridge Marina on the Isle of Wight. For the last seven days he'd hardly thought about work, let alone dreamt of chasing villains and arresting scum on his CID patch in Portsmouth just six miles across the Solent – though it could have been a million miles away as far as the landscape, population and crime statistics were concerned. The Isle of Wight was a haven of tranquillity and a desert of crime in comparison to the rainforest of the inner city where he'd grown up and worked.

As he headed for the small marina shop he wondered how Sergeant Cantelli was faring in his absence. Fine, was the answer, he thought with a smile. Barney Cantelli was one of the best sergeants an inspector could have, and he was also a very close friend; the only person who had stood by him during his suspension last year over those ridiculous rape accusations, which had proven unfounded but had cost him his marriage.

His daughter, Emma, flitted into his mind and with her came the usual gut-churning anguish. Eight years old and he should be with her. He didn't understand why Catherine was so determined to keep him away. She had no right. Hopefully his solicitor would sort out the access problem soon and he and Emma could go sailing together, and he could get to do all the things a father should with a daughter. The thought of what he was missing filled him with bitterness and anger and it was with an effort that he pushed such negative emotions aside. A good long walk along the coast, lunch somewhere, then another walk back would help. Tomorrow he'd sail around to Cowes and maybe after that across the Solent to Lymington. He had a whole week left to enjoy before being swallowed up again in crime and station politics.

His thoughts had taken him to the marina shop, which was closed. It didn't matter; there was nothing he needed from it. He'd grab a coffee on route somewhere.

He struck out across the soft sandy soil and grass of the Duver, recalling that it had once been a golf course but the steadily increasing number of walkers suing for being hit by flying golf balls had finally been too much for the club and they'd given the land up for a nature reserve. It was, he thought, a much better use of the beauty spot. Perhaps the seagulls agreed. Glancing up, he watched as they swooped low and then glided up on the keen morning air. God, they were noisy and big buggers too. Wouldn't like to make enemies of them; they'd peck your eyes out as soon as look at you – which reminded him of his boss, DCI Lorraine Bliss. Still, she was safely on secondment at HQ, thank God, and would be until the end of March. They were welcome to the ice-maiden.

Something was getting those gulls going though. A dead fox probably, he thought, pushing his way through the thick and overgrown wind-sculpted gorse. The gulls were directly overhead now. Maybe he should turn back and leave them to their carrion. But he'd come too far; a few more paces and he'd be out of this gorse and on the shore, breathing the fresh, salty sea air and feeling great.

He rounded the bend and drew up sharply. Kneeling in front of him he was surprised to see a woman crouching over what looked like one of the derelict sandy bunkers. A polite smile formed on his lips, he made to speak when she spun round, and the words froze in his throat as swiftly he took in her terrified pale blue eyes, ashen face, wet blonde hair and dirty, sodden clothes. But it was what she was holding that sent his heart into overdrive. He was staring at the barrel of a gun aimed at a part of his body that he hoped he'd still have some use for despite his marital break-up.

'It's OK. I won't hurt you. I'm a police officer,' he said as steadily as he could, and he hoped reassuringly, not sure whether stating his occupation would calm her or incite her to violence. He held up the palms of his hands, willing her not to shoot either intentionally or accidentally. The magazine could still be loaded with cartridges, which could go off with the slightest pressure on the trigger. And she didn't look as though she was in control of her emotions let alone her movements.

She did nothing. Her eyes were blank with horror – or was that terror? He didn't have time to analyse as his brain registered the smell of rotting flesh, his stomach contracted at the thought of what might lie beyond the woman in the bunker, and if she had killed once she could easily do so again.

Keeping his gaze fixed firmly on her stricken face and his palms

in the air he cautiously stepped forward, saying gently, 'Why don't you give me the gun?' He lowered one hand, stretching it towards her, holding his breath. The moisture was pricking his forehead and a cold sweat trickling down his back, but that was the least of his problems. 'The gun,' he urged more firmly this time. He saw her start before her eyes flicked down to the weapon and then surprise gave way to disgust as she thrust it at him.

He took it with a silent sigh of relief then deftly removed the magazine, noting what he had already surmised by the smell emanating from the bunker: the SIG P220 semi-automatic pistol had been discharged. Removing a tissue from the pocket of his sailing jacket he wrapped the magazine and gun in it, then seeing that the woman wasn't about to go anywhere he stepped past her and peered into the bunker.

The body was worse than he'd expected. The maggots were feeding off the soft dead flesh, animal life had made inroads into other parts of the corpse and the birds had pecked at the eyes. His stomach somersaulted and bile filled his mouth, and though he wanted to look away he knew he couldn't. First impressions were vital.

The man was on his back, clothed in stout walking boots, heavy dark-green corduroy trousers and a navy-blue waterproof jacket smeared with mud. As Horton's eyes once again travelled to what was left of the face he saw that he'd been very fair, like the woman hugging herself on the edge of the bunker, and was, he reckoned, aged somewhere between thirty-five and forty-five though it was difficult to tell. Finally, Horton registered what he thought was a gunshot wound on the left temple. She'd killed him.

Then his brain kicked into gear. This poor soul had been dead some days. Was he therefore looking at a suicide and this unfortunate woman had inadvertently or instinctively picked up the gun? Time to find out.

'I'm Detective Inspector Horton,' he announced firmly. He didn't bother with his warrant card; he doubted she'd see a billboard if he stuck it in front of her. She was younger than he'd first thought, about late twenties, and still on her knees. 'What's your name?' he asked gently, recognizing that she was in a deep state of shock. Who wouldn't be?

She made several attempts before any sound emerged. 'Thea Carlsson.'

She began to shiver. Horton whipped off his sailing jacket and draped it around her shoulders, noting how thin she was. Pulling her up, he led her trembling body a short distance away. She made no protest.

Reaching for his mobile he said, 'Where do you live, Thea?' He had to ask her twice before she answered.

‘Cowes.’

That was to the west of the island, about fifteen miles away.

‘I came to find . . . I came to see . . .’ Her eyes dashed towards the bunker.

So this wasn’t a chance discovery, he thought, surprised. She knew the victim. How? Had she arranged to meet him here and arrived some time ago to find him dead, and had then been unable to move for shock? It was possible. It would account for her appearance.

‘We’ll get you to a hospital.’ He began to punch in the emergency number but she stopped him.

‘No. Please. Not that. I’ll be all right. I need . . .’ Again her eyes travelled in the direction of the bunker before she screwed them shut as if she could blot out what she’d seen. She obviously couldn’t though, because she quickly threw them open again.

‘Sit down,’ Horton commanded. She obeyed without question, sinking on to the grassy hummock. It was soaked from the heavy rain of the night, but getting her jeans wet was the least of the poor girl’s concerns.

‘I’ll call the police. This won’t be my case,’ he explained, studying her harrowed expression and feeling there was something vaguely familiar about her. Stepping a short distance away, he swiftly searched his memory for his past cases but nothing registered with him.

He was tempted to call Superintendent Uckfield, head of the major crime team in Portsmouth, but there was no indication yet that this was murder. It could still be suicide. So he rang the head of the island’s CID, Detective Chief Inspector Birch.

‘What do you want? I’m busy,’ came a voice like a dry twig snapping underfoot. Birch by name and Birch by bloody nature, thought Horton, recalling the thin-lipped, gaunt man with whom he’d had a run-in when he had been a sergeant and Birch a DI on the mainland. What had stuck in Birch’s gullet was the fact that Horton had been right about a case. He’d insisted that the man Birch had arrested for murdering a pensioner was innocent. But Birch had wanted a result and hadn’t much cared how he’d got it. Birch had coolly and verbally bludgeoned the vulnerable, simple soul they’d arrested until he’d confessed. Two days later, in police custody, Brian Gooding had hanged himself and Horton had found the real killer, an evil bastard called Fred Hemmings.

But Birch had got his promotion to DCI, and Horton was still a DI, which just went to show there was shit justice in the world.

Crisply Horton said, ‘Possible murder, the Duver, St Helens. I’m with the woman who discovered the body, male Caucasian.’

‘The victim’s name?’

‘Haven’t got that far.’ Horton relayed the location, knowing it wasn’t far from the car park.

‘Stay there,’ Birch commanded.

‘I wasn’t thinking of leaving. No sirens.’

The line went dead. Birch probably didn’t like being told that but Horton didn’t want the world and his wife coming to take a look, though he didn’t think they’d draw a crowd on a cold January morning.

Relieved to see that the dog-walking brigade hadn’t yet woken up, he sat down beside Thea Carlsson, feeling the wet grass soak through his cargos. He wished those seagulls would go away. After a moment he said gently, ‘Who was he, Thea?’

Her head swivelled round. She looked surprised to find him there.

‘I never thought . . . I didn’t expect Owen to do that,’ she stammered.

‘Owen?’

‘He’s my brother.’

Horton hadn’t expected that. Her shock seemed genuine enough but being a police officer he knew there could still be a reason why she had wanted her brother dead. This could be an act. If it were though, it was worthy of an Oscar.

‘You think he took his own life?’

Her head came up and she eyed him with suspicion. ‘What other explanation is there? You saw him.’

He had indeed. But there were certainly more isolated spots on the island to commit suicide, so why come here? And why hadn’t anyone found him before now when clearly he’d been dead for days?

‘Did he own a gun?’

‘No.’

Where had it come from then? He didn’t believe her. ‘Where does your brother live?’

‘Cowes.’

‘With you?’

‘Yes. If the police had listened to me in the first place then Owen might still be alive,’ she added with a flash of anger. ‘I reported him missing on Sunday, but they said he’d probably just taken off for a few days. They thought I was being neurotic. But I knew Owen wouldn’t go away without telling me. I knew something was wrong . . .’

Her voice faltered. She stared into the distance, but not in the direction of her dead brother. Wherever she looked though, Horton guessed she was seeing the rotting corpse. He studied her angry, hurt and bewildered expression, knowing all too well how it felt to live with the pain

and emptiness of someone 'missing'. Her mystery had been resolved, albeit tragically, within three days. He'd been living with the mystery of his missing mother for nearly thirty years. What had happened to her after she'd left their council flat that November day, he still didn't know. She'd mixed with some dubious characters, admittedly, one of whom he'd come across recently while working on a case, but that trail had gone cold.

Had she ended up like Owen Carlsson, he wondered, staring across the Duver. He didn't want to think so but knew it was possible. Suddenly and unexpectedly a distant memory nagged at a dark corner of his mind. There was something here that had prompted it but no matter how hard he tried, whatever it was it refused to step into the light. The sound of vehicles approaching brought him back to the present. Birch had got here quicker than he'd expected.

'When was the last time you saw Owen?' he asked, bringing his mind fully back to the case, only it wasn't *his* case.

It took her a while to answer. 'Saturday morning. Owen went out walking. When he didn't return by late afternoon I called him but got no answer. I tried most of Saturday night and Sunday. Then I went to the police. I tried again all day Monday and Tuesday but got nothing.' She shivered violently. Her eyes darted to the bunker.

'Did your brother have any financial worries?' Horton could hear people making tracks through the gorse and the low rumble of voices. Of course it might not be Birch.

'No.'

'Had he been unwell?'

'You mean depressed? A bit. You see his . . .'

Her words trailed off. Horton looked up to see two uniformed officers heading towards them. Behind them was a lean man in his late forties wearing a long raincoat and a sour expression on his grim, unyielding face. He was accompanied by a short, corpulent balding man in a shabby jacket that didn't quite meet across his stomach.

Horton rose, and leaving Thea in the care of the woman police officer, crossed to Birch. He'd lost more of his hair since Horton had last seen him and what he still had was now grey, but his eyes were exactly as Horton recalled, hard and full of cynicism.

Birch curtly introduced the short, balding man as Detective Sergeant Norris. There was no smile of greeting. Working with Birch had obviously inoculated him against using those particular facial muscles.

'What are you doing on the island?' Birch demanded, as if Horton should have applied for a visa.

‘Sailing. I’m on leave.’

Birch regarded him disbelievingly. That was his problem, thought Horton, as he led them to the corpse. The young uniformed officer retched at the sight of the rotting body before scuttling away. Horton didn’t blame him, but Birch’s expression never altered. If he blinked Horton must have missed it. He gave no sign of being moved by what he saw, and neither did Norris. Given that a violent death such as this happened on the Isle of Wight about as frequently as a total eclipse of the moon, this pair were remarkably indifferent. Too indifferent for Horton’s taste.

Horton held out the gun. ‘I took this off the woman; she’s the dead man’s sister. She claims it’s not her brother’s.’

‘We’ll check,’ Norris said, taking it.

Horton quickly briefed them on what he’d learnt so far. Birch showed no recognition of the name, but Horton knew a missing person’s enquiry, especially one that had only been reported three days ago, wouldn’t have involved a DCI unless, of course, it had been a child.

When he finished, Birch said, ‘She could have killed him earlier, then dumped his body here this morning. When she heard you crashing through the undergrowth she picked up the gun to cover her fingerprints and to make you think it was suicide.’

‘So how did she get the body here?’ asked Horton stubbornly. ‘She doesn’t look strong enough to have carried it from the car park.’

‘She had an accomplice.’

Unfortunately Birch could be right. How else would she have known where to find her dead brother?

Crisply, Birch said, ‘We’ll deal with this now. You can make your statement later.’ He turned away to give instructions to Norris.

Feeling irritated at the abrupt dismissal but determined not to show it, Horton returned to Thea Carlsson. He studied her forlorn, bedraggled figure still sitting hunched on the grass, with his sailing jacket swamping her; he simply couldn’t see her as a killer though he knew he should keep an open mind. He’d been in the job long enough to know that even the most innocent-looking people were capable of mass cruelty and murder.

He said, ‘Is there anyone I can contact for you? Any friends or relatives?’

‘No. There’s no one.’ She regarded him for a moment then added, ‘But there is something you can do for me. Would you feed my cat, Bengal?’

Horton swiftly hid his surprise at the unusual request. Not of the

fact that she had a cat but that she trusted him to enter her house and feed it.

She took a key from the pocket of her jeans and stretched it out for him. As his fingers brushed hers, Horton felt a strange sense of connection. She held his gaze and he got the distinct impression she was speaking to him, though what she was saying he couldn't fathom.

Reluctant to relinquish her touch, but with the beady-eyed female police officer breathing down on them, Horton pocketed the key. The policewoman took Thea's arm and gently eased her up.

Now was probably his last chance to ask the question that was bugging him. 'How did you know where to look for Owen?'

'He told me where to come.'

Horton eyed her curiously. How was that possible when he was dead? And, despite her appearance, he simply couldn't believe she'd been keeping vigil over her dead brother's body for days. Someone would have found her. Had Owen Carlsson posted her a note on the Saturday of his disappearance which she'd only received this morning? But that would make her postal delivery incredibly early, which, Horton thought, was highly unlikely.

'It's difficult to explain,' she added, with a quick glance at the exasperated-looking police officer who was obviously keen to get Thea Carlsson to the station. 'It's why I knew Owen was in trouble.' Again the nervous glance at the policewoman. 'I sensed danger. I knew that something had happened to Owen. I didn't know the exact spot. I've been walking around for hours.'

Now Horton was really puzzled. She wasn't making any sense. But before he could comment, she drew a deep breath and said, 'You see, I'm psychic.'

Horton gave a silent groan. She was clearly unhinged. Enough to have killed her brother? Probably. The police woman obviously thought so, judging by her expression. And if Thea Carlsson was going to stick to that as the reason for being here then he didn't hold out much hope of her convincing Birch she was innocent.

Eyeing him regretfully but unapologetically she said, 'I can see that you don't believe me. It doesn't matter.'

Then why did he feel a stab of guilt? It was as though he'd been tested and found wanting, he thought as he watched her climb into the police car.

He took the key from his pocket, recalling the sensation as their fingers had touched; something had passed between them. There had been some kind of silent pleading in her eyes. What had she been

trying to tell him? What did she want him to do? He stared down at the key.

‘She wants you to feed the bloody cat,’ he said aloud, slipping the key back into the pocket of his cargos. And that was exactly what he was going to do.