

Bad Christmas



Chapter VII

Frozen Pipes

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BAD CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER VII : FROZEN PIPES

Paullus Meagan passed the bank on his way back home. The sign said -3° . Already this cold, and the sun had only just begun to set—and still no snow. Christmas wreaths hung from lampposts all on Main Street, and the sidewalk trees were full of lights.

Meagan pulled into his driveway, shut off the car, and went inside. It was warmer than outside, but it was still pretty cold indoors. House did not hold heat as well as he had wished.

“I know you’re doing your best, Old House,” Meagan said softly and stroked the doorjamb affectionately.

He paced around the parlour trying to decide what to do.

He looked at his Christmas tree. It was a small spruce tree he went out and cut two

weeks ago. Meagan always liked Christmas, and kept a tree even though he did not have any gifts to put beneath it or any relatives to see it. He had been too busy at work this year to decorate it. He had meant to do it tonight. That was before everything else. The boxes of ornaments and lights were still up in the attic. *Well, no time for that now.*

Meagan's main concern was for the Pipes under House. He could crawl down there and shut off the water, but he couldn't drain the lines unless he spent all night at it. If he could keep House warm enough, he wouldn't have to bother.

Or, he could just forget about it, let the Pipes freeze, and spend the night in his father's warm house. He took out his father's pistol and set it down on Coffee Table's shiney surface. Paullus did not own a gun of his own, but he went shooting with his father many times. He shot this very gun more times than he could count. It was a good thing the police hadn't found it.

He went around the tree and looked at the wood stove. When Meagan bought this house, the stove came with it. It was very small, with only a thirty-five centimetre aperture. He had only used it twice, for æsthetic purposes, when he brought a girl home. He had no stock of wood. *Or do I?* he thought, looking toward the kitchen.

In the spare bedroom were several large boxes containing a new set of kitchen cabinets. Working so much lately, he had been unable to install them, and the original, half-rotten set that came with the house was still in use. Since he meant to tear them out anyway, he thought, *Why not put the old wood to good use?*

Meagan thought vaguely about the possibly toxic fumes that would rise from the various solvents and preservatives in the wood, but dismissed these concerns by assuring himself that the stove would seal them in. *They'll go up the chimney.*

“May as well get started,” he said.

He quickly emptied the drawers and cabinets of their sparse contents, retrieved a crowbar from the guest room, and went to work. By nightfall, he had detached all of the old cabinets. They only needed to be broken down into thirty-five centimetre fragments for incineration.

His exertions kept him from getting cold, but his flashlight became so ineffective that he had to get out the oil lamps and light them up before he could start a fire. They cast long shadows across his house, and Meagan was beginning to feel very cold. He took a lamp around House and opened all the faucets a trickle.

Someone told him once about the technique, that it would help prevent freezing in the pipes, as warm water from the city main flowed constantly to refill the chilly pipes. With a book of matches, a newspaper, and an armful of small broken cabinet pieces, Paullus Meagan set about lighting a fire in the stove.

When he opened the door on the front of the stove, a cold breeze flooded down the chimney and into the house, blowing tiny bits of soot and ash with it. There was a lever on the bottom of the stove which Meagan understood to control the flow of air into the burn chamber, but he didn't really understand how it worked, nor was its mechanism clearly visible. He drew it out into what he thought was the open position.

Meagan took the entire newspaper apart, page by page, and, crumpling each page into a ball, packed it into the stove. Then he layered broken fragments of the kitchen cabinets over the top. The stove was almost completely stuffed with inflammable particles when he finished. He struck a match and tried to light the fire.

As he brought the match to paper, it blew out. He tried three more times before he

realised that it was the cold wind coming down the chimney that was extinguishing his matches. Taking a lamp into the kitchen, he dug through all the stuff he had dumped out of the kitchen drawers onto the dining room floor. After some searching, he found what he sought, a small butane lighter.

Returning to the so painstakingly laid, unlit fire in the stove, he struck the lever on the lighter until it caught. He held the flame up to the pile of papers. It flickered and was blown away from the paper by the downdraught, but he pushed it closer, and finally it lit the paper. He went on to light the paper in three other places.

He was about to light even more of the balls of paper, when smoke began pouring out of the stove into the room. The heap of inflammables was smoking as it caught fire, but cold wind kept pouring down the chimney, forcing the smoke into the room.

What the fuck? he thought. This had not happened the other times he lit a fire. In fact, there had been no such downdraught at all the times before. He didn't know what to do. At first he just waited for it to resolve itself and go away on its own. The quantity of smoke pouring into the room just grew larger.

He grabbed an old file from work that that had been lying on a bureau in the parlour. He rolled it into a tube and set fire to one end. Turning and holding it at an angle to get a good flame, he approached the fire. He brandished his torch into the fireplace, trying to add heat to the fire to make it burn right. This, he was certain, would make flames go up the chimney, as they should do naturally. Wind from the chimney just blew the flames out of his burning file.

The fire inside meanwhile grew larger. As the contents burnt more completely, less smoke was produced. However, the entire quantity of smoke produced still poured out of the front of the fireplace and into the room, instead of up the chimney. Finally, Meagan availed

himself of his only remaining option. He shut the furnace door.

Smoke continued to pour out around the edges of the door, but it did stifle the flow somewhat. The flames, visible through a glass window in the door, dwindled smaller and smaller. Meagan thought about flapping the door to get some air to it and then remembered the vent control at the base of the stove. He took and pushed it to the opposite setting. The flames suddenly grew long and healthy again. They burnt vigorously, and the quantity of smoke that seeped around the door into the room decreased. After about two minutes, it stopped altogether.

The chimney creaked and groaned as it changed shape in the heat. The fire inside was beginning to dwindle. Meagan ran into the kitchen. He thought he was going to have plenty of time to break down some pieces to fit inside while the kindling caught, but instead, the smoke problem had kept him busy far too long. He frantically swung the crowbar at a set of drawers, smashing it haphazardly in hopes of producing smaller fragments as quickly as possible. Presently, he gathered those pieces that might fit and rushed back into the parlour.

The fire had reduced itself to a pile of red coals lit by a few, very small, deep red flames. Meagan opened the door, and to his surprise, no more smoke came forth. And there was no cold breeze. He loaded more fuel into the furnace and shut it up again. The fuel caught and burnt, and the chimney squeaked and chirruped. And heat radiated out from it, warming the room.

Meagan dragged pieces of cabinetry into the parlour and used the crowbar and a small bowsaw to break them down into thirty-five centimetre fragments. He prised and sawed, stopping to feed the fire as necessary, until all old cabinets had been reduced to a clumsy stack of firewood.

As he fed the fire, it grew hotter. The sides of the stove glowed orange in the dim lamplight. And when he opened the door to feed the flames again, the air that blew out was almost too hot to bear.

The hotter the fire became, the faster it burnt the wood. In only a couple hours, all but a small quarter of the fuel remained. Meagan left the fire to see how well the back of the house retained the heat.

As soon as he neared the doorway into the kitchen, the air grew cold. The kitchen itself was downright chilly. But the faucet still dribbled into the sink that stood uncertain on its stripped platform. Further back, the bathroom was frigid. Sheets of ice formed on the inside of the window.

Meagan was shivering by the time he got back to the fire. The stuff in the stove wore down again into a bed of bright coals. Meagan refilled the furnace and thought about the problem.

Why isn't House keeping warm? Meagan knew lots of people who heated their homes entirely with wood. *What do they know that I don't?* he asked himself.

He thought it over and put more wood on the fire. The stack was very small, and the house was still freezing. A good portion of Meagan's wood was very small. Even for such a tiny stove, in fairness it could only be called *kindling*. *Perhaps that's my problem*, thought Meagan.

But there was not much he could do about it. Any source of wood he had available would be similarly comprised of manly wee pieces. *Could there be something else I'm missing?* he asked himself hopefully. Meagan looked around the room, and his eyes fell on the Christmas tree. *That's it!*

People don't heat their homes with cabinetry. They burn firewood! Seasoned, untreated firewood! Cut up trees. Christmas trees!

Was two weeks long enough for the wood to age? Meagan did not know, but he was willing to find out. So he took his saw to Christmas Tree and limbed it.

He cut the limbs into pieces small enough to burn. The wood oosed sap, and Meagan's hands and forehead were covered by it. His clothing was spattered with many small patterns of pitch.

He filled up the stove with a mixture of broken furniture and bits of Christmas tree limb. Unlike the kitchen cabinets, the tree branches did not burst into flames the moment they fell on hot coals. They just lay there in the flames, sizzling and charring, but not really burning. Meagan was just about to open the door to see what he could do, when at last they caught fire.

The tree limbs crackled and popped and burnt in thick yellow flames. The furnace grew hotter. The chimney pipes protested. Heat poured out from Stove's face, and Meagan was forced to step backward. He went back to work and cut up the rest of the tree into thirty-five centimetre sections.

He shared up the remaining bits of old cabinetry into small portions to be mixed with the freshcut logs. The stove's second load of branches and cabinetry made the parlour too hot for Meagan bear it. He could not stay in the room for more than a minute or two at a time. He stood just inside the kitchen and watched the fire from there.

Meagan decided to check the rest of the house again. First, he shone his lamp on the kitchen sink. The water still flowed, but the room grew rapidly cold as he moved further away from the parlour. There was ice in the corners of the window above the sink.

Meagan went to the bathroom. It was even colder than before. Frozen air bled steadily

through the window and even straight through the outside walls. And the faucet was not running.

Meagan opened the taps wider. There was a gurgling noise, but no more water spurted forth. He opened the cupboards under the sink, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary. Meagan considered. He went back up to the parlour and restocked the fire. Then in the pantry he opened the trapdoor.

When Meagan bought the house, there was no foundation. It just sat in the mud on a short wooden frame. And since it rested on the flood plain, it was not uncommon for the crawlspace to fill up with water. This rotted the joists and encouraged the growth of certain kinds of mould. When the lot really flooded, water came up through the floorboards and watered the house.

So, as soon as he was able, Meagan had House' old infrastructure replaced with a higher platform made of stone blocks. The bottom and sides of the crawlspace were sealed with plastic sheeting. With a water table so high, he could not put in a dry well, and so the basement had no drainage. Since the water outside was now kept out, this was only a problem if leaks sprang on the inside. Leaks were a very rare occurrence, and it was never more water than Meagan was able to suck out with Father's shopvac.

Meagan shone his lamp under the house. A great expanse of black water concealed the pipes from view and reflected his lamplight back to him. The pipes must have frozen and burst. The pressure from the city water line then forced out the plug of ice, and the warmer water behind poured into the crawlspace, filling up Meagan's plastic-lined basement. It was not hermetically sealed, but the cold outside quickly covered any leaks with seals of ice. Water followed the path of least resistance. It flowed.

Meagan's father Montie had anticipated trouble like this if it got too cold. He warned Paullus about it and advised him to wrap his pipes with insulation and heat-tape. Paullus meant to follow Father's advice. He even bought the pipewrap and heat-tape, but they kept him so busy at work that he just never had time to do it. The heat-tape rested in the kitchen, on top of the freezer.

Well, I've got to shut it off, thought Meagan. There was a city shut off, but it was outside, under twenty centimetres of frozen mud and gravel, and locked inside a special box. Only the city janitor carried the key.

Fortunately, Meagan had his own, private shut-off. The frost-free hydrant connected Meagan's house to the city water supply. It came up in the crawlspace, just under the bathroom. Meagan argued with himself for a minute about whether or not he should go get his fishing waders. Then he jumped in.

The water was only about thirty centimetres deep so far, but it was cold. And the whole crawlspace was full of frozen air. Meagan regretted not only that he had not first put on his waders, but also that he had not worn a hat and gloves.

He had to hunch down into what was almost a squatting position in order to clear the joists overhead and the wires that depended from them. The hydrant was less than six metres away, but it seemed to take an hour to get there. And by the time he did, his arm was cramping up from straining to hold the lantern above the water, and his feet were numb from cold. He took hold of the handle with his right hand and pushed.

Nothing happened. He tried to push harder, but he just could not get enough leverage, all hunched over with his other arm holding the lamp out over the water. And he could not afford to sit and rest. Already his calves grew numb.

So he waddled around the hydrant, and, taking hold of the handle again, threw his chest against it. He put as much of his weight into it as he could. Then, just when he felt he could push no more, the pumphandle creaked forward and fell. He snapped it completely shut and made his way back to the trapdoor.

It was hard not to rush, but with the dark water and the numbness in his legs, he could not risk hurrying. Finally he made it. He stood up painfully in the hole and set the lantern down on the edge and climbed up onto the floor. He was exhausted, but the cold goaded him onward.

He got up to his knees and covered the hole. He took the lamp and stumbled to his feet and went back into the parlour. As he passed through the kitchen he did not notice, but the faucet was no longer dripping.

The fire was almost burnt out. Meagan loaded more wood on it and striped off his wet clothes. He huddled before the heater and rubbed the warmth back into his limbs.

When he was a little less shaky, he got some blankets and canned peaches and returned to the fire. He ate the peaches and drank the syrup. Then he packed the last of the tree into the fire, huddled up in his blankets and went to sleep.

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