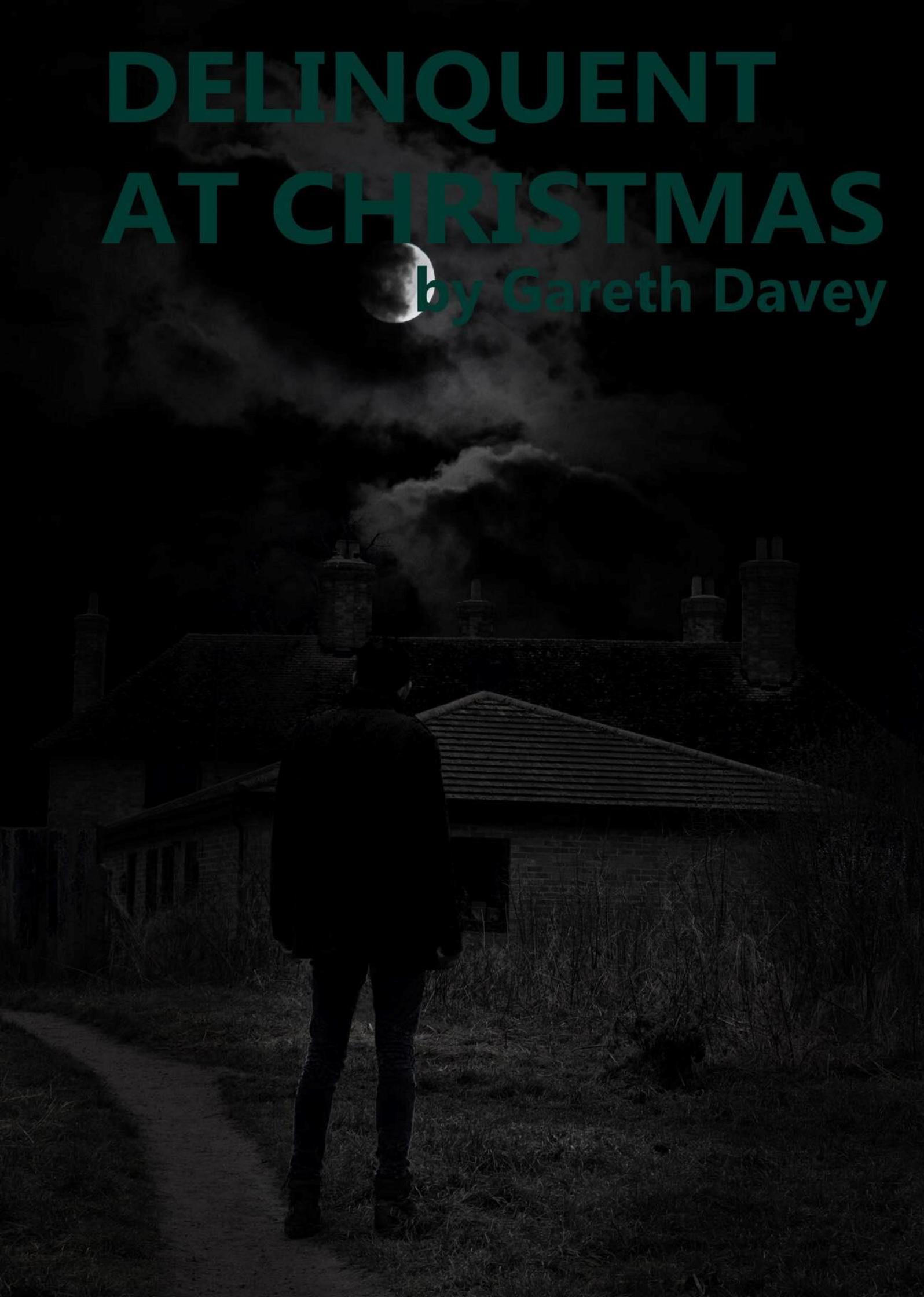


# DELINQUENT AT CHRISTMAS

by Gareth Davey



## Delinquent at Christmas

The rain lashed down from the night sky, soaking into Jason's thick curly hair. It dribbled down onto his beard, as he pushed one of Lucy's old hairclips through the keyhole and wriggled it around, like a worm writhing in an apple. They all told him – the other, less successful burglars – that his life would be much easier if he owned one of those large lock-picking devices, but Jason would never change. He was a retro burglar. A classic thief.

He pumped his leather gloved fist when he heard the gentle click. The handle pulled down beneath his weight, and he eased his way through the back door, out of the violent rain. He took a large tea-towel from the small bag he carried around his waist (again, the 'fanny-pack' was another thing *they* wanted him to get rid of) and wiped his shoes carefully, focusing mostly on the soles. Then he glanced around the kitchen, running his tongue over the front of his teeth.

'It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas,' Jason muttered in his deep voice. He wiped his feet on the back-door mat and glanced around the dark kitchen. His eyes adjusted to the dark, and he could make out the silhouette of the marble worktops and the enormous metal fridge that looked ready to be sent into space. There was a small dog mat in the corner with a bowl of water and the brown stain of old food in the corner of the beige mat. Dogs were a burglar's worst enemy. Nothing could make more noise than the four legged terrorisers – most robbers would swivel and leave at that point. But not Jason.

Earlier in the week he'd monitored the manor house from the road side. A neighbour (or a relative – frankly, Jason didn't care) let the dog out into the woods every morning at seven o'clock. So at six o'clock, in the coaly black, Jason waded into the thick field – smudging dirt on his favourite leather boots – with a selection of *Pedigree* premium brand dog biscuits. He spread them across the grounds, pressing them into the feet of the tree trunks. He wasn't worried about footprints; the rain would wash them away and police only pretend to look for details in burglaries. Especially when the 'victims' were Mr and Mrs Hemingsworth, crying about their stolen golden candelabras into their silver-threaded handkerchiefs.

A sniffing sound and the scuttle of paws drew Jason's attention to the doorway.

'Hey there, little guy,' Jason said, moving towards the doorframe. He pulled out three *Pedigree* premium biscuits from his pocket and waited at the doorway. A dark shadow moved through a living room, passed the shadow of a sofa, followed by a soft breathing noise and unmistakable sound of a wagging tail pounding against a table leg.

Jason clicked his flashlight on and shone the yellow beam into the room. When it hit the golden coat of the Labrador he closed his eyes, just for a moment. Him and Lucy were going to get a Lab. That was always the plan. When their little boy was old enough they'd get one and they'd call it Smeagle, and it would be Jason's job to walk it but Lucy was happy to bring him to the groomers and give him a bath once a week. Jason had screwed that all up. Everything with him and Lucy, maybe the first time he was caught dealing, maybe the second. He was trying to make amends – in his weird way. A savings account already had three grand in it for their boy. But the dog would never happen. Him and Lucy would never happen again.

Reluctantly, Jason opened his eyes and smiled at the dog, whose head was cocked and tongue was lolling out of the side of its mouth like it had completely lost control of its bodily functions.

'Biscuits must be like doggy pizza,' Jason muttered. 'Come here big guy.' He crouched to the floor and stretched out his arm towards the dog. The Lab padded across the living room and sniffed at Jason. 'Hold up,' Jason said. He stood up, still holding his hand out. Then, in a deep voice, he met the thick black of the dog's eyes and said 'sit.' The dog, after wagging its tail some more, did as instructed, perching its rear firmly on the floor.

'You're a good little lad, now, aren't you?' Jason said. He bent down and placed one biscuit on the white carpet, then nodded. The dog sprung forward and chomped the biscuit, leaving crumbs on the floor. Jason waited for the dog to finish licking his lips and then stood up again, holding another biscuit out in the palm of his hand. This time, the dog sat before Jason said anything.

'Now,' Jason said, nodding his thick beard towards the dog. 'Stay.' The dog looked at him with his big eyes, and Jason smiled. 'Stay,' he said again. And then he moved passed the dog, checking behind him to see that the Lab was sat completely still on the floorboards, tail still wagging.

With the dog secured, Jason was free to raid the house. He didn't want to stay too long, in case someone had seen his car on the way in, but he knew he had a little bit of time to find something of value. It wasn't worth him taking a lot – if he took one thing worth a decent amount it might not even be noticed until it was way too late to track. So he swept his torch-beam across the living room, settling for a moment on the Christmas tree that was so draped in white and silver that it looked ready to walk down the aisle. He swung the beam beneath the tree for a moment as well, but the perfect parcels wrapped in royal red would be a step too far for Jason.

He wasn't there to ruin Christmas. Just to take something they didn't need. And he knew exactly where the value would be. The jewellery box.

He crept through the living room and out of the other side, ducking into a mahogany hallway. There was a wreath of holly on the door, bursting with red cherries, and a large ornament of Santa Clause that Jason thought would look suitable in the sex offenders section of a prison.

The stairs creaked beneath Jason's weight – he'd put on a few pounds the last few months with his uplift in cash. Christmas, for some reason, made the upper class careless and made the burglars rich. He'd been eating *Dominoes* pizza for a week – knew the delivery driver's name by this point – and had already bought at least five presents for Noah – Jason's favourite being the acoustic guitar. He could just imagine watching Noah on stage, plucking out Wonderwall to a cheering crowd. If Lucy didn't let him see Noah this year he'd just have to leave the presents on their door step. Hope somebody didn't nick them – and yes, Jason saw the irony in that. Especially since Lucy had started working as a policewoman three months ago. Jason tread a fine line between irony and stupidity most of the time. It was a good job he was born with the balance of a ballerina.

At the top of the stairs, the torch beam illuminated a large photograph of the home-owners. Mrs Hemingsworth was a fifty year old Mother, with the body of a twenty-year old (uplifted breasts included) and the unmistakably stretched skin of a fifty-year old serial botox-user. Mr Hemingsworth wore a bald head and had nostrils like Land Rover tyres. Sometimes, when Jason saw the faces of those he was robbing from, he felt a twinge of regret and considered calling it off. But the faces of this home almost spurred Jason on – especially the bead of glistening crystals that hung around Mrs Hemingsworth’s sagging neck.

He continued through the upstairs hallway, passed an open door that led to a dark marble bathroom – all the way to the end where a large door was pulled firmly closed. Jason pushed the door open and swept the light around the master bedroom.

The double bed must have been Super King Size – it could comfortably offer a horse a mattress, if the horse could cope with the satin sheets. A selection of silver and gold cushions were sat at the top of the bed. Jason wondered where someone would feasibly put their head if they wanted to sleep.

Ignoring the bed, he continued to spray the torch around the room, lighting up the large television, the antique arm chair, the walk-in-wardrobe almost overflowing with kimonos and hunting jackets, the elaborate painting on the wall and the selection of expensive looking vases.

It didn’t take long for the beam of light to land where Jason wanted it to. The dresser was the length of a village pub’s bar, and was a series of elegant boxes clad in laces and simple decorations of silver thread. He prised open the first. Peered into the collection of silver earrings.

‘Nah,’ he said, closing the lid. He moved on to another. This one was slightly larger and had even more stringy frills sliding down the pale fabric.

‘You bloody beauty,’ Jason said, flashing his light inside the box. It was full of necklaces, all stretched out individually like a museum exhibition. There were diamonds on silver chains, precious gems on gold – even the initials ‘DH’ carved in what looked like ruby residue. But it was the necklace resting two up from the bottom of the row that Jason plucked from the box.

Pearls. A string of them in a loose fitting necklace, like a row of tiny baubles. He knocked them together, gently, grinning as the soft sound eased through them. He brought them up to his mouth and scraped one against his front tooth, mouth still pulled into a grin, and almost groaned with happiness when he felt the grate of genuine pearl against his enamel. He slipped the pearls inside his jacket pocket and removed a different set of false pearls (still fairly expensive, fifty quid from the local jewellers) from his fanny pack, placing them delicately into the box. It wouldn't work forever – not if Mrs Hemingsworth genuinely knew what real pearls felt like – but there would be no tracing the originals by the time she noticed they were gone.

After pressing the lid back onto the box, Jason smiled, remembering when he first met Lucy at that fancy dress party. She was dressed as a latino Marilyn Monroe, fake pearls clinging so tightly to her neck that there was a genuine suffocation risk. And Jason, dressed as Al Pacino, his thick beard not yet fully grown, had gone straight over to her, while she sat in the corner sipping on a Coke and Rum, and asked her if he could be her Joe DaMaggio for the night. When she told him that she wanted him for more than 274 days, he was all but in love.

A sound snapped Jason from the memory. The growl of the Labrador. A footstep muffled by the floorboards. Someone else was in the house.

He stood in pitch-black silence in the main bedroom of the house, listening to the house unsettling. The dog stopped growling, but that didn't ease the pit that had opened up inside Jason's stomach. He paused, tried to strain his ears, pick up sounds from inside the house that he would recognise. All he could hear was the thudding of rain outside, pounding into the ground.

Jason bit his lip, almost hard enough to draw blood. He looked over at the large window, velvet curtains hanging either side of it, and considered leaping out. But even with the softened ground, he was likely to break his leg on the jump – and then, not only would he be spending Christmas in the corner of a damp, urine-smelling police cell – but he'd also have a broken leg. He realised quickly that his only option was to try and escape. Through the back door. He glanced into the corner of the room, desperate for an

answer – and he got it. In the form of a jet-black umbrella, with a large bronze point at the tip. He knew what he had to do.

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Officer Leon Burns' flashlight shone on the snarling dog. Its teeth were bared and bright, eyes wild and heckles raised.

'Shut up,' Leon whispered, pulling his gun out. The dog continued to snarl, the only noise in the silent house. A creak eeked out from above him, like the noise Leon's cat made when he tickled its ears. 'Bollocks.'

Ignoring the snarling dog, Leon crept through the living room. He glanced at the mirror for a moment, taking in the heavy bags beneath his blue eyes. His smooth black hair had an oily shine from the rain outside. Leon crept onwards and stopped at the doorframe. He was an open target if he stepped through the shadowy rectangle. The intruder could be armed and would have a free shot.

*Should have waited for back up.* They'd offered it while he was on the way over. Leon had waved it away. Usually he'd have Luciana with him – the perfect back up. She understood what he was going to do before he did it – but that was the problem with a single Mum being a policewoman. She was somewhere at home, with that wilting Christmas tree in the corner, wrapping all of Noah's toy cars in that disgusting holly wrapping paper that Leon had been laughing at her for all week.

Another creak sounded from above him. Leon's fingers tightened around his pistol as he stepped into the hallway. Swept his light round the room – saw nothing but a pile of expensive coats and a creepy Santa that Leon swore he'd arrested last week. Leon took one look at the enormous staircase and made his decision.

He crouched at the foot, his gun trailed on the top step. Felt sweat on his fingers as he tried to tighten his grip. Tried to force his eyes to adjust to the darkness – prayed the dog wouldn't come through the living room door with his teeth bared. Waited for any sign of movement before – something flashed through the air. A blur. Something pointed at the end – he wanted to react, to roll to his right, but he couldn't. He was too slow.

Leon crumpled to the floor, the pain searing through his body.

Through the red mist of vision, he saw her. Luciana. Smiling at him in that goofy way, her head tilted slightly and her teeth – as white as Leon's skin – poking through the gap her lifted lips left. She moved close enough that Leon saw the tanned glow of her cheeks and the deep brown of her eyes meeting his own. And he felt the cool touch of her skin then – smelt the chocolatey shampoo that always radiated off of her. Her lips moved slowly, as if calling him.

'Move,' she said. And then she was louder, like she was at a crime scene. 'MOVE!'

Leon stirred on the hallway floor, his chest heavy beneath the pressure of bruised skin. He looked to the right and saw the missile that had struck him, sprawled on the floorboards like a murder victim. An umbrella. A dark black umbrella with a bronze tip. He'd never live this one down.

As Leon clambered to his feet, he heard the backdoor slam shut.

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Jason sprinted passed the dog, dropping the last two biscuits, and out of the door as fast as he could remember moving – at least since he was a 400m runner at school. He was too pumped up to feel the lashing rain on his face.

The officer looked shaken by the umbrella – probably assuming it was some sort of bullet Jason had fired. The police-man was barely conscious when he sprinted passed him at the bottom of the stairs. Jason

wanted to stop and help him up, but it wasn't worth the jail-time. The officer looked nice enough, but he'd have to come to on his own.

Jason was ten steps from the house when he heard the snarl of the dog again. He glanced back, briefly. There were no lights in the large manor house's windows, as there would usually be on a Christmas Eve. He could imagine it – the two Hemingsworth's curled up on the sofa in the living room, strings of fairy lights around the room, sipping on their glasses of port. For the first time, he wondered why there weren't there.

And then he thought about the cold corners of a prison cell and began to sprint once more – there was a line of trees twenty yards away, and if Jason could make it to there then he'd probably be out of trouble. Back at home in half an hour, feet up on the table, wrapping Noah's last two presents and watching whatever the hell was on TV on Christmas Eve.

But before he could put his feet up in his own living room, reclining into the grooves caved into his leather sofa, he had to get through the night. Away from the police-man who was probably at the back door at this point. And that was when Jason made his first mistake.

He glanced backwards. The police-man had just appeared, yanking the door from the frame. In response, Jason snapped his head back round and tried to take a larger step forwards. But before he knew what was happening, his boot was veering off in the liquid mud, and despite his flailing arms, he fell on his back with a squelch.

Jason felt the rain for the first time, lying there in the mud. Like the day it snowed and Noah ran outside, falling into the snow and pushing his arms out wide and moving them in arcs to make a snow angel. Justin didn't move his arms and legs though. He lay still, feeling the rain hammering down on his face. He could hear the police-man coming closer, but he didn't even think about the grey bricks of the prison cell that had his name on it.

Instead, he thought of the big brown eyes Noah had got from his Mum. He thought of the way his son would stick his tongue out when he called his Dad a 'Poop-man', the way he'd beg his Dad to stop

tickling him and then try and tickle him in return, but could never reach his Dad's stomach and find the right ticklish spots. He thought of the endless *Uno* games and the pictures Noah drew of Jason and Luciana for months after they'd split up. That was gone now. As soon as those bars closed in front of Jason's nose, that was it.

'Don't move!' The police officer yelled, his squeaky voice only just audible above the rain. Jason didn't respond. Just lay there, his back slathered in mud, rain pounding on his face. His thick, black beard felt heavier than usual, weighed down like a sponge. The police-man's flashlight was clicked on and shone towards Jason, blinding him with golden yellow as it hit his eyes. And then he was standing above him, staring down at Jason with soft blue eyes and a sombre face. Not the red-faced fury Jason was imagining. There was something sad about the sullen cheeks of the police-man, something childlike about the glint in his eyes.

'Go on, mate, up you get,' the officer said. Jason pushed the palm of his hand into the mud and levered his back up. He was sat in the mud now, the gun of the police-man aimed at his midriff. 'Up,' the police-man repeated.

'I'm moving,' Jason said. He stood up and glanced at the police-man once more. Jason was a good two inches taller than the officer. If they were to have a boxing match, Jason reckoned he could take him. But the police-man had the upper hand in this situation; he had a loaded gun, wore body armour and probably had a belt full of weapons at his disposal. Jason had his ex girlfriend's hairgrip, a string of real pearls and two claw-sized hands.

'I'm parked next to your car,' the police-man said. 'The other side of the trees. You're going to lead me there, two steps ahead.' Jason raised his eyebrows. There was something familiar about the police-man. He reminded Jason of an action man – the close cropped black hair and the blue eyes. The little scar, like a cat scratch, just beneath the right eye. 'Move,' the officer said. Jason did, dragging his feet through the gloopy mud, like wading through soup. The rain made it impossible for Jason to see more than two metres in front of him – and at this point he'd resigned himself to the arrest. The bank of trees, whose naked branches were like cracks in the night, were no longer safety.

'What's your name?' the police-man asked. Jason was two steps ahead, as requested, and ten yards from the trees.

'You what?' Jason said, twisting his head to look at the officer.

'Keep facing forward, please,' the police-man said. 'I asked what your name is.'

'I'm – name's Jay,' Jason said, mumbling. 'What – who are you?'

'Officer Leon Burns,' the police-man said. They didn't speak again until Jason reached the trees. The thick, brown trunks were like the legs of huge creatures in the dark, and the crackling branches above his head tangled like raking bones.

'Where's your partner?' Jason said. 'I thought you guys travelled in pairs?' He turned his head again, wanting to see the officer's reaction. This time, Officer Leon Burns didn't tell him to turn his head. He didn't look at Jason as he spoke.

'At home,' he said. 'She's got a kid.' It hit Jason like a runaway truck on a motorway. The police-man. He knew where he recognised him. Noah.

In October, when Jason was allowed bring Noah trick or treating, Noah had showed Jason a picture he'd drawn. It was what he'd wanted to dress up as. A police-man, with black hair, blue eyes and a cut just beneath his eye. Noah had written *Mummy's partner* beside it. It had pricked Jason like a thorn – he'd had to wipe a tear from his eye and pretend to Noah that he had a cold. But now he realised. Luciana had joined the police force when they'd split up. *This* was the man she was working with.

'Well I'll be damned,' Jason said, shaking his head. 'What are the bloody chances?'

'The chances?' Leon said, stepping closer to Jason and waving his gun, as if he was reminding Jason that it was there. 'Of what?'

'She latino?' Jason said. He ran his tongue across his front teeth. 'Your partner, I mean.'

'What the hell's that got to do with you?'

'She got a kid, too? Lovely little lad, big brown eyes like his Mum. Loves Spacemen and *Power Rangers*?'

'Noah?' the officer said. 'Oh shit. You're –'

'The Dad,' Jason said, with a little smile. It was gone from his face as fast as it had appeared. 'Well – I was. Not sure I'm gonna get much time with the little lad after this.'

'You – Luciana never –'

'Mentioned me. Nah, she wouldn't do. I'm not much to sing about, really.'

'Made one hell of a kid,' the officer said. The two men were stood perfectly still, a metre from one another. Rain dripped slower beneath the branches, hitting the two men in a gentle glistening of raindrops. 'Gotta be something good about you.' The police-man smiled at Jason. 'You don't seem all that bad.'

'You just caught me burgling –'

'Yeah but you were robbing someone who'd probably never notice it was gone. What did you even take? Jewellery?' Jason reached into his pocket and pulled out the pearls. He held them in a flat palm. The officer shone his flashlight on the beads and raised his eyebrows.

'Pricey,' he said. 'Bet you'd get a good couple of grand for those. Enough to start up a business or something – right?'

'Ur – well –'

'Like a security company? I mean – if you can break into a house you know the weak points – right?'

'I guess but –' The officer held up a hand. A slither of silver moonlight snuck through the clouds and fell on his face, lighting his eyes like ten pence pieces.

'That boy needs a Dad,' the Officer said, bringing his hand to his chin. 'A real Dad. Someone to look up to – to make him a better man. Better than – well better than you. Someone to show him the right way.' He paused, nodding. 'I'll be honest with you, Jay – I want to be a man in his life. I think – in some ways, I

love his mother. Luciana is an amazing woman – but you can be an amazing man, too. I could – could just say you'd gone when I arrived.'

'But what –' Leon silenced him with a raised hand. Jason stared at the officer with deep brown eyes, his mouth hanging open.

'Take those pearls and get the hell out of here. Then start your bloody business, security or whatever. Something bloody legal. But for God's sake don't make me regret this.'

'What the hell do you mean? You don't even know me –'

'It's not for you,' Officer Leon Burns said. 'It's for your boy. Now get the hell out of here.'

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Luciana had just wrapped the last present when there was a knock on the door. She looked up at the clock on the wall.

'Who the hell is knocking at one in the morning?' she said, but the knock was so gentle that she knew that, whoever it was, she could trust. They knew she had a little boy, dreaming of Santa Clause in the room upstairs. She stood up, shook her head at the small mountain of boxes and toys, all wrapped in the holly paper she'd found (left over from the year before) and picked up her half drunk bottle of Budweiser. She always had a bottle on Christmas Eve, wrapping up the little tykes gifts for him. Before she drank the little glass of whisky that they'd started when Jason was around. And eaten the cookie.

It was all worth it – the scarily low bank account, the weary Christmas Day at her Mother's – for Noah's giant grin when he saw the large red sack, full to the brim with presents. Though she wouldn't be able to keep the charade up if he had to see her terrible wrapping every year.

Luciana stepped into the hallway and glanced at the front door. From the large figure and bushy beard, she already knew it was Jason.

‘What the hell do you want?’ she muttered. She considered turning around and going back into the living room, but she was scared he might be drunk and knock louder. So, reluctantly, she opened the door and felt the icy air invade her house.

Jason stood on the doorstep with his mouth slightly open and thick streaks of mud across his face, down his front and on his hands. His usually perfect hair was a curly wet mess, and his beard hung to one side.

‘Jay?’ she said. ‘What the –’

‘Shh,’ he said, holding a finger to his lips. He wasn’t drunk – she could tell because his eyes weren’t the ting of red that they usually were when he drank too much whisky. ‘Can I come in?’

‘Quickly,’ Luciana said, ushering him in. ‘What the hell –’

‘Shh,’ he said. ‘Don’t wanna make the little dude.’ She watched him move passed her in the hallway with her eyebrows raised and her lips twisted.

‘Jason,’ she said, after closing the front door and the living room door. ‘What the hell happened to you?’ Jason didn’t respond. He was sitting by the pile of presents, cross legged.

‘Did you wrap this one with your mouth?’ he said, and he smiled. His eyes twinkled, like they’d done all those years ago at that fancy dress party, and for just a moment, Luciana felt like no time had passed. But then she remembered. Everything.

‘Jason if you just came here to laugh at my –’

‘Nah,’ he said. ‘I came to drop this off.’ He pulled out an envelope from his pocket. It had *Luciana* written on the front of it. ‘It should cover the cost of the gifts.’

‘I don’t want your –’

‘I don’t care,’ Jason said. ‘You’re having it. And I want to let you know that I might be a bit late calling Noah tomorrow. I’m doing a shift at the homeless shelter.’

'Great,' Luciana said. 'Anything else?'

'I'm starting a business in the New Year. Security.'

'For which mafia?'

'For houses in dodgy neighbourhoods,' he said. 'You mind if I use yours as a starter?' She rolled her eyes.

'For goodness sake, Jay, I told you this isn't a –'

'I'm kidding,' Jason said, and he grinned. And when he grinned, Luciana couldn't help but see Noah plastered all over his face. 'Now how about we drink a bit of that milk, eat a bit of that cookie and you can let me rewrap these damn awful gifts?'

'You're getting cleaned up first,' Luciana said with a smile. Her phone buzzed as Jason stood up and left the living room, heading for the shower. Luciana surprised herself when she went to glance at the screen. She found herself wanting it to be Leon. It was.

*Missed a big night. Merry Christmas xx*

As the shower began to hiss upstairs, gently – Noah wouldn't stir – Luciana wrote out her reply.

*Gutted. Merry Christmas to you too.*

And then she paused, before adding another message to the thread.

*What you doing Boxing Day? Know you said your parents aren't about – fancy a drink at mine?*

Luciana smiled to herself when the message went through. Boxing Day would work. After all, Noah would be spending the day with his Dad.