

The new Andy Horton mystery . . .

PAULINE ROWSON

Dead Man's Wharf



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DEAD MAN'S WHARF

An Andy Horton Marine Mystery

Pauline Rowson



To Harry

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ONE

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‘**H**as Mr Jackson received death threats before?’ Inspector Horton tried to contain the anger in his voice. Usually he took such matters seriously, but not this time.

‘No, Inspector, and neither has Nick.’ The woman opposite him dropped her eyes as soon as they connected with Horton’s. Was that from guilt, he wondered, at wasting police time?

She was perched nervously on the large leather chair opposite him. The woman dressed from head to toe in black looked more like a nun without the wimple than a television director to Horton. But then he guessed his views of directors were coloured by newspaper and magazine articles where they were usually men of presence and power. *Wrecks Around Britain*, though, was hardly *Titanic* and Perry Jackson wasn’t exactly Leonardo DiCaprio. Not that Horton had met Jackson yet as Corinna Denton had waylaid him and Sergeant Cantelli the moment they had entered the plush reception of the Queen’s Hotel on the Southsea seafront.

On their way there, Sergeant Barney Cantelli had told him that the programme always contained an element of danger, which had convinced Horton that the anonymous threatening telephone calls were a publicity stunt designed to attract media coverage. He had bet Cantelli a month of free canteen lunches they were.

‘Television personalities do get stalked, you know, Andy,’ Cantelli had replied. ‘There are some seriously weird people out there.’

‘I know, I’ve met them.’

‘Then why so sure these calls are fakes?’

‘Let’s just say I can feel it in my gut.’

Did he? Or was he simply angry that he’d been ordered here by his boss, DCI Lorraine Bliss, because of the status of Perry Jackson and his television partner, Nicholas Farnsworth. Horton had never heard of either of them, but that was hardly surprising when he didn’t own a television on the boat where he lived.

‘Where is Mr Jackson now?’ he asked Corinna Denton.

‘Having breakfast with Nick.’

The threats obviously hadn’t affected his appetite then! Horton had missed breakfast. Not that he could have eaten a thing anyway. Since he had decided, in the middle of the night, to meet Emma at Heathrow Airport earlier that morning, food had become of periphery interest.

His mind slewed back to the arrivals lounge and Catherine’s incensed expression as their eight-year-old daughter had run into his arms. He had promised Emma that she could stay with him on the boat. She was overjoyed. Catherine was outraged. A state she seemed to be permanently in regarding matters relating to him gaining access to Emma. He didn’t know why. He guessed that Catherine was already on to her solicitor complaining. Well, let her.

He brought his attention sharply back to the matter in hand. The sooner he got this out of the way, the quicker he could return to the station and get on with solving real crimes.

‘Where are your film crew?’

‘Jason, our camera and sound man, is probably still in bed.’

Horton noted the slight shift in her tone that told him she didn’t approve of this. Or perhaps she didn’t approve of Jason.

‘We work on a very tight budget, Inspector. If we need any extra lighting or cameras then we hire it in wherever we’re shooting. We’re only here for a few days, doing some external shots, meeting with the diving contractors, working out a schedule. And Perry’s doing some additional research. He’s writing a book.’ Corinna said it as if it was the only book in the world, and maybe it was to her and Mr Jackson. ‘The dive is being filmed in May,’ she added, running a hand through her short dark hair. ‘We’ll call up anyone else we need then.’

So why the anonymous calls now if this was a publicity stunt? Surely it would have been better to have staged them when the programme was being filmed. But because Horton was a cynical copper, he asked, ‘Are they showing the programme on television now?’

There was a slight hesitation and lowering of eyes before she answered. ‘I think they’re repeating the *Diving off Devon* series.’

You think! You bloody know. And the media attention this stunt would attract would draw in additional viewers. Not bothering to

hide his contempt, he said, 'Have you mentioned these calls to the press?'

She looked surprised. 'Of course not. Perry didn't even want me to phone you. I wouldn't have bothered, only Nick insisted. If it had been just the one call, but three—'

'I'd like to speak to Mr Jackson.'

'I'll call him.'

'He's having breakfast, you said.'

Before she could stop him, Horton was marching across the reception area and heading for the restaurant, his eyes scouring the room for any likely looking media types. He wouldn't mind betting he was being filmed or that Corinna Denton had a Dictaphone stashed in her handbag. He had a deep mistrust of journalists and it wouldn't surprise him if his voice, and Cantelli's, rang out on the programme when it was aired. Something along the lines of: *Perry Jackson continued diving despite the threats to his life*. Well, bollocks to them, he thought, scanning the restaurant. No more than half a dozen tables were occupied and none of them with journos unless they had suddenly got a hell of a lot older.

There was only one table with two men sitting together. He didn't need to be a detective inspector to work out they must be Jackson and Farnsworth. They seemed to be arguing. Their heads were bent low over the table, their expressions serious. One of them definitely looked out of sorts. A deep frown showing on his receding hairline and a faint flush on his swarthy skin.

They both looked up as Horton drew level.

The man with the frown paused mid-sentence. 'Yes?' he snapped.

'Mr Jackson?'

'What is it? Can't you see I'm having breakfast?'

Corinna Denton, who had scurried up behind him, hastily made the introductions.

Jackson's frown didn't automatically vanish, but it rested on Corinna for a moment, before he forced his round features into an expression he obviously considered to be welcoming.

If that was welcoming, Horton thought he'd rather meet Dracula on a cold dark night in a cemetery.

Horton pulled up a chair. His first impressions of Jackson as a pompous prick were confirmed when the man said, 'I really don't know what you are doing here, Inspector. It's not at my behest.'

Who the hell used words like that these days? Prime Minister John Major had come close, but then even he was history.

Jackson was stockily built, with dark hair and hot, angry brown eyes that had a way of looking both through you and into you. Horton guessed he was in his early forties. He was the complete opposite of the fair man sitting across the table from him, who Corinna had introduced as Nicholas Farnsworth.

Farnsworth's expression assumed one of concern. 'Corinna is worried, Perry, and so am I. We have to take these calls seriously. Coffee, Inspector?'

'Thanks.' He might as well get something from this farce. He was even more convinced now that it was one after seeing the fake expression of concern on Farnsworth's face.

Catching the waiter's eye, Farnsworth commanded another cup and more coffee with an ease that Horton both resented and secretly admired. He had those rugged good looks combined with sophistication that made Horton instantly think of James Bond. Though the character rather than any of the actors who had played Bond over the years. He would have said that Farnsworth was a little younger than Jackson, but he could have been mistaken. He was taller with a leaner, more athletic frame. Horton wondered if Jackson was Farnsworth's plain man against the handsome and if he'd been cast because of it.

Horton addressed himself to Perry Jackson. 'Tell us about these calls, sir.' He thought that now that he was here, he might as well go through the motions.

Cantelli pulled his notebook from his jacket pocket and removed the small stubby pen from behind his ear while Horton shrugged off his sailing jacket.

'It's just some prank.' Jackson dismissed it with a wave of his hand. 'I told Corinna not to bother you. I hate fuss.'

'When did you receive the first call?' Horton ignored his protest.

Jackson frowned, and then obviously seeing he wasn't going to get rid of Horton easily, resigned himself to answering.

'Six p.m. yesterday. We'd only just checked into the hotel. The caller said, "Watch your back."'

That suggested to Horton that the mystery caller, *if* there had been one, had either seen them arrive or knew what time they had been scheduled to check in.

Cantelli said, 'Nothing else?'

Jackson swivelled his gaze. 'No. I said, "Hello, who is this?" and the line went dead. I hung up and didn't think anything of it. Then last night after dinner, I returned to my room and the phone rang. It was the same caller. This time he said, "You've been warned."'

'It was a man then?' Horton said.

Jackson looked surprised, as if Horton should have known that. 'Yes.'

'What time was this?'

'Midnight.'

'And this morning?'

'Just on eight.'

On the hour again. Horton wondered if that was significant. But if these two had organized the bogus calls between them, perhaps they thought it sounded more dramatic that way.

'This time the caller said, "You'll pay for what you've done.''

'Have you any idea what he meant by that?' Horton didn't really expect a sensible or an honest answer, and he didn't get one.

'If I had, I would tell you,' Jackson snapped.

I bet you wouldn't, Horton decided, wondering what Jackson had done to upset someone *if* these calls were genuine. He still had his doubts about that.

'It's just some weirdo,' Jackson added, echoing Cantelli's words earlier.

'You get them, Inspector,' Farnsworth intervened. 'Especially when you're famous.'

Hardly that, thought Horton, looking at Farnsworth to check he wasn't kidding. No, the man was deadly earnest.

He swivelled his eyes back to the scowling Jackson. 'Can you describe the voice?'

'I've already told you. It was a man.'

'Was there any accent?' Cantelli interceded.

Jackson frowned. 'No.'

'Posh voice or common?' pressed Cantelli, his pencil poised over his notebook.

'For heaven's sake, I've no idea.'

'Young or old?'

'Voices can be deceptive when heard on the telephone, Sergeant,' Farnsworth said pleasantly.

Horton bristled at his tone, or rather at the patronizing smile that went with it, but Cantelli simply nodded as though he'd just learnt something. Horton knew he was playing dumb cop. Cantelli was looking thinner than before his Christmas leave, Horton thought, and his dark eyes were sunk just a little deeper in his gaunt face. A shadow seemed to have fallen on his usually cheerful countenance and Horton knew the reason for it. On Thursday his father's funeral was being held.

'Sometimes you can get an impression, sir,' Cantelli said.

'Young rather than old then,' Jackson capitulated with exasperation. 'I mean his voice didn't quaver like some old people's do.'

Cantelli seemed to take a long time writing this down in his notebook, which Horton knew was a deliberate ploy. He noted Jackson's impatience and Farnsworth's disdain.

Horton asked, 'Who knows you're staying in the hotel?'

It was Corinna who answered. 'No one except us. I made the reservations myself.'

'What about family, friends, business acquaintances?'

'Oh, yes, sorry. I didn't think you meant them. It can't be anyone we know.'

'Perhaps you could give Sergeant Cantelli a list of names.'

Jackson exhaled noisily. 'It's a waste of time.'

'If you wouldn't mind, sir,' Horton said firmly, eyeing Jackson coldly. The man flushed angrily, but he pressed his lips together tightly. To Horton he seemed a man with a short fuse. 'Has anyone threatened you in the past?'

'Look, I'm sure you've got far more important crimes to solve than bothering with this.' He scraped back his chair, preparatory to rising, but neither Horton nor Cantelli moved.

'The call was on the hotel phone not your mobile?' Horton enquired.

'Yes.'

'Then it must have come through the switchboard. We'll check it out and ask them to screen all further calls to your room.' Now, Horton rose and gathered up his jacket. 'How long will you be in Portsmouth, Ms Denton?'

'Until Saturday.'

'You'll let me know if there are any further calls, Mr Jackson?' Horton extracted a business card and handed it over. 'Or if anything unusual happens?'

'If I must.' Jackson looked pointedly at his watch. 'Now, I've got a meeting for which I'm already late. I'll see you later, Nick.'

Why did Horton get the feeling it sounded more like a threat than a friendly farewell?

Farnsworth addressed Horton. 'He's not usually that grumpy. These calls have unnerved him more than he wants to let on. You did the right thing by calling the police, Corinna, but as I said, Inspector, it's probably just some nutcase.'

Farnsworth now also glanced at his watch. Horton noted that it, like his clothes, came with a designer label and an expensive price tag, whereas Jackson's had been of the High Street chain-store variety.

'Time we were making a move, Corinna,' Farnsworth announced, pushing back his chair. 'Aren't we meeting the dive boat owner?'

She scrambled up, grappling for her phone in the depths of her capacious handbag. 'I'll call them to tell them we're on our way. Where the devil is Jason?' She was punching a number into her mobile as they left the restaurant.

Horton's gaze followed them. He was even more convinced it was a publicity stunt, but he said, 'I'll check with the hotel staff, just to show willing. Get a list of the people who know they're staying here, Barney.'

The duty manager confirmed that no calls had been put through to Mr Jackson's room at any of the times mentioned and there were no telephones available in the public areas that could connect directly to a guest's room, which meant that the threatening calls, if they had occurred at all, must have come from another hotel bedroom.

Horton asked for a printout of the guest list for the previous night and that morning. His request was greeted with as much enthusiasm as a health and hygiene inspector. He told them he would send an officer along to collect it later. He'd get DC Walters to run the names through the computer to check for any previous convictions. Of course, even if there was someone staying in the hotel with a criminal record, that didn't mean that he was the mysterious caller. It could be a member of staff. Until Jackson received another call – if he did – then Horton wasn't going to waste too much time on it. His desk was groaning with paperwork and not all of it crime related. This morning he'd found an email from DCI Bliss announcing yet another crap

initiative called C.A.S.E. = R. He had no idea what it stood for because he hadn't bothered to read it.

'Farnsworth gave me a signed photograph for Marie,' Cantelli said, as Horton climbed into the car. 'She'll be chuffed to pieces.'

Marie was one of Cantelli's five children. The ten-year-old, Cantelli had explained to him earlier, was an avid fan of the programme.

'And the list of people who know they're staying here?'

'Corinna says she'll give it to us later. You should have heard Farnsworth rip into the poor sod of a cameraman,' Cantelli added, starting up. 'He made Superintendent Uckfield sound like a Sunday school teacher.'

Across the wet and windswept car park, Horton watched Farnsworth climb into a new Range Rover whilst Corinna pushed a large holdall into the back of an old Ford and made an impatient gesture to a thin, scruffily dressed scraggy man to get in. He wondered why they hadn't all gone together in Farnsworth's car.

The radio crackled into life and Cantelli stretched across to answer it.

It was Sergeant Stride. 'PC Somerfield and PC Seaton are at the Rest Haven Nursing Home in Whitaker Road, Southsea. They've got a bit of trouble and want assistance.'

'What kind of trouble?' asked Cantelli warily.

'Well, it's not armed response. I don't think the old dears are going to shoot their way to freedom.'

'Ha bloody ha.'

'There's a relative kicking up a fuss. Claims his mother's been assaulted.'

'By a member of staff?' asked Cantelli, concerned.

'No, by an intruder. There's no sign of a break-in though, and the manager swears blind no one's assaulted Mrs Kingsway. Somerfield says they've done their best to calm her son, but he won't have it. He insists on speaking to someone from CID, and DC Walters is still at Oldham's Wharf.'

Where Horton knew the detective constable was investigating a suspected break-in. He said, 'Tell them we're on our way.'

He was getting the impression it was going to be one of those days, full of frustrations and frayed tempers, and on top of the list was his. As they headed along the blustery, deserted seafront he wondered if he should call his solicitor, Frances Greywell.

He doubted, though, if she'd achieve the miracle of getting permission for Emma to spend some time with him next week, when he was on holiday. After this morning's debacle, Catherine would probably ensure he was prevented from seeing his daughter for at least another six months. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to go tearing up to Heathrow Airport. But it was too late for that now. Just like it was too late for many things – his divorce was progressing slowly and painfully, and his initial enquiries into the disappearance of his mother over thirty years ago had come to a stumbling halt.

Over Christmas he'd reread her missing person's file. It hadn't got him any further forward with fathoming out why she had walked out of their council flat one November day in 1978 and had never returned. He had thought about trying to track down some of the people who had known her, such as Irene Ebury, who had worked with his mother at the casino. Thoughts weren't action though and he knew his unusual indecisiveness was because a small part of him was telling him to let the dead past bury its dead and to get on with living.

His thoughts had taken him to the nursing home, where he could hear a man bellowing as soon as PC Somerfield answered the door to them. She hastily introduced Cantelli and Horton to the manager, Mrs Angela Northwood.

'He's upsetting all our residents. I've tried to pacify him, but it's impossible,' Mrs Northwood said.

Horton noted the Irish accent and the fact that Mrs Northwood – a large-boned woman with untidy bleached-blond short hair and a tired expression – looked fit to drop. He wondered how many hours she'd been on duty. He nodded Cantelli towards the direction of the booming voice, where he guessed PC Seaton was trying to calm Kingsway, obviously without success.

'I've never seen him like this before. He's usually such a calm, quiet man,' she continued. 'I tried to tell him that with his mother's condition – she's got vascular dementia – this sort of confusion is common, but he just won't have it.'

'Where is Mrs Kingsway now?'

'In the residents' lounge, staring at the television.'

Which Horton could now hear because Mr Kingsway had stopped shouting. Cantelli was working his magic. 'Can you show me her room?'

'It's on the first floor.'

She led the way. Squeezing past the stairlift, Horton noted that the decoration in the hall of this sprawling, detached Edwardian house looked as tired as Mrs Northwood. The paintwork was scuffed and the carpet on the stairs was wearing thin in places. At least the smell of urine and sickness had been blotted out by the reek of disinfectant.

There was a small turning halfway up the stairs and Horton glanced out of the window to look down on a flat-roofed extension and a small garden, which gave a view on to the gardens and the backs of houses on the adjoining road.

Mrs Northwood said, 'Mrs Kingsway shared a room with another lady who passed away on New Year's Eve. The doctor visited her in the early morning of New Year's Day to certify death, and I'm convinced this is where Mrs Kingsway has got her story from. She's simply got the night muddled up in her head. Dementia patients have very little or no concept of time. Here's her room.'

It was directly opposite the staircase with a bay window that faced north on to the street. Horton took in the two single beds with mauve floral counterpanes, each with a bedside cabinet. On top of one was a box of tissues, a glass jug and beaker, and a lamp. There was a white painted wardrobe facing each bed astride a chimney breast and in the bay, under the window, a matching chest of drawers. In the corner, behind the door, was a commode and a sink basin and beside it a cabinet with towels and toiletries. Horton noted that there were no curtains around the beds to screen them off and provide privacy. The room felt cold even though it was centrally heated. It smelt of old age and death and made him shudder.

'This is Mrs Kingsway's bed.' Mrs Northwood indicated the one nearest the door. Horton had already guessed as much. 'I'm sorry to be wasting your time, Inspector, when you must have so much else to do. I can understand Mr Kingsway being upset. It is terribly heartbreaking for the family when they see someone they love suffering.'

He crossed to the window, thinking that this didn't feel like a waste of his time, unlike his interview with the television divers. He thought of the puffed-up egos of Jackson and Farnsworth, who obviously considered they were doing something of vital importance by filling the public's television screens with their diving antics, when the really valuable jobs, like Mrs Northwood's,

went relatively unseen and unrecognized. The contrast between the splendour of the Queen's Hotel and the shabbiness of this nursing home also struck him. But then, that was the nature of his job. It took him into all walks of life.

He lifted the net curtain and peered out. There was a burly, dark-haired man in a green waxed jacket on the opposite side of the road, walking away from the nursing home towards the junction. Other than that, the street was deserted. All the houses in the road were of a similar period as the Rest Haven, but most, as he'd noted on arrival, had been converted into flats, except for the bed-and-breakfast hotel opposite. The curtain twitched as he turned away. Probably someone being nosy like him. There was nothing to see here and Mrs Northwood's explanation of the circumstances seemed logical enough. Now they just had to convince Mr Kingsway that his mother was mistaken about this mystery night visitor.

'Who was the lady who died?' Horton asked casually, as they headed down the stairs.

'Irene Ebury.'

Horton started with shock. It was as though thinking about her not ten minutes ago had suddenly conjured her up. He could hardly believe what he'd just heard. Surely it couldn't be the same Irene Ebury – the woman who had worked with his mother? Could there be more than one Irene Ebury in Portsmouth? It was possible. But with spine-creeping certainty he just *knew* it was her.

Angela Northwood had said that Irene had died on New Year's Eve, so who had collected her belongings? A son or daughter? Perhaps a husband. Would Irene have spoken to them about Jennifer Horton? Why should she though? It was over thirty years ago and they had only worked together for a year between 1977 and 1978. But what if Irene *had* spoken about his mother? And what if she had kept diaries? Chance had brought him here. Wasn't it silly not to go that little bit further and check? He knew he was clutching at straws, but now that the idea had entered his head, he couldn't ignore it.

'No one's collected her things. They're still in storage here,' Mrs Northwood said in answer to his question. 'Her son Peter is her next of kin and he's in Kingston prison.'

Horton hid his surprise. That was a Category B lifer, and Category C prison, which meant that Peter Ebury must have committed a very serious crime to be there.

He told himself not to raise his hopes. There would probably be nothing in the old lady's belongings that was useful. But still, he needed to be certain.

Angela Northwood looked surprised at his request to see them. She made as if to protest, then must have thought better of it, because she said, 'They're in the cellar. I'll fetch the keys.'

Perhaps she was too tired to argue, he thought, following her into an office about the size of a broom cupboard, where she took a set of keys from a board behind the door. Locking it again, she said, 'I suppose you're interested because of that son of hers?'

She'd given him a reason. Good. Let her think that. He contrived to look both secretive and knowledgeable. He wasn't sure it convinced her, but she led him to a door under the stairs, which she unlocked.

Horton peered into the gloom and his heart leapt into overdrive. Suddenly the memories of being locked in a cellar in that God-awful children's home rushed in to torment him. He could feel the walls closing in as he followed her down the stairs. His heart was racing and the sweat was pricking his back. He struggled to fight away terror and panic and to ignore the smell of dust, damp and decay. *Think of Irene Ebury, think of Emma. Think of anything but that bloody cellar twenty-seven years ago.*

'There's not much, just a . . . that's strange.'

Her voice jolted him back to the present, and swiftly he came up behind her seeing instantly that the drawer had been forcibly opened. Frowning, he scanned the rest of the cellar, his heart gradually settling down as he considered this new puzzle. In the far left-hand corner, stacks of incontinence pads were piled high and beside them were a couple of commodes, some walking frames and other medical appliances. He brought his eyes back to rest on the filing cabinet and busted drawer. None of the others had been touched.

He tried to tell himself this was probably a case of petty theft, but in his heart he knew it was more. How much more though? Did Irene Ebury's death and her missing belongings have anything to do with this alleged intruder? But who would want an old lady dead? And what did she have worth stealing? Even more crucial, though, was did it have anything to do with his mother?

For a moment the small voice inside him urged him to walk

away and forget he had seen this, to leave it to uniform, but when had he ever listened to reason? He guessed he wasn't about to start now. This was one puzzle that he knew, without any doubt, he had to solve. It might come to nothing, but he couldn't leave that to chance. And neither could he leave it to others to discover something that might just have a connection with his past.

TWO

Would a member of staff have taken them?' he asked, pulling on a pair of latex gloves.

'If they had, they would have signed them out.'

'Can you check? And send Sergeant Cantelli down here, please.'

Angela Northwood looked about to object, then had second thoughts. As she clattered up the stairs, with enough noise to tell him she disapproved of all this fuss, Horton examined the lock. It was flimsy and wouldn't have taken much to force open. A wrench or other similar tool would have done the job.

Who had keys to this room? He recalled that Mrs Northwood had taken them from the board in her office. She had locked her office door behind her with another set of keys, so whoever had taken Irene Ebury's belongings must have had a key to this basement. The lock on the door hadn't been forced, which meant it must be a member of staff. Or had the cellar door been left open for the thief – this intruder that Mrs Kingsway claimed to have seen?

Hearing footsteps, he turned to see Cantelli descending. 'Any joy?'

'He's quiet enough now and apologetic. What are you doing down here?'

'The cupboard was bare,' Horton said, stepping aside.

Cantelli looked puzzled. Horton quickly explained leaving out the connection between Irene Ebury and his mother.

Cantelli frowned. 'Peter Ebury rings a bell, but I can't recall why.' He peered into the empty drawer. 'Inside job?'

Before Horton couldn't comment, Mrs Northwood returned.

'No one's signed out for Mrs Ebury's belongings.' She looked understandably concerned.

Had someone taken them and forgotten to sign the book? No. That didn't explain why the drawer had been forced open.

'Are the keys to this basement and these cabinets always hanging on that board in your office?' Horton asked.

'Yes.'

'And do all the staff have access to them?'

'Only when my office is open and either I, my relief or the night manager is there. Otherwise the office is locked and if staff want something they have to ask.'

'But you don't accompany them.'

She looked at him as if he were mad. 'Of course not. I'd be up and down these stairs every five minutes. But they don't get the keys to these cabinets without explaining why they want them.'

So, although the staff wouldn't have keys to this cabinet, they could easily have broken into it whilst fetching incontinence pads or a surgical appliance. Horton said, 'Do you have a list of Irene's belongings?'

'In my office.'

'I'd like to see it. In a moment,' he added, preventing her from leaving. 'You mentioned the night manager. Was she on duty when Irene Ebury died?'

'Marion Keynes. Yes. She comes on at six thirty along with the other night staff. But I had to stand in for her last night. She's off sick. And I'm a care assistant down. Wretched woman didn't show up for work yesterday or today, and there's no word from her. It happens in this job, all too often I'm sad to say. I've got an agency nurse in tonight, thank goodness.'

Horton saw Cantelli note this. 'How long had Mrs Ebury been a resident?' he asked.

'Just over two years.'

So, why steal her things now, Horton wondered, when whoever it was must have had ample opportunity to do so over the years? And it must have been recent otherwise that busted lock would either have been reported or repaired.

'When was the last time you checked these drawers?' he asked.

Her fair face creased up in thought. 'A week ago on Sunday, the twenty-eighth of December, when Mrs Jenkins passed away. Mrs Ebury's drawer was locked then.'

Horton made no attempt to hide his surprise or his disapproval at the time lag. 'Mrs Ebury died five days ago—'

She flushed. 'Look, we're short-staffed. I'm rushed off my feet, there was no need to hurry down here and bundle her things up. Her son is hardly coming to claim them.'

No. And how bloody convenient. Horton had a bad feeling about this.

'What was the cause of death?'

'Heart disease. She had high blood pressure and was on medication for that, as well as having Alzheimer's.'

'Who certified death?'

'Our GP: Dr Eastwood.'

'What time did she die?' Horton held her hostile stare.

'I wasn't on duty, remember,' she snapped. 'You'll have to ask Marion, though I doubt she'll know exactly. According to her report, she found Mrs Ebury dead at five thirty a.m. on New Year's Day. She called the doctor straight away. He issued the death certificate.'

No autopsy then. Horton definitely didn't like the smell of this. Would he have cared though, if there hadn't been that connection with his mother? Would he simply have accepted the burglary as an inside job and sent a constable or DC Walters to investigate? The tightening in his gut gave him his answer.

Because of the holiday period, Horton knew it was unlikely that Irene Ebury would have been buried yet. 'Who's organizing her funeral?'

'I am, when I get round to it,' she answered defensively. 'Her son can't do anything, can he?'

By Cantelli's expression, Horton could see he was still trawling his memory to pinpoint exactly what Ebury had done. He wondered if Cantelli would recall Irene Ebury.

He said, 'Did Mrs Ebury have any visitors?'

'No.'

'Never?'

'Not one. I doubt if anyone will be at her funeral except me.'

Unless they let Peter out for it, accompanied by a couple of prison officers, thought Horton. He asked if she had put an announcement in the deaths' column of the local newspaper and got an incredulous look. His suggestion that she should do so earned him a deep frown and a heavy sigh of exasperation.

He excused her grumpiness on grounds of lack of sleep, noting at the same time that his own disgruntled mood had slipped away.

‘I would like you to lock the door to the basement and not let anyone down here until the fingerprint bureau has been, and . . .’ Turning to Cantelli, he added, ‘I also want someone from the photographic unit here.’ Cantelli, reaching for his mobile phone, climbed the stairs.

‘Surely there’s a simple explanation for this,’ Mrs Northwood cried in exasperation, locking the door behind her.

‘Then we’ll find it,’ he answered, wondering if she was right, but feeling uneasy nevertheless. ‘I’ll take a look at Mrs Ebury’s room again while you get me a list of her belongings.’

He wasn’t sure what he would gain from seeing the room a second time, but on the first occasion it had simply been a bedroom where an anonymous elderly resident had died. Now he was looking at it with a very different set of eyes, though initially he couldn’t see anything more revealing than on his first visit. Had Irene died of natural causes or was there something suspicious about her death? Maybe he was looking to complicate things unnecessarily.

Standing beside Mrs Kingsway’s bed, he could see it would have been easy for her to have witnessed an intruder looming over Irene Ebury. Or, as Mrs Northwood had suggested, it could have been the doctor bending over to examine the body. But, no, that wouldn’t wash. If it had been the doctor, then he or Marion Keynes, the night manager, would have switched on the light. The doctor could hardly examine the body in the dark. Marion Keynes had discovered Irene Ebury’s body at 5.30 a.m. and even if the GP hadn’t arrived until 6 or 7 a.m. it would still have been dark. And surely they would have taken Mrs Kingsway out of the room whilst the doctor was examining the body. As Horton had noted earlier, there were no curtains around these beds to give any degree of privacy. If Mrs Kingsway was right, and she had seen an intruder, perhaps that intruder had frightened Irene Ebury into having a heart attack and had then stolen her belongings. Mrs Northwood had said that dementia patients got the days and times muddled up. He felt a frisson of excitement that told him he could be on to something.

Hearing footsteps on the stairs, he turned.

‘Someone from the fingerprinting and photographic bureaus will be over within the hour,’ Cantelli announced, gazing round the room.

Horton could tell by his expression that he didn't approve of it.

'I want Seaton and Somerfield to take statements from all the staff. And if Walters has returned from Oldham's Wharf get him over here too. I want to know who had those keys to the basement, and when and what they were all doing on New Year's Eve. We'll talk to Marion Keynes later.'

Horton found Mrs Northwood in her office. She gave him Marion Keynes' address and then handed him a list of Irene Ebury's belongings. There was a small amount of jewellery listed: a wedding ring, a dress ring, a gold charm bracelet, some bead necklaces and earrings. There were also some letters and a small photograph album noted. No diary. The photograph album and letters might have been interesting though. It didn't seem much to show for a life or worth killing for. *If* she had been killed.

He asked, 'Do you know who the letters were from?'

'No. I never read them. She might have got one of the staff to read them to her though.'

That was a question Seaton, Somerfield and Walters could ask later. He guessed they could have been from her son.

'Who told Peter about his mother's death?'

'Marion Keynes informed the governor.'

Was it worth a visit to Kingston Prison? Definitely. He'd like to know if Peter Ebury had ever written to his mother. He was also curious to know how he felt about his mother's death.

Mrs Northwood said, 'Irene's toiletries were given to the other ladies, and we kept some of her more decent clothes. We get through quite a lot here. The rest went to a charity shop. I've got her pension details, birth and death certificates, but I can't hand those over to you until I have permission from her next of kin.'

'You can at least give me her date and place of birth.' He would be able to get access to her pension details and previous employment records from the various government department computers.

She unlocked her filing cabinet and withdrew a folder. Flicking through it, she handed Horton the birth certificate. Irene Ebury had been born on 4 January 1939 in Portsmouth to Gladys and William Ebury. Had she never married? Unless she had reverted to her maiden name on divorce.

'Where's her marriage certificate?'

‘I’ve never been given one.’

There was a wedding ring in her personal belongings and she had adopted the title of Mrs. Maybe it was just for show. He jotted down the details and then, handing back the certificate, asked, ‘Are those her medical records?’

‘Since she’s been in our care, yes, but you can’t see them,’ Mrs Northwood said quickly, clutching them close to her as though he was going to steal them. ‘They’re confidential.’

‘Irene Ebury is dead,’ he said evenly.

A quick glimpse might be all he needed, though Horton didn’t really know what they could tell him.

‘She may be, but until her son says you can see them, or you have a warrant, they stay with me.’

Pity, but if that was how she wanted to play it, then so be it. He’d get Peter Ebury’s permission to access those medical records. It would be quicker than getting a warrant.

He explained about his officers taking statements from the staff, which drew a scowl from her.

‘Why all this interest, Inspector? I know there’s the case of her missing belongings, but that hardly warrants so much police activity.’

‘We’ll try to be as quick and discreet as possible,’ he answered evasively.

She wasn’t happy with his answer. That was too bad, Horton thought. In the corridor, he asked Cantelli if Mr Kingsway was still on the premises.

‘He’s in the staffroom having a coffee. I asked him to hang around for a moment. I thought you’d like to talk to him.’

Kingsway looked up as they entered, and Horton felt some sympathy for him. The poor man seemed to be on the edge of a nervous breakdown. Fatigue was etched on his weather-roughened face. His grey eyes were red-rimmed, whether through crying or tiredness Horton didn’t know. He was wiry, like Cantelli, but shorter than the sergeant and his close-cropped hair made it difficult to put an age on him. Horton would have said late forties possibly early fifties.

‘I visit my mother every Monday,’ he said in answer to Horton’s question. ‘So today was the first time I’d seen her since Mrs Ebury died. She knew who I was this morning, which is unusual, and she seemed more like her old self. She told me that she didn’t like it here, there were things going on. When I pressed

her, she said she'd seen a man standing over the bed next to her. She was scared. She pretended to be asleep. But he turned and saw her and grabbed hold of her.'

'Did she scream?' asked Horton.

'She says she was too scared to cry out. The man shook her and let her go.'

'Did she give a description?'

'Sorry, no. I don't even know if it is true. She seemed so certain this morning, but now it's like it never happened and Mrs Northwood explained how she can get dates and times muddled up. I'm sorry for putting you and your officers to so much trouble,' he said sheepishly, rising.

'It's no trouble, sir.' And it wasn't. Horton was glad the son had called them, because he might never have bothered to find Irene Ebury, or if he had done then he might never have known about her missing belongings. He had a feeling that Mrs Northwood wouldn't have reported it. He asked Mr Kingsway if he'd known Irene.

'I'd met her a couple of times, but I didn't really know her. Thanks for taking me seriously anyway.' He stretched out a hand. Horton took it, noting its firmness.

Horton watched him head down the corridor, where he entered the lounge, presumably to say goodbye to his mother.

'Must be tough,' Cantelli said, shaking his head.

Horton knew he was thinking of his own mother, who had been widowed just before Christmas. Fortunately, from what Horton had seen of Mrs Cantelli senior, her mind was still firing on all cylinders.

'Make sure Seaton and Somerfield know what questions to ask.'

Cantelli went off to brief them, while Horton stepped into the damp, windy morning and called the mortuary.

'Have you performed an autopsy on Irene Ebury?' he asked when Dr Clayton came on the line. 'She died on New Year's Eve.'

'You must be kidding – we've got them piled up. What with the holiday and this vomiting bug, I don't expect we'll get around to her until next Christmas. Is it urgent?'

Horton didn't much relish the vision of corpses piled sky-high. 'Possible suspicious death . . .'

'Hold on, did you say Ebury?'

‘Yes, why?’

‘I’ve just had another Ebury brought in for an urgent PM. Any relation?’

‘Don’t know yet. You haven’t told me who it is.’ Horton suddenly felt very cold. There had to be several Eburys in Portsmouth, but he’d wager a million pounds on who this dead one was. ‘Is it Peter Ebury?’

‘Yes! How did you know?’

He pulled up the collar of his sailing jacket as an icy blast of fear wrapped itself round his heart.

‘How did he die?’ He hoped his voice sounded normal.

‘That’s what the post-mortem will tell me,’ she said pointedly.

‘What did the doctor say?’ he rephrased.

‘Respiratory failure.’

Brought on how? Mother and son dead within five days of each other – wasn’t that strange? OK, so it might not be unique and perhaps Peter Ebury, wracked with guilt, had given up and died. Or perhaps he’d suffered from asthma and had had an attack. It was pointless for him to read too much into this. But he did.

‘When will you have the results?’

‘The autopsy’s scheduled for tomorrow morning. It’s the earliest I can do it.’

Damn. He noted her unusually defensive and slightly aggressive tone and thought that someone must have been getting at her. The prison authorities probably. They’d want this sorted out, and a verdict of death by natural causes, as quickly as possible.

‘Was there any mention of suicide?’

‘You mean he killed himself because he couldn’t face the guilt of being in prison when his mother died? No, and he wasn’t on suicide watch. I suppose you want me to do Irene Ebury’s autopsy tomorrow too?’

‘Please. Call me as soon as you’ve got the results on them both.’

Cantelli joined him in the car. ‘Walters is on his way over.’

‘Good. How’s your claustrophobia?’

Cantelli raised an enquiring eyebrow. ‘Mine’s fine, how’s yours?’

‘You know me and closed-in spaces. But when duty calls . . .’

‘We’re going to prison.’

‘Got it in one.’