

A CHRISTMAS KILLING

An exclusive Richard T. Burke short story

*I'm dreaming of a **RED** Christmas*



A Christmas Killing

by Richard T. Burke

Christmas Eve

An out-of-tune rendition of the Big Ben chime rang from the doorbell. I peered through the glass panel beside the heavy wooden door before unlatching it and pulling it open. In front of me, slouched a man in filthy grey overalls and brown working boots. He was one of those disconcerting people whose eyes don't focus at the same point.

'Your delivery, sir,' he muttered, straining under the weight of the plastic-wrapped package he held between his arms.

I resisted the temptation to glance behind me to see what he was staring at and, after a second of indecision, identified which eye to follow. Once I had gained my bearings, I focussed on a face with beetling eyebrows and a ruddy complexion topped by a mop of unruly brown hair. He had the look of somebody who spent most of his life outdoors. His bored expression remained unchanged throughout my moment of inspection. A blast of frigid air washed over him bringing with it the odour of something unpleasant, the scent of decay – not surprising, I supposed, considering his line of work.

'Where do you want her?'

'In the kitchen, please.' I nodded towards the door on the right at the end of the hall. 'Do you need a hand?'

The man gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head and fixed me with a stare from his dominant eye. I led the way along the oak floor, the man's boots clumping a short distance behind.

A scraping sound made me glance backwards. One of her legs had touched the cream-coloured wall leaving a pale red streak. The deliveryman appeared not to have noticed. I would have to remember to wipe it off afterwards. I passed through the doorway and gestured at the large, wooden farmhouse table. 'On there, please.'

With a grunt, he leant forwards and deposited her on the pockmarked surface. Yes, she would do nicely. I tried not to think about how she might have died; perhaps at the hands of the man who stood before me. He didn't look like a killer but how could you tell? I wondered if she knew it was coming, whether she made any attempt to escape before the fatal blow, if she suffered any pain.

The man stared down at her, making no indication that he was about to leave. Did he want a tip? This was all a little outside my realm of experience. Just as I was reaching into my back pocket to extract my wallet, he turned and, without another word, retraced his steps.

I followed him down the hall. He opened the door for himself and crunched across the gravel to his grimy white delivery van. 'Thanks!' I called to his back but he didn't acknowledge me. He got into the vehicle and started the engine with a cloud of noxious black smoke. The tyres threw up several small stones as he dropped the clutch and accelerated away.

After closing the front door, I returned to the kitchen. I studied the package and pulled back a section of the clear plastic material. All the colour had leached out of her skin, leaving it pale and bloodless. I reckoned she had probably been dead for a day or two. When I touched a finger against her, she felt cold and clammy. Through the plastic, I could see her head had been severed, exposing a dark, gaping hole in her neck where it had once connected. Her limbs were bound together with twine. A watery puddle of crimson was forming beneath her but it was clear that most of her blood had already been drained before I took possession of her.

Grabbing a cloth from beside the sink, I mopped away the fluid. I didn't want to stain the table's surface, battered though it was. Flinging the cloth into the bowl, I turned back to her and folded my arms, deep in contemplation.

I felt I ought to name her. I was going to be doing some pretty personal things to her so it was the least she deserved. After all, even storms had names. Each one began with the next sequential letter of the alphabet. When they got to Z they restarted at A.

I walked around the table a couple of times, stroking my chin. *Angela. That's it. I'll call her Angela.*

'Hello, Angela,' I said. 'Pleased to make your acquaintance. Man, I love roast turkey. There'll be more than enough for Christmas Day and you'll keep me going for weeks.' I reached out a hand and patted her. 'We'll have to make space for you in the fridge though. We want to keep you at your best.'

Needless to say, she didn't respond.

I crossed to the white-fronted appliance and yanked the handle towards me. I crouched down and peered inside. The interior was so crowded with food for the Christmas period that the automatic light had no effect.

'No room in there. Looks like we're going to have to put you in the big fridge.'

I glanced at Angela once again, trying to memorise her size, then pulled open the door to the utility room. I flipped the switch and waited for the flickering of the fluorescent light to stop. I moved across to the tall fridge-freezer standing in the corner. The seal gave way with a slight pop, almost as if it was inhaling. *Not as cramped as the other fridge.* I would need to do some reorganisation including the repositioning of one shelf but I was sure there was enough room.

I removed the items on the bottom two levels, some wrapped in cling film, others in silver foil, and placed them on the ground.

When the area was clear, I slid out the plastic-coated grid and positioned it vertically on the floor in the gap down one side. Angela would fit perfectly in the space I had created.

I returned to the kitchen and wrapped my arms around the bird.

'God, you're a heavy one.'

I lurched back into the utility room and staggered towards the open fridge door. A green light on the top edge was flashing, accompanied by a persistent beeping sound.

'I know, I know,' I said, levering Angela inside. I was careful to avoid stepping on any of the sealed items I had removed. I nudged the door to confirm that it would close. Perfect.

'Right. Let's sort this lot out.'

I picked up the first foil-wrapped package, peeled back the edge, and took in

the garishly painted fingernails.

‘Ah yes, Xenia. How are you holding up? How are you feeling?’

Next, I grasped the jam jar. I held it to the light and peered in at the severed ear still wearing the pearl earring.

‘Good evening, Yvonne. How are you? I haven’t heard much from you recently.’

Finally, I grabbed a package wrapped in cling-film. Through the transparent layers, I could just about make out the red-painted toenails.

‘Hello, Zoe. I hope I haven’t kept you sitting around too long.’

‘All of you, I want you to meet Angela. She’ll be staying with us for a few days.’

Christmas Day

I drove the blade down hard, the edge trembling in the bright lights. A tear rolled slowly down my cheek and paused, quivering at my chin. I was reaching up my sleeve to brush it away when the doorbell played its discordant version of the Big Ben chimes. I really would have to replace the damned thing.

Sniffing loudly, I headed towards the front door. Halfway down the hall, the sequence of notes began once again.

‘Okay, okay, I’m coming!’ I called, although whoever was waiting would more than likely be unable to hear me. I reached up with my left hand and unlatched the door.

A policewoman wearing black trousers and a yellow high-vis jacket stood before me. On her head, she wore a black flat-topped hat. Her hair was tied back in a short ponytail. She was not unattractive and smiled as she greeted me.

Despite the unflattering uniform, I could see that she had promise. My gaze was drawn to a strand of hair that had worked loose and dangled alongside the delicate features of her neck. She – or at least part of her – would make a fine addition to my collection. I pushed the thought from my mind and

gave her my happy expression.

‘Good morning sir—’ She stopped speaking and the smile dropped from her face. She took a step backwards, staring at my right hand. I glanced down and realised I was still holding the knife.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I was just chopping onions.’

Hastily, I deposited the kitchen knife on the small wooden cabinet in the hall. When I turned back, she seemed less on edge but still wary.

‘So, what can I do for an officer of the *leu* on this fine Christmas morning?’ I asked.

She shot me a puzzled look. ‘The *leu*?’

‘You know, an officer of the law. Inspector Clouseau, Peter Sellers, The Pink Panther.’

She stared at me blankly. ‘I’m sorry, sir, I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

I guess it’s true what they say; the police are getting younger. ‘Never mind,’ I said. ‘It’s an old film about this incompetent police inspector, not that I’m suggesting for a moment... You should watch it sometime. Anyway, what can I do for you?’

The woman shook her head. ‘We’ve had reports of screaming on this road the past couple of nights. The person who called it in was sure the cries were human. We sent a patrol car but they didn’t see anything.’

‘Screaming, you say?’

‘Yes, sir. I was wondering if you might know anything about it.’

‘Me? Why would I know anything?’

The woman frowned. ‘I was thinking you might’ve been at home the last two nights. One of your neighbours rang the emergency services sometime between one and one thirty this morning and about the same time two nights ago. I thought maybe you’d have heard something.’

‘Oh, I see. No, I’m sorry, I can’t really help. I’m a heavy sleeper. There are a lot of foxes around here, though. They have a cry that can sometimes sound like a woman screaming.’

'That was our first thought but the caller was adamant that it sounded human.'

'Maybe kids, then.' I jerked a thumb behind me. 'They always seem to be having parties in that house backing onto my garden. There's normally loads of shouting and screaming. I don't remember there being one last night, though.'

The policewoman shrugged. 'That's a possibility. I'm planning to talk to all the residents in the vicinity.'

'So has anybody been reported missing?'

'No, that's why they sent me.'

'Okay. Good luck. I hope you find a *cleu*.'

This time, she got it. 'Let me guess, the incompetent inspector.'

'That's right. I'd offer you a glass of Christmas cheer but I suppose you're not allowed to drink on the job.'

'Thank you, I'd love to but I can't until I knock off this evening. Have a good day, sir.'

'You too. Merry Christmas,' I replied as I closed the door.

The smell of roast turkey permeated my small bungalow. I glanced at my watch. They would be here any minute. My sister, brother-in-law and their two boys were making the short trek from the other side of town. Despite my successful career, I had remained in the house where I was born just over forty years earlier. My sister, who is three years younger than me, had also stayed in the area to help look after our ailing parents. Now they were both gone and it had become a tradition for the remainder of the family to get together on Christmas Day.

The doorbell signalled their arrival. I opened the front door and the whirlwind comprising my two nephews swept into the house.

'Uncle Dave, look what I got for Christmas!' the first boy shouted as he rushed past holding up a blue model aeroplane. 'It flies too.' Jake was ten years old and a bundle of nervous energy.

His twin brother, Ben, was more restrained. 'I got one too,' he said, proudly displaying a red plane. It was a never-ending conundrum for my sister and her husband to treat their twins equally yet make them feel like individuals. 'Can we fly them later?' Ben asked eagerly. 'Dad said you'd help us.'

I smiled. 'Of course, once we've had Christmas dinner. We'll need the fresh air after all that turkey.'

My sister appeared in the doorway and enveloped me in a hug. 'Merry Christmas, David. I hope you've got lots of energy because the boys are even more excited than usual this year.'

'Hi, Helen. I'm sure I'll survive. I only get them in short bursts. You have this all the time.'

She laughed. 'They do sleep occasionally.'

She was followed in by her husband, Steve, a bottle of wine grasped in each hand. Condensation had already begun to form on the glass in the warm atmosphere of the hallway. 'I'd shake your hand, Dave, but I'd have to let go of one of these first.'

'Thanks, Steve. I'll take them off you and put them in the fridge if I can find any room. Make yourselves at home in the lounge. We'll be eating in about twenty minutes. Can I get you a drink?'

Both my sister and brother-in-law requested wine.

In the kitchen, I rummaged in the drawer for the corkscrew. I filled three glasses then replaced the cork in the opened bottle. Knowing there was no space in the small fridge but plenty in the fridge-freezer now that Angela had been removed, I carried the two bottles into the utility room.

I placed the bottles in the fridge door. 'They're not for you, ladies, so leave them alone please.'

'Who are you talking to?' a voice asked from behind me.

I turned to face Helen. 'Oh, you know, just talking to myself, making sure I've got everything ready.'

'I'm sure you have it all under control. Is there anything I can do to help?'

'No, everything's fine. Let's go through to the lounge.'

The meal went smoothly and Angela was every bit as succulent as I'd hoped she would be. My stomach was so full it wouldn't take another mouthful and we hadn't yet started on the mince pies.

'When can we fly the planes, Uncle David?' Jake asked, once we were back in the lounge.

'Let's give it a few minutes for the food to settle,' I replied.

'Have you got any batteries?' Ben said.

'Um... what type?'

'It's okay,' Helen said. 'They recharge from the mains. I've got the chargers in my bag. Let's get the washing up done before we think about flying any planes.'

'How long does it take to charge them up?' I asked.

'Twenty minutes or so. If we plug them in now they'll be ready by the time we've washed the dishes.'

The two boys groaned. They had reached an age where they had to help with household chores to earn their pocket money.

'It won't take long if we all do it,' Steve said.

Jake perked up as another thought occurred to him. 'Hey, Uncle David, can we see the ladies?'

I glanced across to my sister who gave a slight frown of displeasure.

'If your mother says it's alright,' I replied, turning back to my nephew.

'Go on, Mum,' the boys chorused in unison.

'I suppose so,' she said. 'Let's just hope they don't give you too many nightmares, though.'

'Please, Uncle David, can we see them?' Ben asked eagerly.

'Come on then,' I said.

The two brothers leapt to their feet.

'I'll make a start on the washing up,' Helen said as all five of us trooped into

the kitchen. She made a beeline to the sink as I drew out chairs for the rest of us.

‘No touching, though,’ I said, wagging a finger at the twins.

‘We won’t, we won’t,’ Jake replied.

‘Wait here.’ I headed into the utility room and pulled open the fridge-freezer door. ‘Hello ladies, my nephews want to say hi.’ I carefully removed the three packages and transported them back to the table. I gently placed them on the surface. The boys immediately crowded round.

‘I call this one Xenia,’ I said, unwrapping the silver foil to expose a severed hand with brightly painted fingernails.

‘Ew, gross,’ Ben said.

Steve leant forwards and studied the limb. ‘You can see all the tendons and everything.’

My sister turned round from the sink and shook her head in disapproval.

‘This is Yvonne,’ I said, holding up the jam jar containing the severed ear.

‘Can I hold her?’ Jake asked.

‘Um, okay, but be careful. Don’t drop her.’

‘Is that a real pearl?’ Steve asked.

‘Yes. Nothing but the best for my ladies.’

‘I can see some earwax,” Ben exclaimed.

‘And finally, Zoe.’ I peeled back the layers of cling-film to reveal the foot with the red toenails.

Steve leant in again. ‘Incredible, so lifelike.’

‘Surely you mean death-like.’

Steve laughed nervously. ‘I guess.’

‘Can I touch her, Uncle David?’ Jake asked.

I hesitated for a second. ‘Okay, but gently, and just one finger.’

He reached forward and tentatively placed a forefinger on the big toe. No sooner had he made contact than he whipped his hand away. ‘Ugh. She feels

all cold.'

'She has been in the fridge for a few days,' I said. 'So what do you think of them?'

'They're certainly gruesome,' Steve said. 'Which film are they for?'

'*Night of the Zombie Apocalypse*. They start filming the week after next.'

'So why do you keep them in the fridge?'

'If I didn't, they'd decompose.'

An uneasy smile flashed across Steve's face.

'I'm joking. They're made of a special rubber that has to be cooled down to cure properly. They need to spend two or three days in a cool environment before they're strong enough to be handled.'

'Do you know what scenes they're going to be used in?'

'Ones where the victims lose bits of their bodies I should imagine. The special effects people just tell me what they're after and I make what they ask for.'

'He's always had a fascination with gruesome things,' Helen said over her shoulder. 'As a boy he used to stuff dead animals.'

'Why do you bring them home, though?'

'I can work on them at night. I prefer it here to the office.'

'Can we see the film when it's made, Uncle David?' Ben asked.

'I think you'll have to wait until you're a bit older,' I replied. 'I'm fairly sure it's going to be an eighteen.'

'They're amazing,' Steve said. 'How do you do it?'

'You don't expect me to tell you all my secrets, do you? Basically, they're made from a mould and then painted.'

I explained some more of the process. Of course, I didn't reveal to him how I managed to make my moulds look quite so realistic.