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A Killing Frost

R. D. Wingfield

Prologue

A blinding flash of lightning etched the trees in sharp relief against the night sky, followed almost instantly by a rumble of thunder overhead which seemed to make the ground shake. Heavy, stinging rain drummed down.

The man sheltering under the oak tree, his raincoat soaked through, cursed his luck for venturing out on such a lousy night just to take the flaming dog for a walk. As soon as the rain eased off he would make his way home, but where was the dog? Probably cowering under a bush somewhere, terrified by the noise.

'Rex! Come here, you bloody animal.'

An answering bark resounded in the darkness, but he couldn't locate it.
'Rex, here! Now!'

There was a whimpering yap, then the dog bounded over to join him, its fur flattened and rain-blackened. It had something in its mouth.

'What you got there?' The lousy dog was always picking up and eating pieces of ancient carrion, usually making itself violently sick on the mat once they got home. But this didn't smell ancient. It stank to high heaven.

KILLING FROST He tried to pull it from the dog, which growled menacingly and clenched its teeth even firmer, reluctant to yield its prize. The man pulled his hand back. Whatever the dog had found felt like bloated, squishy flesh.

'I said drop it!'

Another menacing growl. He grabbed the dog by the collar and shook its head until it released its grip and whatever it was holding fell to the ground.

He dragged the torch from his raincoat pocket and clicked it on. The horror of what he saw jerked him back.

'Bloody hell . . . Bloody bleeding hell!'

The dog made a leap to retrieve its find, but just in time he snatched its collar again and clicked on the lead, holding it awkwardly as he unbuttoned his mac to get to his mobile. ‘Operator,’ he shouted over the thudding rain. ‘Get me the police . . . Denton police.’

Detective Inspector Jack Frost, slouched at the desk in his office, glanced up as lightning flashed and the overhead lights flickered off and on. He went to the window and looked out on the darkened car park, where stair rods of driving rain broke the reflections in the puddles.

‘Look at that bleeding rain,’ he muttered to himself, glad he wasn’t out in it. One good thing about heavy rain: it kept most villains indoors.

He returned to his desk and his car expenses. Picking up his ballpoint he carefully altered a ‘6’ to an ‘8’.

There was a perfunctory tap at the door and Bill Wells, the station sergeant, entered. ‘Jack . . .’

Frost didn’t look up. ‘I can’t come out to play now, Bill. I’ve got my sums to do.’

Wells grinned. ‘You’re going to get caught fiddling those expenses one of these days, Jack.’

‘Not a chance,’ murmured Frost. ‘The devil looks after his own.’ He put his pen down. ‘Any chance of a cup of tea?’

‘No time for that, Jack. Just had a bloke on the phone. He’s in Denton Woods – his dog has found a chopped-off human foot.’

‘Tell him to phone again when he’s found the rest,’ said Frost. Thunder rumbled and the lights flickered again. ‘I pity the poor sod you’re sending out to answer the call.’

‘There’s only you, Jack. Jordan and Simms are still at the hospital with that girl who was attacked in the car park.’

Frost chucked down his pen and took another look out of the window, hoping the rain was showing some signs of easing up. ‘Shit!’ he muttered. It was bucketing down worse than ever.

Bill Wells yawned, knuckled his eyes and checked the time. Two o’clock. Not a word from Frost yet. Time was creeping. The cells were empty. The usual quota of yelling, singing and vomiting drunks had been kept indoors by the weather. He didn’t have much to do. He yelled for PC Collier to make some tea and picked up a copy of the Denton Echo. As he turned the page, the main doors crashed open and a gust of wind blew across the lobby. A rainsoaked, fed-up-to-the-bloody-teeth Detective Inspector Frost squelched over to the inquiry desk and dumped a dripping transparent plastic bag in

front of Wells. Inside the bag was a bloodless, bloated, dirt-encrusted human foot, the pale skin flecked with green and black mould. It had apparently been sawn off at the base of the fibula; the toes bore puncture marks from the teeth of the dog.

'If anyone reports a foot missing, we've found it,' said Frost, shrugging off his mac and shaking it over the lobby floor.

'Flaming heck, Jack,' said Wells. 'You should have left it on site. This could be a murder inquiry.'

'What – just leave it there and have some poor sod standing over it, guarding it? Besides, we don't know where the dog got it from and I wasn't going to go crashing about in Denton Woods in the dark trying to find the rest.' He prodded it through the bag. 'It's from a hospital, I reckon . . . some prat of a medical student's idea of a joke.' 'What am I supposed to do with it?' asked Wells.

'Fifteen minutes at gas mark five,' said Frost. 'Or stick it in the bloody fridge and if no one eats it send it over to Forensic in the morning.'

Wells wrinkled his nose. 'It's a bit flaming whiffy, Jack.'

'I thought that was you,' said Frost. He looked at the foot again. 'And first thing tomorrow, Bill, get a couple of spare bods to go through the motions of searching for any more bits. But don't let them waste too much time on it.'

'Something else, Jack. That fifteen-year-old girl who was attacked. Sally Marsden. PC Jordan has phoned through – she was raped. Looks like the same pattern as the other two girls.'

'Damn,' sighed Frost. 'It never rains, but it flaming pees down.' He gave his mac another shake. 'Right, I'm on my way.'

Wells shook his head. 'No need, Jack. The hospital say she's in no state to be questioned until the morning.'

Frost yawned. It was too late to go home. 'Got an empty cell I can kip in?'

'Take your pick,' said Wells.

Frost yawned again. 'Send the maid to wake me at around seven with a cup of tea in one hand and her knickers in the other. If that kid's been raped I want to get down to the hospital first thing. We've got too much to bleeding do, now that Hornrim Harry's sucking up to the Chief Constable by lending half our manpower to Hockley Division for a drugs bust. "You can have as many men as you like, sir. Frost has got sod all to do. He can manage."'

He collected his cigarettes from his office. Rain was crawling down the window. It was a sod of a night.