

# THE SANTA BENEATH THE ICE

*A Keegan and Lestrade Short Story.*

**SAMPLE CHAPTER 1 OF 4.**

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1.

Constable Jack Keegan prodded at his coffee with a spoon. It didn't move. 10 minutes sat on the window sill had been enough to cover it in a thick circle of ice.

It was going to be one of those days.

It was the cruel winter of 1900 and New York City had frozen to its core. As the Constable looked out from the frost-encrusted window, he could see icicles hanging in sheets from the rooftops all around him. In the distance the sun was glancing off the Hudson River, now covered, bank to bank, with a thick sheet of ice. Even inside the Precinct HQ fingers of frost were creeping across the desks and chewing at the walls.

"Merry Christmas," Keegan laughed, rising to his feet with a smile and heading to the door.

It was Christmas Morning and, ever the optimist, the young Irish Constable was expecting a nice quiet day – perhaps a visit to the nearby soup kitchen to warm him through as he walked his beat.

A scream from the river soon dashed that hope.

"Murder! Murder! Help, somebody please!"

Keegan was just stepping out into the frozen air when he heard it.

"Oh, God! Help! Somebody help, please!"

His blood ran cold.

The Constable raced down to the cobbled street and stopped to listen again, watching the shutters and windows above him swinging up and open at the sound.

In his three years on the force, the Constable had never heard a more wretched and desperate voice. "Sweet Mary," he cursed, sprinting towards the river.

Keegan pressed two fingers into his mouth and blew. The whistle sliced through the air behind him and a sharp bark rang out from the precinct in reply.

A grizzled black bulldog shot from the doorway, pelting eagerly at the Constable's heels.

The Constable had run the distance between police headquarters and the river many times - usually when late for duty. That morning, however, the frozen air turned against him. Every breath caught like a razor blade slicing into his lungs and by the time he reached the dockside his body was bent double in agony.

Collapsing against a mooring and retching in a cruel fit of coughing, he weakly held his hand in the air.

"Wait,..... Wait for me,....."

The bulldog raced past him, leaping from the dock and cannoning to the deck of a schooner. From there, the animal leapt to a jetty and onto the ice of the river, scuttling away into the distance.

"Bloody,.... dog,...." winced the policeman, clawing his way to his feet and barrelling down a set of steps to join the dog on the ice.

Whistles rang out from the riverbank as two more constables joined a gathering crowd. On seeing Keegan stumbling across the ice, his colleagues gingerly pawed their way down ladders in pursuit, muttering oaths and shouting insults in his direction.

There was a mist hanging over much of the river - a great wall of fog that stretched into the sky like a skyscraper. Keegan ran headlong into it.

He was suddenly embraced in a frozen white shroud, cutting him off from the world outside. Noises from the bank sounded distant and muffled as he slowly walked forward, straining his eyes in search of his dog.

"Hello?! This is the police. Who's there?" Keegan's shouts were swallowed by the void. No sound echoed back.

"I'm here to help," he called again. "Who is calling?"

There was a thundering crack far beneath the Constable's feet.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God!" he choked.

Keegan stopped still, spreading his feet and arms wide. The absurdity of his situation hit him like a brick, his skin crawling and his bladder tightening as he considered the rushing river beneath.

"I'm going to murder you, you jowly, slobbering mutt!"

Keegan was fairly sure that it was his paralysing fear speaking, though it wasn't the first time he'd uttered the threat. He had a sneaking suspicion that it wouldn't be the last, though that depended on how long the ice held.

His breakfast was threatening an escape as he turned his head from side to side in a desperate search. At this point, he wasn't sure from which orifice it would erupt.

Somewhere to his right he thought that he could see a shadow. It was bent low against the ice and swimming in his vision as ribbons of mist drifted around him.

"Who's that?" He called out.

Shuffling sideways, he slowly worked his way towards the shape, listening with pained effort for any sound of ice splitting under his feet. There was a soft sobbing and a dull thumping sound from the shadow. A bark confirmed that his canine companion had already arrived.

Step by step, Keegan crept nearer. As the mist parted, he could see a young woman crumpled in the snow, weakly driving the heel of a shoe into the ice beneath her. Tears were streaming down her face and freezing in jewelled drops on her ragged, dirty clothes. Wooden buckets and fishing twine were chaotically scattered around her. The bulldog was sitting beside the woman, looking carefully into the river.

"Now, now miss," the Constable began, wincing inwardly at every strike against the ice. "Mind what you're doing there. We don't want to,..."

His words were cut short as his foot slipped out from beneath him. He stumbled forward, crashing into one of the buckets and flinging himself face first into the ice with a sickening splat. Stars burst in his vision as his head came crashing down.

Laying there with his eyes tightly shut, the terrified Constable waited for the ice to shatter and swallow him into frozen darkness.

When it didn't happen, he opened his eyes.

He immediately wished that he hadn't.

The Bulldog watched with amused interest as his human partner shot up from the ice, scrambling backwards as if jolted with electricity.

"Holy Jesus!" Keegan shouted, his eyes staring madly down through the bloodied ice. There, bobbing back at him, was another face, trapped, blue and frozen, beneath. It was a face he recognised from the storybooks of his childhood, a face trimmed with white fur and a fluffy white beard: it was the face of Santa Claus.

Constable Keegan suddenly discovered how his breakfast would escape - and it wasn't pretty.

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"So you couldn't keep it down, eh Paddy?"

Eric, the precinct surgeon, liked to find humour in his work. This time, as with most times before it, he failed.

It'd never occurred to Eric that Constable Keegan could have another name: he was Irish and that meant his name was Paddy. That was the way of things in Eric's slow, untroubled mind.

Keegan was leaning back against a grimy tiled wall at the police mortuary, dabbing at his bloodied nose and nursing a fresh black eye. In front of him, Santa lay on a slab, his grimy green coat and trousers sodden with water. His gleaming leather shoes were the only things that seemed untouched by the polluted wash of the Hudson.

The once-jolly face of Saint Nick stared lifelessly at the Constable, his dishevelled beard hanging from strings over his ears and a deep gash stretching across his forehead. As the surgeon pressed on the man's chest, a great glug of water welled up and spilled down his blue, cracked cheeks.

"Drowned, you see. Poor bastard," the surgeon continued, circling the table. "Pretty obvious, even for a numbskull like you. I don't know why you bothered calling me in."

"It's procedure." croaked Keegan.

"Not on Christmas Day," grumbled Eric. "I was just sitting down to breakfast."

"Orders. Is there anything else we should know?"

The bloated, sweaty surgeon rubbed his third chin. He would've rubbed his first but it'd disappeared under his second many years before.

"Not that I can see," the surgeon grumbled, reaching for his coat. "Probably one of these charity bozos who bother you on the street - that'd explain the getup. Check out the grime on that jacket: he'll be a bum, I'd put money on it. Beyond that? Fell off a bridge, hit his head, drowned in the river and got trapped under the ice. Case closed: Merry Christmas."

The surgeon said these last words as he bustled out of the door, slamming it with more force than the wall could take. Two tiles broke free from the lintel and shattered on the stone floor.

"Oh, and get your damn dog off my table!" Eric called from the hall.

The bulldog had jumped onto the corpse and was busy sniffing at the clothing and burying its snout in the dead man's hair. With a weary sigh, Keegan lifted the dog down.

"He always knows when you do that," muttered the constable, placing the dog on the floor and turning to inspect the body.

"It's about the only real insight that fat oaf can muster," came a voice from behind him.

Keegan's shoulders dropped. A smell of pipe tobacco suddenly filled the room. The Constable dreaded what he would see if he turned around,... but he turned anyway.

"Sweet Jesus, I thought you wouldn't do this to me again," he wept.

"My dear chap," said the bulldog, now standing on his hind legs and puffing on a curved pipe with gusto. "When the game's afoot, what else am I to do?"

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