

Bad Christmas



Chapter IX

Sarah Cagles' Body

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BAD CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER IX : SARAH CAGLES ' BODY

Meagan woke up and turned over. The sun was just rising over the horizon, and it filled up the parlour with its sharp morning light. He was cold. But it was colder outside the blankets, so for a while he just sat there and remembered his dream.

Who the fuck is Charisse? He had never been married. He rarely even had girl friends. And none were ever named *Charisse*. He looked around.

And why is it such a big crime to steal some old peaches? The fire was out. There was frost on his blankets and ice on the windows. Finally he crawled out of bed.

Waking, he recognised the stupid song that played while he fought the fat man. It was *Dry County* by the B52s. He could see no significance to it.

He stumbled over the burnt out oil lamp and the bed of dead pine needles, all that remained where he had cut up the tree, and went back to his bedroom to get some fresh clothes. It was freezing back there. The clothes were frosty. He brought them back to the dead fireplace to put them on. It was still a little warmer in the parlour than elsewhere in House.

The sun separated itself from the hillside and began to shrink into a flat, copper disc as it rose in the sky. *Happy Christmas!* he told himself. He stopped and regarded his father's pistol. He picked it up and departed the meagre comforts of House.

It was much colder outside. His eyes were sticky and irritated by the cold air, and his nose struggle to seal itself up. The rest of his face was numb and heavy. He sat in the car for a while to let the engine warm up and the windows defrost.

He went down Main Street first and looked at the bank. -7° . *Colder than yesterday.* It must have been even colder during the night. He drove by his father's house and thought about going inside. There it would still be warm, and he could get something to eat. He drove on instead.

After a while of aimlessly cruising around, he found himself moving slowly down East Pierre. He slowed to a stop in front of a small, dark blue house. There was a black mailbox in front, with the name *S. Cagles* painted on it. Smoke came out of the chimney.

It was Sarah Cagles' house. Although most of the people in Meagan's Christmas dream were strangers, Cagles was real. In reality she was not a fruit thief but a reclusive science writer. It was also true that Meagan used to obsess over her in school, and he had tried to keep himself up to date on the broad strokes of her life over the years. Cagles rarely came out into town, and Meagan never had the time nor the volition to pester her. Today, Christmas, was a lot different. He stopped the car and went up to the door.

Ding! Ding! He pushed the bell and waited. After a minute, the door came open and warm air poured out onto Meagan. It was her. She was wearing a bright red wool sweater and green plaid pants. Her hair was dark and tied back, and her round face was ruddy and warm.

“Sarah,” he said. “Happy Christmas.”

“What?” she asked.

“It’s me. Paullus Meagan. Let me in.”

“Alright,” she said. “Come in.”

He came in. She shut the door and he moved further into the house, luxuriating in its warmth. He involuntarily went up to her large barrel-stove and stood in its glow and turned to watch her. He had expected her to wither away, locked for all these years in the little house, alone, communicating with the outside world only by mail and telephone.

But she had not. Instead, she’d grown more beautiful. Everyone thought she was very pretty in school, but this had not made up for her generally antisocial character. If anything, it helped to strengthen general antipathy against her.

But in school they had been children, and even the loveliest girl was not really a woman. Since that time, Cagles had gained weight and filled out. Pleasant, feminine curves showed their shape through her clothing. The structure of her face had broadened, turned more regular and mature. Perhaps most importantly, she moved with the quiet grace of someone who had been a woman long enough to get bored by it.

“Why are you here, Paul?” she asked.

“It’s a long story,” he said. “I would have brought something, but my house was flooded and frozen and I haven’t got no cash.”

She came up to him.

“Let me take your coat, then,” she said.

She helped him take it off, and he began shivering almost immediately. She raised her eyebrows at the gun but said only, “Coffee?”

“Yes. Please, Sarah. *Anything.*”

“Alright.”

She took his coat away and returned with a cup of coffee and pressed it into his hands. She sat on the couch.

After warming his hands on the cup and taking a few swallows, Meagan stopped shivering and became more of himself.

“I see you’re not decorated,” he said.

“I don’t believe in Santa Claus anymore,” she said.

“What about family?”

She snorted.

“What?” asked Meagan.

“Family,” she said. “My family, is a joke.”

“Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be.”

“Well,” he said. “Now that I’m not freezing to death, I have the luxury of feeling sorry about coming to your place Christmas morning, unshaven, in rumpled clothes, bearing nothing but my own spiteful presence.”

“I don’t mind. In fact, now that I’ve got over the first shock of it, I’m kind of glad you showed. It does get lonely from time to time, you know.”

“Yeah,” said Meagan. “Or no. I don’t know. I haven’t had much time to think about

these things. Listen, Sarah. Things have been kind of strange for me. I need to tell someone.”

“Okay,” she said. “Tell me.”

And he did. He told her all about quitting his job, losing his savings, losing his father, his hopeless battle against cold last night. He described his run-in with the police and with Vincik.

“Don’t let me scare you, Paul,” she said. “But it seems to me there could be more to this.”

“What?” he asked.

“It just seems a bit much for a coincidence.”

He thought about it. Then he drove it from his mind.

“I can’t stand to think of it any more right now, Sarah.”

“Okay,” she said.

Then he told her about his crazy dream. She laughed. He told her about her special role in it, and how afterward he came to her house.

“Paul,” she said. “I see something on you that scares me.”

“What?”

“You look worn out and drawn, like a man on his death bed.”

“I didn’t sleep much last night, like I said, Sarah,” said Meagan. “And I have a lot on my mind.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Maybe. But I think it’s something more. There’s something happening here that you’re not seeing, something below the surface, maybe.”

He redirected the conversation to the topic of their time in school. She did not have much to say about it. Apparently she passed through it all in a sort of daze, biding her time

until she could flee to her life of solitude. She confessed to have thought very little of him. She did not remember the way he said he used to stare at her. Or the way he always tried and failed to provoke a conversation. Of it all, she could only remember the Valentine's Day card he gave her in the third grade.

"I didn't think much of it, though," she said.

But Meagan had. He remembered the whole affair as clearly as if it had been yesterday. He remembered how hard he struggled to make something she would like. He remembered how he was plagued with doubts at every decision, from the choices of crayon colours to the number and arrangement of cut out paper hearts to glue on.

And so the morning passed away and some of the evils of yesterday. At the beginning of the afternoon, Cagles warmed up some soup and they ate. Afterwards, Meagan found himself on the couch with Cagles lying against him.

Looking backward he saw how throughout their time together they had been steadily and slowly coming closer together. It had been unavoidable from the moment she chose to let him in. He stroked her soft, dark hair.

She shivered and pressed herself closer to him. He ran his hand down her back. She moved up against him and kissed his throat. A strange, fluttering feeling something like fear rose up from his guts and invaded his body. It seemed natural to put his hands on her hips when she climbed onto his lap.

She held his head against her breast and he heard her heart beat through the soft, red wool. She pulled off her sweater and threw it on the floor. He reached up her back and unclasped her brassière and helped her out. She was so soft and warm and so human, so different from everyone that met him yesterday.

He kissed her and embraced her. He wanted to drown himself in her soft, womanly feel. She pulled away and stood up on the floor in front of him.

“Come on,” she said and turned away.

He followed her into her bedroom. He watched her remove the rest of her clothing, and he undressed himself. For a moment, she clasped his naked body against her. *How can she keep it so warm in here with just a wood furnace?* he wondered.

She threw the blankets off the bed and went onto the sheets. As he followed her, he realised that he wanted her, now, more than he had ever wanted anything. He saw that he had always wanted her, from the moment he first saw her. But he was always too busy with other things. Love was something for which idiots and children sacrificed their lives, not grown men with their wits about them. *And look where being intelligent and mature has got you? What's come of all your careful planning and consideration?*

He cursed and hated himself for wasting so much of his life. He should have picked up some bonehead job after school, married Cagles. He could have made enough money to help get her started in her career quicker. *Heck, she managed it by herself well enough.* They would have made out just fine. And he could have spent how many hours a day in her presence? They would have talked forever, and made love, and slept together. Even without children, without wealth, even in this tiny house, it would have been enough. He would have been a happy man. Instead he blew off his baser, animal urges for a carefully planned future. *Maybe there's still time!* he thought wistfully. But the moment the thought was formed he knew it was false. So that and the rest of his thoughts rose up and through the top of his head and were gone. He drowned his sorrows in Sarah Cagles' soft, female body.

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