

# Bad Christmas



Chapter II

*Shutoff Notice*

A. A. A. Hartvisen

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## *Chapter II: Shutoff Notice*

A. A. A. Hartvisen

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High Desert Ventures LLC  
608 East Madison  
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Bad Christmas, Chapter I

# BAD CHRISTMAS

## CHAPTER II : SHUTOFF NOTICE

The bright red ring on Meagan's Front Door was visible from a block away. But the driveway was in back of House. So Meagan pulled in, parked, and then went inside and through House to Front Door to investigate.

He had a pretty good idea about the circular sign on Door before he got a closer look. Yet he still couldn't quite believe it. As he passed through House' insides, he flipped the lightswitch in the kitchen. No light came on.

He opened Front Door and looked at the round, red label that had been affixed thereto. It was a shutoff notice from Sharplin Charter Electric Trust, SCET. There were two lines on the lower half of the sign, captioned "Reason: ". Poorly formed, black magic letters had been

written in: "Nonpayment."

With some difficulty, Meagan removed the sign, went back inside and closed Door. As he approached Telephone, it rang. He picked up the receiver.

"Hello," said Paullus Meagan.

"Paul?"

"Yes, it's Paul. I live alone. I never have guests. Certainly not relatives."

"Okay, okay. It's Vince."

"Hi," said Meagan. "What is it?"

Vince Millband was an electronics technician Meagan met by accident at Halcyon about six months ago. Millband was only able to stomach the system at Halcyon for three months--by then he had to quit. Meagan went out with Millband for a few beers once, and they still talked sometimes, mostly by telephone. Meagan was no great socialist anyhow.

"Well I just heard on the scanner the cops are at Montie's," said Millband.

*Great*, thought Meagan and silently cursed his father. He looked at Clock. It was 17 15.

The power company closed its offices at about 17 30 and did not reöpen till Monday morning. It would be tough enough getting the mistake cleared up in the fifteen minutes that was now left to him, but there would be no possibility of getting anything done after that, until Monday. Field men continued to work on the lines and boxes over the weekend, but they were unable to act outside work orders that had been processed by the office during the week.

"Vince, I've got to go," said Meagan and closed the connexion.

He dialled the power company. A computer switchboard answered and put him on hold. Meagan watched another six minutes tick across Clock's concerned face and worried about his father. Every three to six months, Montie got drunk and acted out some fantasy of aggression

against oppressive authority. As soon as it was over, he would come back to his senses and promptly flee the scene of his crime, go home and wait for the police to come for him.

But even when he was calm and clearheaded, Montgomery Meagan was not a humble man. And the police, with their typical, overbearing, cop attitudes, always pushed things a bit further than absolutely necessary. Over the years, Paullus learnt that his intervention at these times, or at least his presence as a witness, could prevent his father from getting himself a beating or having to spend the night in jail.

And in the back of his mind, Paullus couldn't help worrying about the possibility of his father getting himself shot. So when he met Millband and found out he was an enthusiastic police scanner, Paullus asked him to let him know when he heard about anything going down at Father's. But there was not much Paullus could do about it now. He did not want to spend Christmas freezing to death. Nor did he look fondly toward the idea of spending it holed up with Montie in his smutty warren until Monday. Furthermore, the Pipes were naked and helpless in the crawlspace beneath House' spidery underbelly, reliant entirely upon the heat Montie radiated through the joists for protection from cold, cruel weather. Pipes would freeze and crack and burst open if power were not restored too soon.

"SCET. Estella Hendley. What's your concern?"

"Hey," said Meagan. "I just got home and my power's shut off. And I—"

"Account number," said the girl.

"Fuck, Miss, I don't know," said Meagan. "I don't have it memorised."

"Look on the lower right hand corner of the shut off notice," said Hendley.

"It's round," said Meagan.

"Excuse me?"

“The shut off notice is round. It has no corners.”

“Name?”

“Paullus Meagan.”

Meagan listened to the girl type frantically and pant into his earpiece. Whatever she was typing was certainly much longer than the twelve letters in his name. Finally she stopped and caught her breath.

“Montgomery Meagan, at 1911 Launce?”

“No,” said Meagan. “*Paullus* Meagan, at 313 Spraggens.”

“Paullus?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, here it is. *Nonpayment*,” said the girl proudly.

Meagan wondered if *Nonpayment* were spelt with an extra *e* in her computer records as well.

“That what it says on the notice,” said Meagan.

“Well our records verify...”

“I just paid the fucking bill,” said Meagan. “On Tuesday.”

“Oh,” said Hendley, typing rapidly. “Oh, yes, here it is, *Paullus*. Your check was returned. So your account was charged an additional \$76.72 bad check fee and a unit was dispatched to shut off your power. Thank you,” she said and hung up.

Meagan picked up Telephone and threw it across the room at the wall. Its motion was slowed a little when it came to the end of the cord and unconnected itself. It then fell with an unsatisfying lack of violence in the corner and rolled sadly over on its back. In a moment, Meagan was glad that Telephone had not been badly hurt by his senseless act of violence.

He went over and picked Telephone up and plugged it in. The plug was all messed up, so he

had to hold it in place to keep it connected.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Phone.”

He dialled the power company. Miss Hendley answered directly this time.

“SCET. Estella Hendley. What’s your concern?”

“Let me speak to a supervisor,” said Meagan.

“No.”

“No? Why not?”

“They have all gone home early. Sir,” she explained. “*It’s Christmas Eve!*”

“Oh, I must have forgotten, Stella,” said Meagan. “Just put through an order to have my power reconnected and I’ll get this mess straightened out with the bank first thing Monday.”

“I’m sorry, Sir,” she said. “You are Paullus?”

“Meagan.”

“Well I *just* talked to you, Sir, and your account has been marked as hostile, so payment agreements can only be made by at least tier three.”

“Well then give me someone from tier three!”

“Tier three is upper management, and, *as I’ve told you*, Paullus, these people are all gone home. It’s Christmas Eve!”

“Really? I didn’t know that,” said Meagan. “*Turn on my power or I’ll fucking kill you!*”

*Click.* She hung up.

Meagan stood there and considered his options. It looked like there was nothing he could do about the power company. *Why did the check bounce?* he wondered.

He checked with Clock. The bank was still open for another forty minutes. He called.

He was received by a computerised switchboard which pronounced a repeated message that



told the date, time, and current temperature, among other things. It was 5 ° according to the message. *Droppin' fast*, thought Meagan.

“Third Freedom Bank, Patty speaking.”

“Hey, this is Paullus Meagan. I’d like to find out why a check I wrote earlier this week was returned.”

“Yes, Sir. Account number?”

He recited all relevant information.

“Oh dear!” said Patty. “It looks like you have a negative fifty dollar balance!”

“There must be a mistake.”

“Well,” said Patty. “The bank charged your account a fifty dollar fee for insufficient funds when the check first came in. Before that, the balance was just plain old zero.”

“That can’t be right. I had over six thousand dollars in that account.”

“Wait a moment.”

He waited.

“Here it is, Mr Meagan. Last Friday night, we received a debit against your account for a whole twenty thousand dollars from the Department of Education.”

“Damn it!” said Meagan. “Thank you... uh... happy Christmas.”

He hung up. Meagan knew what had happened. Eight years ago, he applied for a special Department of Education program that had paid for Meagan to travel around the East Coast for a year, learning cutting-edge techniques at a series workshops directed by the masters of the field. Only the best were admitted, and each of them had to sign an agreement that promised to repay the state twenty-five thousand dollars for the privilege.

It had been a wonderful opportunity, and with it Meagan was enabled to study under several

of the greatest Russian biochemists. He also became fluent in the Russian language, which was of use as a sort of lingua franca among the numerous Transcaucasian scientists that so dominated the field these days.

The agreement provided for the repayment to be paid out of any profits made from saleable discoveries or inventions, as they occurred. All this was worked out according to a very favourable percentage. The idea behind it was that anyone chosen for the program was genius enough that, with the help of the workshops, the State was making a good investment.

In early part of his career, Meagan stumbled upon some stuff that took care of five thousand dollars worth of repayment, but he had not come up with anything profitable since. If, after a certain number of years, the student's work remained unprofitable to the state, the department would take action to recoup its losses more directly. But that period was supposed to be ten years. And it was only six since Meagan's last innovation.

Meagan went over to Cherry Desk and thumbed through a stack of old mail. The stack was made up of several possibly important, but unurgent, messages received over the past month. One, dated two weeks back, was from the Department of Education.

It was unopened. Four times a year, he was sent a reminder of his obligation to repay. These reminders were all identical and of no real importance. And so he had not bother to opened this one earlier. He opened it now.

It was the same form letter as usual, with a new date. But there was also an attached declaration of intent to pursue payment immediately if arrangements were not made. There was a number to call to make arrangements. And the deadline was set to the middle of last week.

It went on to say that failure to contact the appropriate offices would result in the attachment

of wages, bank balances, and any real property other than primary dwelling. Meagan realised that this meant that he would be receiving only a portion of his final paycheck.

Meagan did not feel so smug about quitting anymore. *Those bastards at Halcyon are laughin' their asses off now!* Telephone rang. Meagan went to it.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hey, it’s Vince again. I been calling you!”

“So?”

“I heard’em call for an ambulance out to your father’s address!”

“Fuck.”

“A minute later, they called it off. That was about ten minutes ago!”

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know!”

“Okay, thanks. I better get over there.”

“Bye,” said Vince.

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