

## Desperate Measures

Michael Keagan stared despondently at the bleak winter sky. The light snow that had started to fall half an hour ago had become heavier and begun to settle.

'Fabulous,' he whispered, 'the first Christmas snow we get in decades and I'm stood around in it, freezing to death.'

Cursing under his breath, he pulled his hood forward, checked his watch for the 20th time and wondered, once again, why he had chosen to wear trainers instead of the warm winter boots that were sitting under the stairs at home.

Christmas Eve wasn't the best time to do a spot of breaking and entering, he decided.

Keagan looked around, the garden was quiet. His hiding place could not be overlooked by the neighbours, he had chosen well. The laurels were excellent cover and he could see into the drawing room clearly. The occupants, a man in his 40s and a slightly younger woman, were sat together in front of an open fire, drinking and sharing some joke or happy memory.

Keagan willed them to go to bed, it was 11.45. It couldn't be much longer now surely? There was a child in the house, kids always got up early on Christmas day. Parents usually got up with them.

Five minutes later his patience was rewarded. The couple left their fireside seats and headed for the door leading to the stairs. The man remained for a while, turned off the Christmas tree lights and placed a metal guard in front of the coal fire. He checked his watch as he left the room; closing the door behind him.

Keagan watched as the stair light was turned off. It was replaced by a bedroom light and the duller light of the en suite close by. Not long now. He reached for a cigarette then decided it was too risky. He would have to wait.

Ten minutes later the lights were extinguished. He hoped the pair weren't feeling amorous.

Keagan waited in the shrubbery for another thirty minutes before he decided it was safe enough to proceed. He took a final glance at the upstairs window and hurried across the lawn, crouching as he ran. The snow was coming down heavier than ever and would quickly cover any footprints he left behind.

Still crouching, he crossed the patio and headed for a set of French doors. A pair of small garden statues guarded them, one either side of the frame. Keagan lifted the right-hand statue carefully and groped underneath until he found a key. He grinned and nodded to himself. He knew it would be there; people were so lax about security matters.

With a trembling hand, he turned the key in the lock. The door opened with a low groan, the warm air that greeted his entry, welcome after the freezing two-hour reconnaissance. Keagan dipped into his pocket and pulled out a small pencil torch. Sliding a tiny button forward he shone the thin beam around the room. The door he wanted was on the left and with a few quick strides he crossed the timber floor and let himself into the drawing room.

The fire had begun to die down but gave out enough light to enable him to turn off the torch. Keagan wandered over to the Christmas tree, a dozen parcels lay underneath. Picking a couple at random he shook them, guessed the contents then returned them to the pile.

'Now for the tricky bit,' he thought.

He walked to the stair door and slowly eased the handle down. He grimaced as it creaked open, didn't anyone lubricate hinges anymore? Keagan waited for a full minute in case the sound had been heard, but no-one stirred in the rooms above. He decided to leave the door ajar, for his heart as much as anything else. The noise had un-nerved him.

On tip toe and grateful now for his decision to wear the trainers, Keagan crept up the stairs a step at a time, listening intently for any sound of movement.

At the top he halted and waited for a few seconds; all was quiet. He turned to the right, eased open the white painted door in front of him and entered the bedroom. A small night light glowed on the bedside table, he smiled to himself; she never had liked the dark.

Keagan looked toward the small figure curled up under the covers and caught his breath. The girl was asleep, breathing softly, deep in dreams; her golden hair spread over the pillow. He moved slowly to the side of the bed, reached into his pocket and brought out a small package containing a bracelet and a short letter. Holding his breath, he gently lifted her hand and laid the package on the coverlet, then set her hand on top. Instinctively, he leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

He wanted to stay longer, but he daren't. He wanted to wake her, to tell her he loved her, to tell her he hadn't forgotten, but that could end in disaster. Laura's mother had steadfastly refused him access, despite the court order he had won. She had even refused to pass on gifts and messages. Were she to discover him in this burglar role, her revenge would know no limits

Keagan leaned over her again, whispered, 'Soon, my darling,' then, wiping away a tear, he turned and left the room as quietly as he had entered it.

Back outside, Keagan replaced the key under the statue and took a last look at the house he knew so well, the house he used to share with Laura before life had become so difficult. His lawyers had insisted that access would be granted in the New Year It all should have been sorted out much sooner. Had it been left to Laura's mother and him, it would have been.

Once on the street he lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. The snow fell steadily. It was in for the night, there would indeed be a white Christmas; Laura would love that.

Back in the car Keagan lit another cigarette, fired up the engine, turned on the radio and adjusted the dial for the heater. He had a two-hour drive ahead of him, but the journey would be shortened by the feeling of a job well done.

As he was about to pull away, he heard a beep from his pocket. Keagan checked the phone; a text message was waiting in his inbox.

'Thanks Dad, I love the bracelet. Happy Christmas! Laura.

Through misty eyes, Keagan checked his mirrors, pulled away from the kerb and turned up the radio. As he drove along the deserted High Street, he heard the familiar voice of Bing Crosby wishing everyone a merry Christmas.

'Someday soon we all will be together, if the fates allow. Until then we'll have to muddle through somehow...'

Keagan nodded in agreement and headed toward the motorway.