

Bad Christmas



Chapter XII

Winter Escape

A. A. A. Hartvisen

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High Desert Ventures LLC
608 East Madison
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BAD CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER XII : WINTER ESCAPE

Norman Vincik did not expect trouble when he answered his front door Christmas afternoon. He expected business.

“Hello, Norm,” said Meagan. “Happy Christmas.”

“Paul!”

“That’s me. I need to see my father.”

“Paul, the funeral home is closed today. It’s Christmas.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” said Vincik. “What’s the problem?”

“I need to see it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Vincik. “Come back on Tuesday.”

The undertaker tried to close the door. Meagan kicked it open and grabbed Vincik by the shoulders and drug him out onto the walk. He shoved Vincik toward the pickup truck. Vincik turned around.

“Keep moving or I’ll kill you,” said Meagan.

Vincik stopped. Meagan locked his arm around Vincik’s shoulders and punched him in the gut. Then he held the undertaker up when his knees buckled. Vincik coughed and shook. When he got back his legs, Meagan let go of him and shoved him toward the truck again.

“Get in, Norm,” he said.

Vincik got in the truck. Meagan drove them to the back entrance of the funeral home and backed up to the loading door. He stopped the car and got out, left the engine running.

“Get out,” he demanded after opening the passenger door.

Vincik climbed down.

“Paul,” he said. “This is nuts. Why are you doing this?”

“I need to see my father. Go unlock the door.”

He shoved Vincik toward the door.

“I didn’t bring my keys!”

Meagan stared at him for a minute. Then he picked up a large piece of the stone edging that went around the little garden surrounding the north end of the funeral home. He went up to the door, leaned over the railing at the edge of the step and smashed the brick through the window.

Vincik screamed something that sounded like *fuckall* and started clawing at Meagan’s back. Meagan turned around and slapped Vincik across the face.

“There was no *need!*” said Vincik.

He dug a keychain out of his pocket, chose one of the keys, and unlocked the door.

“You play any more games like that, Norm,” said Meagan. “And you’ll be your own undertaker.”

“This is insane, Paul,” said Vincik.

Meagan shoved the undertaker ahead of him into the building and entered. He flipped on the lights and shut the door. Then he turned to Vincik.

“Take me to him, Norm.”

“I refuse!”

Meagan slowly took the gun out of his coat and showed it to Vincik. Then he put it back.

“My father.”

Vincik, pale and shaky, led Meagan through the same series of doors as yesterday, turning on lights as he went. Finally they arrived at the corpse of Montgomery Meagan.

“Pull him out.”

Vincik fluttered his hands through the air and took hold of the gurney and pulled it out into the middle of the room. Meagan went up to his father. Surprisingly, he didn’t look any deader than yesterday. Paullus put his hand on his father’s cold shoulder and looked at Vincik.

“This is *madness!*” said the undertaker. “You must release me. You must turn yourself in.”

“For what?”

“Why? Why? Why? For wreaking all this havoc!”

“Okay,” said Meagan.

“Good, good,” said Vincik.

“Now what’s the best way to take him out of here?”

“No! I can’t allow you to steal one of my bodies.”

“It’s not *your* body, Norm. It’s not mine either. It’s my father’s, but in the current situation I think it’s a little more mine than yours. If anyone stole it, it was you, Norm.”

“The police called me—”

“Yeah. So what’s the best way?”

Vincik paused. *Shouldn’t have to think about it. He’s thinking about something else. About a double-cross.*

“Come on!” said Meagan.

“Well, we should put him in a box. It makes him easier to move. Come on.”

Vincik turned the gurney around and pushed it down the hall. Meagan followed along. Vincik turned them into a room with two other wheeled tables and six man-sized boxes stacked in the corner. The process of transferring the body was much easier than Meagan expected. The technique was streamlined and perfected by years of practice.

They started down the hall to the loading door, pushing the box containing his father on another gurney. They stopped just in front of the door. Vincik unlocked it and kicked it open. The bed of the truck was about a foot above floor level, but working together, they got the box up into the truck with no trouble.

Somehow, Vincik had got Meagan on the side of the box away from the building. As soon as the box was in place, Vincik jumped back down into the building and slammed the loading door shut. Meagan ran up and tried it. *Locked.*

He leapt to the ground, ran over the pavement, and vaulted over the railing onto the step

at the door whereby they had entered. It was locked again. He leaned over the opposite edge of the porch and looked through the broken window. There was Vincik dialling the telephone. He was not looking toward Meagan. *I guess he figures I'm still beating on the door.*

Meagan took out his gun, took careful aim and fired. Vincik went down with a yell. Meagan could not be sure, but he thought he hit a little to the right, instead of straight through the back of Vincik's knee as he intended. So the undertaker might not be as incapacitated as he hoped. *Either way, it'll give me a little time.*

He ran back to the truck, hopped in and took off. He passed by the bank again. -12° . He checked the truck's external thermometer readout on the instrument panel. -14° .

Meagan went back to his father's house. He backed the truck up as close to the back door as he could and shut it off. He muscled the box off the tailgate and into the house. It was too heavy and awkward for him to carry alone. He regretted not thinking of pinching one of Vincik's wheeled tables. It hadn't occurred to him, before now, to take something that did not belong to him.

So he dragged the box along the floor into the kitchen. There was a bunch of newspapers, three dirty dishes, and two plastic ashtrays on the kitchen table. He removed all of the items to an empty spot on the counter. He jockeyed the box up onto the table and cut it open. He carefully removed the dressing from Montie's head.

For a second he just stared, then he understood and stumbled back and gasped. A large area of the back of Montie's head was smashed in. The wound had been washed, but there was still some dried blood around the edges, and fragments of broken bone and torn flesh were easily identifiable. He whispered:

"You bastards."

Although he had always expected it, the truth was still staggering. It was not just the killing, but the coverup, that upset him. That Norman Vincik, the people at the power company, someone at the bank, that they had all been brought into it was astounding. They had all, immediately, almost instantaneously, joined in, enthusiastically cooperating so that one dumb town cop's rash act would not cause any undue hardship for the community. That the murder would go unpunished meant nothing to them. That Paullus Meagan would be ruined meant nothing.

All in a day's work, he thought. And he wondered how often this sort of thing happened around him, to other people, never seen. The operation proceeded too smoothly to be an accident or beginner's luck. Then he heard sirens.

Meagan knew they would show up here in a couple minutes. His only hope was that they would stop at his house first. Meagan went to the telephone and thumbed through the book. He found the number he wanted and dialed.

"Hello."

"This is Paullus," he said. "I don't know if I'll see you again. You were right about everything and more. If I can I'll come for you. I love you like... I don't know what like. But I really do!"

Sarah Cagles made a kissy noise in the phone.

"Goodbye, Paullus," she said, at last saying his name right.

"Goodbye," he said and hung up.

But even as he rushed up to the front windows to check for law enforcement, the sound of her telephone kiss reverberated in his mind. It was so stupid, so inane, and yet it filled him with hope and warmth. That wee, poor gesture communicated more to him than anything else

she could have said.

If they don't kill me, he thought. My heart will burst, and I will die of too much love.

Damn them all to hell!

Again he questioned his ability to feel such pure joy at such a horrible time. He was filled with hate. And he was filled with love. And they did not diminish each other.

The sirens were getting louder. They would be here very soon. He wracked his brain to come up with a solution. Finally an idea popped into his mind. It did not seem like a very good one, but it was the only one he had, and he had no time to think up some more. The first police car come around the end of the block as Meagan turned back into the house.

He took a can of kerosene that his father used for burning weeds and emptied it on the kitchen floor, under the table, and around the edges of the walls. *I can't let them take him, he thought. Not again. I can't let them take him.* He was delayed several seconds trying to find a match. *A thousand cigaret butts but no match!* Eventually he found a box of tiny wooden matches in the kitchen drawer.

Heavy footsteps pounded up the front porch. He struck the match and tossed it into the oil. The flames began to spread. The front door crashed in.

“Die, motherfucker!” one of the policemen screamed into the house.

Meagan took out his gun and sent a shot down the hall toward the front door.

“Turn yourself in!” someone shouted.

Meagan ran out the back door and looked around, ready for a fire fight. Unbelievably, there was no police in the back yard. By now the flames were so high that the officers could not follow him through the house. In their enthusiasm to bring him to justice, they had all poured into the building. Now they would all have to get out and travel all the way around the

house to get to him. By then he would be gone, and they could waste some more time to go back to their cars. Meagan hopped in the truck and concentrated on making himself gone in what time he had left.

He drove three blocks constantly looking back, but there were no followers. So he went down to the main street and headed out of town. The bank said -14° . The pickup said -15° . Just as he was passing the city limits sign, he heard the sirens going off again and looked back. Two police cars pulled out of the MacDonald's parking lot and gave chase.

Meagan knew he could not outrun the police cars on the open highway. Paullus Meagan would have been a dead man, then and there, if it had not been for the sign. It was on the edge of a big open field off to the left of the road.

The sign was off the highway about four and a half metres toward the field. In more peaceful times, Meagan had driven by that field and its sign a million times without a thought. But he thought about it now. This lone sign off in the ditch said, "Not a Thru Street." As far as Meagan could see, it was not any kind of street, "thru" or otherwise.

But the sign was there, for whatever reason, and it made Meagan see his other option. He swerved the truck off the road into the ditch and out across the field. *Sure ain't a thru street.*

The police stopped on the shoulder. He kept going. It would not take them long to figure out where he was going. Then they would try to cut him off. He needed to get there first.

Meagan was about two-thirds across the expanse when the police cars finally started up again and tore down the highway. Meagan came to the end of the field and pulled up onto the old washboard road and went left. At that moment, the police were just turning off the highway

onto the same road, three miles down. So Meagan pushed the his father's truck up the road as hard as he could, toward old Mount Wechassies.

The police gained rapidly at first, but the road got a lot rougher and they started losing speed. They were still gaining, albeit much more slowly. Meagan finally saw the road he was after. He turned off and followed it. He happened the glance at his thermometer. -17° . *Must be the increase in elevation.*

It was an old logging road he knew well. It had not been used except by hunters and campers for several years. Normally, at this time of year, snow made it impassable a little higher up. It was a rough road and steep. The police could not follow him if he got much further, but he wasn't going to get much further unless he could somehow slow them down again. He just needed to keep them from gaining anymore and shooting out his tires or something. A couple slashheaps by the side of the road coming up caught his eye.

Meagan stopped the truck at the next slash heap and jumped out. The first police vehicle came dangerously close as Meagan dragged a big branch across the road. The limbs were hooked and twined with a great mass of debris, and the road was blocked.

Meagan ran and jumped back in the truck. Two shots rang out before he was able to get the truck moving again. A bullet struck the tailgate. Megan pushed on a little faster than was safe on the narrow, steep road, but he dropped the police quickly behind. He stopped again at the next heap and repeated his obstructive act.

Soon he lost sight of the authorities behind rough countryside. He checked the dashboard thermometer. -20° . The drop in temperature corresponded with an increase in elevation. Although he couldn't see any pursuers, Meagan kept on. He curved and twisted steadily up the mountain. He thought of the last time he was here. That was two year ago,

hunting white-taileds with Father.

Things sure have changed. He was now sufficiently relaxed to feel the cold. He shoved the heater control all the way up. At the next fork he went left, along the side of a broad ridge.

After Meagan had gone up the ridge a way, the road forked again, and Meagan took the path that wound more steeply upward. The thermometer said -21° .

Meagan never saw the police again. He drove up and up the mountain, as far as the road would carry him. He had to get out and turn the hubs in shortly after taking the second fork. But even then the road eventually became nearly too degraded and overgrown for going. Washes tore great gashes across it. And after a while he came into snow.

As he rose up Mount Wechassies, the snow got deeper and thicker. Meagan's progress slowed to a slug's pace as the road became more difficult. Eventually, several hours after the police first chased him from his father's home, Meagan came to where a small rockslide and a huge snowdrift conspired to make further progress totally impossible. He stopped the truck.

He shut off the motor and got out, walked around the obstruction. Although the sun was low in the sky, it was reflected very brightly by the snow. And at this high altitude it gave more light than usual. When he faced the sun, he could actually feel its heat on his skin. But the moment he passed in shadow, the heat flowed out and his flesh stiffened with cold. His eyes and his nostrils kept sticking together because of it. His hands and feet ached. After a while of trudging around in the snow, the ache was replaced by senselessness.

I better get back inside. He got back in the truck and started it up. It took a minute to start blowing hot air again instead of cold. When it finally started heating up he was thankful. His extremities stung as they regained sensation, but it was mild and subsided quickly. Meagan still felt chilly inside. Then he thought of something.

He opened up the glovebox. There was a small bottle of Old Grand-Dad that Father kept for emergencies. It was almost full. Meagan uncapped it and took a hit. It burnt going down and rekindled the fire inside. *Firewater*, he thought.

“Thanks, Dad,” he said and took another drink.

Meagan was not a drinking man, and he felt the effects of alcohol in his mind almost *instantly*. The troubles and anxieties of the last two days slowly ebbed away. He briefly considered what he would do when the police finally got to him. *Waste of time*, he told himself, *I got myself the time I needed*, and turned his mind to pleasanter things.

He remembered sticking the halves of the *Plan* to Isenberg and Labrune. It felt good to laugh. He thought of Montie and the good times they had. He thought of the bad times, and even they had some good in them. *You know, I really loved him*, he realised. It was not something he could say about many.

The sun vanished behind the edge of the mountain. In a little while it would set for good. He checked the thermometer. -24° . *It'll probably drop pretty quick after sundown*, thought Meagan.

“And that chick, in town,” he said to himself. “She was sweet.”

He meant Sarah Cagles. He thought about her. He remembered how she let him in. Looking back, it seemed like a crazy decision on her part. Some jerk she had not seen since school shows up covered in pitch and asks to come in. Then he pitches some outrageous sob story that somehow evolves into a profession of æternal love.

“Well I meant it,” he said. “She knew it. That’s all. She knew me when she saw me. Maybe she can see the future.”

A small voice nagged at the back of his mind. It said that Miss Cagles was too good to

be true. It reminded him how she had exhorted him to go back out, how she had encouraged him to pursue the line of thought which brought him here.

“Yeah, well it’s not like she *did* all that stuff. It was the cops and Norm and the bank and everybody else that fucked me. She just saw it coming. She knew I’d hate myself forever if I pussed out. That’s all.”

Is it? Is it all, Paullus? Or did she want you to go away? She certainly succeeded in getting rid of you. She banged you like a drum then got rid of you quick as you like.

“No,” he said. “It’s not like that. She loved me. She didn’t make things the way they were. If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s mine. I should have gone to her years ago. Then none of this would happen.”

The small voice started to doubt Sarah Cagles again, but Meagan banished it with two quick swallows of whiskey. He drowned it in firewater, and it never found its way back up.

He thought more about Cagles. He thought about her soft, curving flesh, her thick, dark hair, and her black eyes. *They were deep as wells.* He took a moment to apprise his situation.

The sun was down. The whiskey was almost empty. So was the gas tank. And the thermometer said -26° .

“Holy fuck,” he said. “I am fucked.”

His only hope now lie in the cops showing up before he ran out of fuel and froze up here. It seemed likely. But he was not holding his breath either. Even if they showed, they might just knock a couple of bullets through his head. It would solve their whole problem. *Clean and simple.* Then they would shove his truck off the edge of the road. It would flip down the hillside and get lost in some trees. No one would find it till hunting season. By then no one would care, even if they could piece it back together.

Who would care now?

“Sarah would,” he said. “And Dad.”

The moon was small and cast no light on old Wechassies. As the last few reflected rays of the sun vanished from the air, the world outside of Father’s truck turned black and invisible. Meagan thought about turning on the headlights or the dome light and decided against it. He turned on the quiet instrument panel lights.

The fuel indicator was well past *E*. It would give out at any time. The thermometer said -29° . He did not even try the radio. He finished off the bottle and chucked it on the floor.

I can hardly believe it’s thirty below out there, he thought. *It’s so warm and toasty in here*. He wondered how long it would stay that way after the fuel was gone. The motor started sputtering and then died. *I guess I’m gonna find out*.

He sat there in the dark and waited to freeze. *No going back. That’s for sure*. For a long time nothing happened. Then he noticed something flicker on the instrument panel. It was the thermometer moving over to -31° . *How can it be so bleeding cold? It has never got this cold. It’s just been getting colder and colder since yesterday*.

“Maybe it’s the next ice age. Maybe it’ll get really cold, and I’ll be frozen like a mammoth, with a bottle still in my hand, just like I was alive, just like I was about to take a drink.”

Just about to take a drink for fifty thousand years. He imagined some future scientist, hundreds of thousands of years afterward, trudging up old Mount Wechassies to find the marvellously preserved body of Paullus Meagan.

“No, you won’t be *Paullus Meagan* to him. You’ll be *an excellent specimen of H. sapiens sapiens*. ’Cause he’ll be some new species, the scientist. *H. s. sapentissimus* or

something. *H. s. s. Titanic.*”

No that was R. M. S.

“Oh yeah, you’re right,” said Meagan. “*H. s. s. sapiens.*”

Meagan was distracted from his fantasies by the aching cold creeping up his limbs. *So soon?* He looked at the thermometer. -34° .

“Fuck this!” he said and opened the door.

He tumbled out of the truck into the snow and started to make his way over the snowdrift that blocked the road. After the snowdrift, he crossed the rockslide against which the snow was drifted. The rocks were icy, but the ice was cold enough to stick to his shoes rather than slip. He made his way down the other side safely and then started down the broken, narrow path that was left of the old logging road.

“Hello, Pine Trees,” he said to a group of stunted lodgpoles struggling to grow out of the hillside.

He climbed amongst them and sat down. There was snow drifted up between them, but it was shallow and tightly packed. It was more like a soft bed of ice cream than snow. He leaned up against the frozen bark and began to review the tragedy of his life. He quickly kicked that futile subject out of his mind and tried to think of something better.

Sarah came back to mind. He thought about how beautiful she was in the third grade, and how much better she was in his arms this morning. He thought about her pretty face and black hair again. Thoughts were hard to hold. They kept slipping away. The burning in his face and limbs drastically shortened his attention span. He was only able to hold the image of her face in his mind for an eyeblink, and then it was replaced by the discomfort of the here and now.

He cast about trying to find something upon which to set his mind, some pleasant thought. He went over everything that he thought earlier in the truck. It was all too slippery for him now. Gradually, he became aware that his unconscious mind had already found a topic that was basic enough and strong enough to keep his mind busy. It had rifled through all his memories and found that one set which was most rivetting and essentially fascinating. He had not struck on it until now because his conscious mind censored it.

Had he not been freezing to death. Had he not been laying in the ice in the frozen pines with his flesh burning with cold, he would not have focussed his mind on such a thing. It would have been absurd, obscene, and frivolous. But deep down it was bigger and more important than anything else. And now, broken down by extremes, his mind settled on it. He thought of Sarah Cagles' breasts.

He remembered when he first noticed them in school. Then, he was all too aware of their powers of fascination, but he struggled to keep from staring, to keep even from thinking. He had thought he succeeded. But he had not. He had still stared, and memorised, everything. It all came back to him now. These memories sharper and more poignant than he would have thought possible. He felt the warmth of desire flood through his veins and obstruct the onslaught of the cold.

Finally his mind came on his more recent memories of Sarah Cagles' breasts. This was partly because the memory was more recent and conected with the physical act of copulation, but what really made the difference was the simple fact that he saw more of her actual flesh today than he ever did before. No matter how much the sight of Cagles' breasts straining against a thin layer of clothing excited his young mind, the recent memory of seeing them bare naked today was greater. For some reason, he could not clearly remember actually *touching*

them. He knew he had. But he could not remember. So it was with the vision of Sarah Cagles' naked, white breasts looming large before him that Paullus Meagan at last fell to sleep in the snow.

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