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Frigid

Translated from the Norwegian
by Rosie Hedger
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She could barely hear the sound of her own knock at the door. But it didn't matter; somebody called her in, and slowly she pushed on the door handle, cold against her fingertips. She nudged the door open a fraction and stuck her head through the gap.

It was like being at school again – just like the time she and Martine had been sent to the head teacher after locking Elisabeth in the toilet. But it wasn't the head teacher who stood up and approached her this time. The man who made his way towards her was smiling at her; he had rolled up the sleeves of his uniform shirt, revealing arms darkened by the sun and hair that matched the shade of the three or four days' worth of stubble on his face.

'Thank you for coming in so soon,' he said.

She nodded in response, before adding: 'Well, it's not every day someone dies on the pavement outside my building.'

'Quite,' the policeman confirmed. 'And it's not every day we find a dead body, either.'

'No,' she agreed, immediately regretting the brief chuckle that escaped her. He held out his hand. 'Bjarne Brogeland.'

'Ulrikke Nilsen. But everyone calls me Ulla.'

Brogeland smiled. 'Then I'll do the same.'

He had warm fingers, a firm grip. She gazed into his eyes; dark-brown irises, on the verge of black. He was a handsome man, the kind she'd never manage to snag; there was no point in even trying.

Brogeland gestured to her to take a seat. Ulla did as she was asked, shuffling the chair a little closer to the desk and placing her red mittens on her lap. The policeman walked back around the desk and sat down, moving a piece of paper and picking up a pair of spectacles with black rims from the table, which he then put on, pushing them up the bridge of his nose.

'It says here that you're a teacher,' he stated, looking up at her.

'That's right,' she replied. 'But not at the moment. I'm on sick leave.'

'Aha,' he replied.

Ulla could tell that he wanted to ask why, but seeing as it had no bearing on why he had asked her to come in, he didn't. Which was a good thing. Had he asked, she wouldn't have known what to tell him. Or how.

'According to the officer you spoke to last night,' he continued, clearing his throat, 'you were taking out the rubbish when you found him, is that right?'

'Yes.' She looked down. 'All that blood,' she said, clasping her hands together, her fingers interlaced. 'Frozen in the ice like that.'

Brogeland waited for a moment before carrying on. 'What did you do after that?'

'I called you,' she replied, lifting her chin once again. 'And then I went back up to my flat. It was so cold outside; and I was only wearing a skirt and had no coat on. I was only taking out the rubbish, you see.'

'And then you went back downstairs to wait?'

'Yes. I couldn't just leave him there all alone like that. Anyone might have walked past, and ... well ... you know.'

He nodded slowly, then picked up a pen and made a note on the sheet of paper in front of him. Ulla wasn't able to see what he had written.

'The officer that spoke to you last night said the deceased had visited you that evening. Is that correct?'

She looked down again. 'Yes, he'd had dinner with me.'

'So you knew each other well?'

She cocked her head first to the left, then to the right. 'Quite well.'

Brogeland stroked a hand over his stubble. 'What time did he leave?'

She looked up at him. 'A little after half past twelve, perhaps.'

'And you went downstairs with the rubbish at what time?'

She considered his question for a moment. 'Fifteen minutes later, perhaps. It took me a little while to tidy up; I can never get to sleep when I know the kitchen's a mess.' She smiled self-consciously. 'Are you the same?'

The policeman said nothing.

'Plus, I didn't want the smell to linger in the flat. Roast lamb has a strong aroma about it, or at least it does the way I cook it. Lots of garlic. And rosemary, of course; there has to be plenty of rosemary.'

He looked at her for a few seconds. 'Was it an enjoyable dinner?'

She picked at the skin of one thumb. 'Yes, I'd say so.'

'Were you in a relationship with him?'

She looked up at him abruptly. 'No,' she replied, more firmly and in a higher pitch than she had intended, her tone betraying a hint of laughter. 'We're ... we were ... just friends.'

Brogeland nodded once again, then briefly put a finger to his lips, wet it, and turned to a new page.

'Tell me a little more about that,' he said, leaning back in his chair.

'Hmm?'

'Tell me a little about your relationship. How you knew one another.'

Ulla took a deep breath.

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When the doorbell rang, she was sitting, drumming her nails against the rough table top. She stood up a little too quickly, felt immediately dizzy and was forced to take a step to one side in an attempt to regain her balance. Perhaps she ought not to have had that glass of wine prior to his arrival. But she had needed it.

She breathed in and out, repeating this a few times before quickly adjusting her skirt and smoothing a crease in her blouse. Her shoes clacked on the floor. The CD she'd bought in a second-hand shop in Frogner played quietly in the background. Everything was ready and waiting – on the stove or in the fridge.

And in the freezer.

She opened the door.

And there he was, wearing the same wry smile as he had the last time he stood on that very spot, though on that occasion he had been on his way home. That was a year and a half ago now, after an evening that had begun with such promise, but had ended so horribly. She recalled the moment he had ambled in through the alleyway where the bins were kept, over to the long table they'd set up for the summer party in the back yard, one hand in his pocket and the other carrying a Rema 1000 supermarket carrier bag that looked like it held something cold. Ulla had stopped mid-sentence when she saw him; she couldn't even recall what she and Cecilie had been discussing. Students, probably.

She had seen him before. He had been to visit Øystein – the pair of them had drunk beer on the balcony, topless on the balmy summer evening. He had smiled at her once as she had lain on her own balcony, wearing her bikini, with a glass of white wine, an *Ernie* comic strip and a pack of Marlboro cigarettes to hand.

At the party he greeted everyone and sat directly opposite her, while Øystein fetched him a paper plate of barbecued food and a glass of grappa, which he sipped in between gulps of beer. Ulla consciously held back at first, drinking her wine as she listened to the conversations going on around the table, without ever really catching on to anything that was said.

It was a nice tradition to arrange a party in the back yard on the first day of the summer break. The holiday feeling created a particular ambience; it was better than Christmas Eve, better than constitution day – the whole summer lay ahead of them, like an adventure they hadn't yet embarked upon. The summer party was the high point of the year, there was no doubting that, and this particular party bore all the signs of becoming something very special indeed.

They fired up the barbecue and ate and drank long into the night, singing and dancing together. Those with children allowed them to stay up as late as they liked. There was a steady stream of sweets and drinks – and of alcohol, of course. Ulla had lived there for six years, the last four all alone, after Bård Vidar had left her to shack up with some doormat in Nordstrand who worked in nail design.

It took a few hours before a seat became available beside him, but Ulla took her chance when Cecilie left to fetch a drink from her flower-bedecked refrigerator.

'Hi,' she said, offering her hand. 'Ulrikke. But everyone calls me Ulla.'

'Roger. Everyone calls me ... Roger.'

She laughed.

And so they came to sit side by side for the remainder of the evening. She didn't dare get up to fetch another drink or to go to the loo, afraid that she might lose her place, afraid that he would find someone else to talk to, someone more interesting. On the occasions that he went to the loo, she made sure that nobody took his place.

As the evening progressed and night fell, of the partygoers, eventually only she, Roger and Øystein remained. They had turned the music down out of consideration for those who had gone to bed, and all three were well and truly drunk.

'I think I'll take my leave,' Øystein said, winking not altogether discreetly to his friend, well aware of the direction the evening was destined to take. When only she and Roger were left, she had leaned in close and whispered:

'Where were you planning on sleeping tonight, then?'

He said nothing, not at first, but simply flashed her a crooked smile.

'Well,' he replied, pausing for a moment. 'Got any good suggestions?'

She had one.

And after accompanying her upstairs, he had undressed her, driven by a seemingly insatiable desire, and took her on the bed that Bård Vidar had never come over to collect. It had felt so good, so right – just as it should. She had been so afraid of ruining something, of making some mistake or other, and so she had allowed him to take control, to decide how he wanted things. She

wanted everything to be just as he liked it. And even though it was all over and done with a little more swiftly than she had hoped it would be, the experience left her with a warmth and happiness deep within her very soul.

He hadn't looked at her afterwards. Hadn't said anything, either. She had tried to penetrate his gaze, but all to no avail.

'What is it?' she had finally asked him.

He said nothing, not at first. But when she pressed him, he replied:

'I don't think I've ever met anyone so cold.'

'What?'

'You just *lay* there. I might as well have been shagging a corpse.'

Brogeland cleared his throat once more.

'So even though he made clear that it was nice to have gotten to know you after the summer party, almost a year and a half passed before you invited him over for dinner?'

'Yes, well ...'

Brogeland removed his spectacles as he waited for her to continue.

'You know how time flies,' she added. 'That's ... just how things worked out.'

The policeman nodded slowly.

'And I've been on sick leave for a while now, too, so ... I didn't quite have the energy to have him over until now.'

'When did he arrive?'

'Around eight. I had invited him over for half past seven. He was late, but it didn't really matter, I had a few things I needed to do first.'

Brogeland looked up at her for a few moments before putting his spectacles on once again and noting something down.

'Tell me what happened,' he said. 'Tell me how the evening progressed.'

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She opened the door, and there he stood.

'Hi,' she said.

'Hi,' he replied.

He was wearing jeans and, under his warm down jacket from Canada, a washed-out t-shirt, white. A v-neck t-shirt. She hated t-shirts with v-necks.

'Come in,' she said, opening the door for him, smiling widely and trying to prevent her nerves revealing themselves in her tone. Judging by his smell, he'd spent the whole day out in the forest. He hadn't brought anything with him.

'Smells good in here,' he said.

Of course it smelled good. She had roasted lamb with garlic and copious amounts of rosemary. It was always important to make sure there was plenty of rosemary.

'Mm,' he said, looking around.

There was a vase of flowers on the table. She had set two places. The bottle of wine was open, the carafe of water lined up beside it. A pan simmered gently on the stove. It was definitely an evening for a nice sauce.

'Have a seat,' she said, picking up the wine bottle from where it stood on the table and filling his glass. He sat down, took a sip without hesitating and held the glass in his hand. Ulla poured some for herself.

'I must admit,' he said, taking another sip, 'I wasn't sure whether I should agree to this when you rang me.'

He leaned back, pleased with himself, as if he'd just given the right answer in a game of Trivial Pursuit.

'So why did you, then?'

He shrugged. 'I didn't have any other plans. Thought I might as well enjoy some nice wine and good food, see how the evening unfolded.' With an oblique glance in Ulla's direction, he gave a knowing smile.

Her stomach turned. Had he forgotten how things had ended the last time? Or had it been so long since he'd last slept with anyone, it didn't matter?

She saw him take another sip of his wine, gulping it straight down.

'You should enjoy it a little more.'

'Hmm?'

'The wine. Here, let me show you.'

She gripped the stem, lifted the glass and let the wine swirl around the bowl a few times before inhaling, filling her nose and herself with the scents it released, then allowing a few drops to cross her lips, leaning her head back with her eyes closed.

Then she swallowed.

'You shouldn't hurry things,' she said, opening her eyes and gazing at him intensely.

Lines appeared across his forehead.

'Try it,' she urged him.

'I don't know if I can do it,' he said.

Ulla smiled. She looked at him long and hard without speaking.

With some hesitation, he picked up his glass.

'No, no,' she said. 'You need to hold it *here*. At the stem. It's not just any old glass, it's a *wine glass*.'

He allowed himself to be directed, clumsily attempting to swirl the

wine around inside his glass. He brought it to his lips, the same lips that had kissed her with such insatiable hunger the last time the two of them had found themselves right here in her kitchen.

'Doesn't taste any different,' he said, once he had swallowed. 'All that stuff you do is just showing off.'

*

'So you talked about work, then? Sports. That kind of thing?'

'Yes, he talked the whole time; I could barely get a word in edgeways. I don't know, maybe he was nervous or something.'

She placed her hands on one thigh. One of her index fingers began to drum against her tight trousers.

'And there was no suggestion of ... anything more?'

'No, I mean ...' She drummed a little more firmly. 'It's possible he had some kind of expectation or ulterior motive; how could I know? But he certainly didn't make a move on me. He seemed rather cold, if you ask me.'

*

His lips glistened, a combination of fat from the roast lamb and red wine.

'How about a little ice cream for dessert?' she asked.

She was out of her seat before he managed to say a word, opening the freezer and rearranging the contents to make sure he wouldn't see what she'd placed there. She smiled slightly to herself as she removed a carton of Henning Olsen ice cream with the word 'Easy' emblazoned on the outer packaging.

'I'm stuffed,' he said. 'But why not?'

She smiled and replied: 'There's always room for something icy.'

*

Brogeland asked: 'And after you'd had your dessert, what happened then?'

'Then ...' She thought for a moment. '... We sat and listened to some music together and chatted a little before he told me he had to go.'

Brogeland raised an eyebrow.

'I think he was off to meet some friends in town, or something along those lines. I didn't ask.'

The policeman nodded. 'And he left?'

Ulla nodded.

She looked down and clasped her hands together with her fingers interweaved, just as she had done before.

'To think,' she said. 'To be so unlucky. What are the odds of being hit by a falling icicle?' She shook her head.

'Fairly high,' Brogeland replied, pushing his spectacles back into place as he leaned forwards. 'Did anyone see you taking the rubbish out? Any of your neighbours?'

'I don't think so,' she said.

The policeman looked as if he were thinking long and hard about something.

Then he smiled and said: 'OK.' He placed his papers down on his desk and stood up. 'That was all I needed, really.'

Ulla felt almost disappointed. She had hoped she might stay there a little longer; it was so long since she'd had anyone to talk to properly, anyone who'd asked *her* about anything. But she clasped her red mittens and followed his lead, standing up, smoothing the creases from her trousers and blouse, and tucking a few strands of hair behind her ears.

Brogeland followed her to the door and opened it for her. A man with manners, she thought. The kind she'd never manage to snag; there was no point in even trying.

'Actually,' he said, stopping with his hand on the door handle. 'I was thinking of taking another look at the crime scene, just to check a few things. Would you like a lift? Or ... perhaps you're not heading home?'

She looked at him. 'Oh, yes,' she replied quickly. 'I'm heading home. I'd love a lift from a policeman. I've ... never had one before.'

Brogeland smiled and showed her out of his office.

*

Twenty minutes later he pulled up in the street where she lived. Ulla was sorry that the drive was over so quickly. She had felt so important, sitting in a marked police car, seeing the expressions on the faces of the people on the pavement. They had looked at her as if she mattered.

It was still cold outside. As they stepped out onto the pavement, she pulled her jacket more tightly around her and put on both mittens. Someone had placed a red sign on the street, warning of the danger of falling ice and snow. A man was standing outside the building, hacking away at the ice where Roger had bled for the last time. It was a few seconds before Ulla recognised him.

'Do you have permission to do that?' Brogeland asked him.

Øystein stood up, one hand resting on the handle of his spade. His warm breath escaped his lips, floating into the cold night air.

'There was a woman in white clothes here; she said it was OK,' he replied, then looked over at Ulla.

'Sounds like Ann-Mari Sara,' Brogeland replied. 'If she said it's OK, then it must be.'

He tried to smile, but Øystein's expression was severe and solemn. Bouquets of flowers and hand-written cards and notes had been left over by the wall. Someone had lit a candle, which fought hard to stay alight in the draughts that stole around the corner of the building. Brogeland looked up at the roof, where a number of icicles remained. Ulla followed his gaze. They looked like the teeth of a terrifying, prehistoric creature.

'The window up there,' Brogeland said. 'Does it belong to one of the flats?'

'It's the loft,' Øystein replied.

'So everyone has access to it?'

Øystein nodded.

'I'd like to take a look. Would you mind letting me in?'

Without saying a word, Øystein set down his shovel and opened the gate. They walked past the shards of ice by the wall, and the rubbish bins where the smell of garlic and rosemary lingered, then made their way towards the red door labelled ENTRANCE A. Øystein let them in.

'If there was nothing else,' Ulla said as they passed her flat, 'then I'll head in.'

Brogeland carried on up the stairs before turning to face her. 'It's possible that I'll need to have a chat with you afterwards.'

She gave him a guarded smile. 'Well, I'll be here.'

*

The loft was cold and draughty. The ceiling sloped steeply, and light poured in through a skylight and a window in the wall. The storage spaces on both sides were stuffed full.

Brogeland walked over to the window and opened it, poking his head out. It wasn't long before he shut it once again.

'So it's possible to break off icicles from here,' he said, as much to himself as to Øystein, all while he fished his telephone out of his pocket and keyed in a number.

Øystein said nothing as Brogeland waited for an answer.

'Hi, Ann-Mari, it's me,' he said promptly. 'I don't suppose you'd mind popping back to the crime scene? There's something I'd like you to see.'

When he'd received the answer he'd hoped for, he ended the call and looked at Øystein.

'The deceased was here for dinner yesterday evening,' he said. 'Downstairs, with Ulla.'

'That's right,' Øystein replied. He shook his head.

'Am I right in thinking you were his best friend?'

'We were certainly close,' Øystein replied. 'We've known each other a long time.'

Brogeland nodded. 'What can you tell me about Roger and Ulla's relationship?'

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An hour and a quarter later, Brogeland knocked at her door. She opened it swiftly.

'Oh, hello,' she said.

'Hi,' he said. 'Can I come in?'

'Of course, please do.'

She opened the door wide and Brogeland stepped inside. She inhaled the scent of him as he passed her; a combination of leather and masculine aftershave. Just the way men ought to smell.

She shoved the door firmly closed and walked past him; luckily she'd managed a quick tidy before he'd arrived, and had mopped up the worst of the stains from the floor, even though she had known that really there were no stains there to begin with.

'It still smells like garlic and rosemary in here,' she said. 'It takes a while for it to fade; I can't face the prospect of keeping the windows open when it's so cold.'

She turned and smiled, but the policeman neither nodded nor said a word. Instead he simply looked at her. She waited for him to speak. When he eventually moved his lips, her index finger started tapping against the leg of her trousers, hard and fast.

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After they had finished their meal, he stared at her with increasing intensity. When she had cleared away the plates and the leftovers, tidied up and turned

on the dishwasher, Roger approached her from behind, placing his hands on her shoulders.

She stopped and closed her eyes, doing all that she could not to tear herself free from his grasp. She felt his hands gliding down her arms, slipping under them and resting on her hips. He pressed his thumbs gently against the small of her back, pressing himself ever closer, breathing against the nape of her neck, bringing his lips to her ear.

If it hadn't been him, perhaps she might have turned around and stared deep into his eyes, let him kiss her, slowly at first, then faster, lustily returning his advances; she'd read about that in one of the magazines she had bought – that sometimes men want it hard and fast, and that sometimes women have to make them wait.

She had read and read and read.

Cried and cried.

'Roger,' she mumbled quietly. 'Don't.'

He moved in closer. She could tell that he was already aroused.

'You want to, I know you do,' he hissed.

She moved his hands away and took a hasty step to one side, opening the compartment where the rubbish bins were kept and taking out the blue and green bin bags and throwing them down by the front door.

'You need to leave now,' she said.

He looked at her. 'Are you joking?'

She shook her head.

'You ask me to dinner, ply me with wine, and then, what? Close your legs when things finally get interesting?'

She said nothing.

'Don't try to tell me you didn't have an ulterior motive, inviting me here tonight like this.'

She looked up at him. 'You're right,' she said. 'I did.'

'And ...?' He gave a shrug, throwing out his hands in disdain.

But Ulla gave no reply. She saw his lips part, but instead of approaching her, instead of trying to kiss her or change her mind with gently spoken words, he shook his head and swept past her, pulling on his warm, Canadian, down jacket and swiftly and firmly tying his shoelaces.

When he stood back up, he said: 'I should have known it was a mistake coming here. I'm lucky I got away without having to fuck you again; I remember how frigid you were last time.'

Ulla tried to take a deep breath, but couldn't; her chest rose and fell faster and faster, and even though she did her best to close her eyes and shut out

everything around her, she couldn't help her eyes watering. That was why she bent over and picked up the red mittens from the basket by the shoe rack.

'Where do you think you're going?' Roger asked.

'Taking out the rubbish,' she replied.

Roger snorted. Unsurprisingly, he made no offer to take the bags out for her, but simply opened the front door and marched past her into the stairwell. Ulla hurried into the kitchen and opened the freezer, closing it quickly again behind her. With one hand behind her back, she picked up the rubbish bags and hurried after him.

Even though she moved quickly, she only managed to catch up with him down by the letter boxes. She hoped none of the neighbours would hear the sound of her shoes clacking against the floor, her footsteps heavy and rhythmic. Roger pulled open the door but didn't hold it for her as he swept out into the cold night. He strode on towards the icy back yard and hurried towards the alleyway where the bins were kept, which led towards the front gate and out onto the street. Ulla only just managed to keep up in her slippery shoes; she ought to have chosen another pair, but she hadn't had the time.

When he was about to step out through the gate, she glanced over his shoulder, betting on the fact that nobody would drive past at that precise moment.

'Roger?' she said.

'What is it?' he snarled, without turning around.

'Your shoelace is undone.'

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'An icicle,' Brogeland began, gazing hard at her, 'is actually the perfect murder weapon. Under certain circumstances it melts, leaving no fingerprints. Everything is gone, just like that.' He threw his arms out, gesticulating into thin air.

She looked at him. Her fingers tapped against her leg.

'But when it's as cold as it was yesterday, it takes a little longer – in spite of the fact that blood is reasonably warm. What's more, it's easy for fluff and the like to get stuck to something as cold as an icicle – from a mitten or a glove, perhaps.'

Brogeland studied her expression.

'Items of that colour, for instance.' He pointed at her red mittens in the basket by the shoe rack.

'We found textile traces on the icicle that was found in the victim's head yesterday evening, Ulla. The same type as those found on the remaining piece of icicle just under the roof.'

She looked up at him with eyes that began to blink rapidly. The corners of her mouth began to quiver.

He took a step closer and placed a hand on her shoulder. 'Øystein told me that Roger was a bastard where women were concerned.'

She blinked again; there was no point in trying to stop what was coming.

'That he tended to say cruel things to avoid having to call them again.'

A line of saliva extended between her lips as they parted.

'So ... there wasn't anything wrong with me?'

'No, Ulla,' Brogeland replied. 'Nothing at all.'

They stood in silence for a long while.

When she eventually spoke, she could barely hear her own voice.

'Frigid,' she stammered. 'He said I was frigid.' She wiped her nose, but didn't look at him.

'Øystein told me you didn't go to the summer party this year.'

She thought about his warm hand on her shoulder.

'The first time you've missed it in the six years you've lived here.'

She sniffled. Thought about how much she enjoyed listening to his kind voice.

'Were you afraid that Roger might turn up again?'

Keep talking, she thought. Please. Instead, the flat was filled with a frosty silence as he placed a hand on her shoulder blade and gently nudged her towards the door.

'Come on,' he said, opening the door for her.

She stopped and looked at him, her eyes sparkling.

He's a good-looking man, she thought to herself. The kind she'd never manage to snag.

There was no point in even trying.