

KRISTMAS COLLINS

BY DEREK CICCONE

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Painless

Officer Jones

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SUNDAY DECEMBER 22

CHAPTER 1

Sunday December 22

Christmas in Connecticut—

Was the name of a campy 1940's comedy starring Barbara Stanwyck. But there was nothing funny about the modern version I was living out this afternoon—a horror film that made me want to return to the safety of prison.

My cab passed through the electronic gates and drove up the Belgian-block lined driveway. We passed rolling, snow-covered lawns, before coming to a stop in a circular drop-off area in front of the ivy-draped English manor. I was here for the Wainwright holiday party, held every year on the Sunday prior to Christmas. I was unable to attend the past three years, and I would have pushed the streak to four if not for some business that needed attending to.

I secured the envelopes that contained my gifts, placing them in the pocket of my suit coat, and grabbed the pastry dish that I'd purchased at a bakery along the way. I then stepped out into the late afternoon—the sky was a dreary gray, and a light snow had begun to fall.

I was met by a portly man in an elf costume. I didn't recognize this particular greeter/security-guard from my previous times on the property,

going back to when I used to live here with my ex-wife, Libby, during our first years of marriage. This surprised me, since the Wainwrights always made it a point to surround themselves with loyal soldiers, even if loyalty had never been a two-way street for them. Perhaps they had added extra security this year since a convicted felon was on the guest list—their favorite former son-in-law.

I started to walk in the opposite direction. This predictably upset Buddy the Elf. “Sir, the party’s this way,” he commanded.

“I’m going to take a shortcut,” I replied without looking at him.

I braced, expecting to be wrestled to the ground and kicked with the curled-up tips of his elf shoes. But as luck would have it, I noticed a longtime Wainwright security guard named Lonnie—windbreaker, winter hat, no elf costume—who nodded at Buddy, instructing him to back off. Lonnie knew from firsthand experience that Kris Collins was capable of creating a scene on a moment’s notice, and the last thing the Wainwrights wanted to do was to call attention to my presence.

I ventured over a slate path, which was lined with sculpted boxwood and ornamental trees that were decorated for the season. In the summer, the formal landscape of the estate was breathtaking, filled with magnolia trees and kiwifruit arbors. But for the party it had been transformed into a world of Christmas fantasy.

Music was being pumped out through speakers—“Winter Wonderland” was currently playing. *The weather outside is frightful*, the lyrics informed me. And while I would agree that it was a tad on the frosty side, I found it downright delightful compared to what was awaiting me inside.

I walked past elaborate ice sculptures, then an empty tennis court and pool house, before I began to smell the real party. I trudged through another frozen acre until I arrived at the Lake House.

It actually sat next to a pond, not a lake, and it would be more accurately described as a mansion. Like most things on this property, it was more about perception than reality. As a former attorney, who was once known as the

“lawyer to the stars,” I understood the concept of “perception over truth.” And now it was likely the only thing keeping me alive.

Outside of the Lake House, sitting in lawn chairs on a brick patio, and enjoying the warmth of a fireplace, were the self-proclaimed Amigos—Tomás, Gustavo, and Berto—spending their final Christmas on the Wainwright property.

Alexander Wainwright had always referred to them as “the Mexicans”—his name for all those of Spanish descent—but they actually emigrated from Peru as children. And what I’ve learned over the years about these Peruvian house parties, called *tonos*, is that you don’t arrive *manos vacias*—empty handed. So after exchanging warm greetings with the Amigos’ wives and large extended family, I handed over a panettone cake to Tomás’ wife, Mia.

I then moved to the patio area, and attempted to spread more holiday cheer. I handed each of the Amigos an envelope that contained a Christmas card. Inside the card, besides a sappy holiday greeting, was the final information regarding a project of mine—one that the Amigos had agreed to lend their considerable talents to. I’d been plotting it since my time in prison, and now we were just days away from the big moment.

Tomás motioned for me to take a seat and join them.

“I don’t have much time,” I cautioned. “I need to make an appearance at the big-boy party. Then I have a few more rounds to make tonight.”

“Just like Santa Claus,” Gustavo said with a chuckle.

“If that’s the case, you’re going to need a drink,” Tomás added. He got up and poured me our traditional Christmas drink—Mountain Dew and tequila, hopefully heavy on the latter.

Berto brought me a plate from the barbecue, what Gustavo referred to as a “Peruvian specialty.” I was fairly certain that a cheeseburger and tater tots wouldn’t qualify as Peruvian or a specialty, but I wasn’t about to argue.

“I’m surprised you didn’t get an invite to the party ... sort of a going away present,” I said between bites, but wasn’t really. The Amigos hadn’t

been invited in the thirty years they'd lived here.

"We didn't fit the 'white Christmas' theme they got going this year," Gustavo said with a grin.

"Same theme as every year ... the Wainwrights are traditionalists," Berto chimed in.

The volume of the surrounding festivities muffled our voices, which made this the ideal place to go over the final preparations. Children were ice-skating on the pond, while the teenagers were shooting off fireworks like it was the Fourth of July. Gustavo's college-age son, Angel—a dead ringer for his father—headed up a salsa band that had attracted a group of dancers on an adjoining patio. Many of them were attractive girls in outfits that didn't appear to be weather-appropriate.

I pointed at the envelopes. "The disc inside the card contains a complete route of all the houses and their floor-plans." As much as technology had advanced communication, it also left proof, which is why this old-school drop and chat was the still the best way to transfer information.

I viewed the large house in the backdrop, along with all their friends and family who were reveling in the holiday spirit. Things had changed a lot since they'd first arrived here. "I'll understand if you don't want to go through with it. You have a lot more to lose these days."

"What's the point of having our gifts, if we can't share with others. Tis the season of giving," Gustavo responded with another sly grin. The others nodded.

The gift he spoke of was the ability to break into houses like few who'd come before them. And not just any houses—the biggest and wealthiest estates in the area. That was, until Alexander Wainwright's security team apprehended them. But luckily for the Amigos, eleven-year-old Libby Wainwright was convinced that there was good in all people, and just as importantly, she had her father wrapped around her finger. She convinced him not to turn them over to the police. Instead, a compromise was reached in which they would live on the Wainwright property and pay for their

crimes by living as indentured servants—performing tasks ranging from keeping up the fourteen acres, to serving as the Wainwrights’ personal chauffeur.

I’m an admitted skeptic of most things Wainwright, so I’ve always had my doubts that this agreement was completely about granting a daughter’s wish, or saving a few bucks on lawn care. It would be very convenient for an institution like Wainwright & Lennox to have access to the Amigos’ talents, if they were in need of gaining private information from their competitors.

But their working agreement with the Wainwrights took an unexpected turn this year. They were being kicked to the curb so that the Lake House could be sold off. This was supposedly related to W&L’s 600 million dollar loss in a business deal gone wrong with Kerstman Publishing a few years back.

This was not news to me, since I was the one who represented Diedrich Kerstman at his trial. This didn’t sit well with the general public, as Kerstman had become the poster-child for corporate greed, and it went over even worse with my former father-in-law. When the smoke cleared my client was dead, I was in jail, and Alexander Wainwright was still out over half a billion dollars. So it went without saying that I was surprised to receive an invitation to this year’s Christmas party. Although, I was starting to get the feeling that the case was still pending ... and I was the one on trial.

CHAPTER 2

With each bite of the cheeseburger and sip of my drink concoction, I came closer to blowing off the Wainwright bash and remaining here for the evening. Libby and I attended a couple of these *tonos* back in the day, usually held on *Noche Buena*—the night before Christmas. They often went until four or five the next morning, and really picked up after the children were put to bed.

But just as I grew comfortable in my rickety lawn chair, I noticed a female in a fancy party dress awkwardly gliding over the snow in a pair of uncomfortable heels. It was still hard for me to believe that she was this grown up. It seemed like just thirty seconds ago she was crawling around the floors of the manor house in her diapers.

Since Taylor would always be six years old in my mind, this womanly stuff was a big adjustment. I noticed Gustavo's son, Angel, whom I've heard is no angel, staring at her. This made me want to make another big adjustment ... to his nose. But beyond getting me sent back to jail, it would have also garnered the wrath of my teenage daughter, claiming that I was "embarrassing" her, followed by Dad receiving the silent treatment until I displayed proper remorse—a much tougher punishment. So I chose restraint, which had never been my first instinct.

When Taylor reached the Lake House, the women circled around her. She let out a big smile—as amazing as her mother’s—and pirouetted to show off the dress. They analyzed and admired everything from her purse to her heels. Taylor had always been like family to them—her first couple of years of life were spent on Wainwright Manor, and frankly, I thought she’d pick up less bad habits hanging out in this section of town than being around her grandparents, so I made it a point to bring her down here at every opportunity.

After the fashion show came to a close, Taylor made her way to the patio area. She traded greetings with the Amigos, and then informed me, “Dad—I’ve been ordered to bring you to the party ... ASAP.”

“And this order came from?”

“Grandmother wanted to call the FBI and demand that they revoke your parole for storming past the party police, but I talked her off the ledge. She gave me ten minutes to bring you back, before she sends in the troops.”

It would be no surprise if the FBI had already found their way onto the property. Not only would it allow them to monitor my moves, as they’d been doing since my release, but they could kill a whole flock of birds with one stone, considering the white-collar-crime festival inside ... and that was just the Wainwright clients. But I decided to keep this information to myself.

Taylor plopped in the lawn chair next to me. Like her father, she didn’t appear eager to return—she was going to use the entire ten-minute allotment. She yanked at her dress. I could tell that she couldn’t wait to shed it in favor of a sweatshirt and jeans when she got home. In that way she was very different from her mother, who found a formal gown as comfortable as a second set of skin.

After a few minutes of reminiscing about the “good old days” spent at the Lake House, most of which Taylor was too young to remember, we said our goodbyes, and my bounty hunter daughter dragged me back for my public flogging. The good news was that the walk provided another opportunity for some father/daughter bonding.

As strange as it might sound, we grew much closer during my stint in prison. In the prior years, I'd been too busy with my career, hobnobbing with celebrities, and cheating on her mother. Taylor visited me almost every week, and to prove that she'd inherited her sense of humor from the Collins side of the family, she would occasionally bring me a gag gift like a Hostess cupcake with a nail file stuck in it like a birthday candle. The guards didn't always find it as funny as I did.

"Thanks for my Christmas present, Dad ... it's the best gift ever! At least until you buy me that private jet I've had my eye on," she said with a smile.

I looked at her with surprise, which she read. "Mom didn't mean to give it away, but the camp called to confirm this week and I answered. I'm so excited to go!"

"Well, now that your grandparents are claiming to be destitute, you're going to need to get that field hockey scholarship if you want to go to college."

"Yeah, they'll probably have to sell their kidneys just to scrape by."

Or sell mine.

"And Dad," she flashed me her patented look of disappointment. "It's lacrosse camp, not field hockey. You only went to like ten of my games last fall."

"Lacrosse—that's what I meant." The T-shirt she often wore popped into my head. "Chicks with sticks, right?"

"Ewe ... when you say it, it sounds like tranny porn."

There is no prouder moment for a parent than hearing your little bundle of joy utter the term 'tranny porn' for the first time. When I stopped beaming, I said, "Your mom said this camp is the one you really wanted to attend, and it fits perfectly into your winter break from school."

"The coach from Clemson is going to be instructing there. I really want to impress her ... and get that scholarship. That's where I really want to go."

"Clemson? I thought Syracuse was your top choice?"

"It was ... like last year! Do you ever pay attention?"

Obviously not.

“I’m thinking I wanna go to a warm-weather school. And it’s only like a few hours from Grandpa’s place in Hilton Head—he said I can use the place when I’m on break.”

That didn’t sound like such a good idea, but I couldn’t quibble with the warm weather part. I took notice that Taylor was shivering, so I removed my suit jacket and placed it over her bare shoulders. If I were a better parent I would have thought to do so about an acre ago, but I was making progress, and I think she respected that I was giving an honest effort. At least that’s what her smile told me.

We entered the party area, which led me to think that warning signs should be posted, like at the beach when the surf is too rough. The speakers were now blaring “Silent Night.” I could only hope.

“Seeing you in a suit reminds me of way back when we were kids. You were so Don Draper back then, always all duded up,” Taylor commented.

Way back ... as in a whole four years ago. “I can’t believe how much older you look in that dress. You’re turning into a woman, no matter how much I want to hold you back.”

She smiled. “Speaking of old, I love how you’re rocking the gray goatee.”

My face still gave off that boyish innocence that was always very effective with juries, and occasionally got me carded at the liquor store. But the recent addition of the gray in the facial hair did make me appear closer to my age of forty-one, closing in on forty-two—maybe it’s a sign that I was finally growing up. The hair on the head was still its natural dishwater blond. I grew it out after my release, after having it cut to the nub while doing my time.

Physically, I came out of prison in the best shape of my life. But after suffering through three years of prison food, I fell off the wagon after my release, and gained twenty pounds in nine months, most of it in my gut. Luckily, my custom-tailored suit hid it well ... along with the bulletproof vest I was wearing.

CHAPTER 3

Taylor escorted me through the marble foyer into the grand reception hall. When we entered the ballroom, my eyes immediately went to its signature double-staircase that cascaded down from the balcony. I'd always assumed the reason for two was so that neither Alexander the Great and his wife, the lovely Beatrice, would be forced to sacrifice any of their spotlight during their entrances.

A large orchestra was playing on the other side of the room, accompanying a Celine Dion wannabe singer. Or maybe it was Celine Dion. You never know who will show up at these parties. "Do you see what I see," she sang as I entered. As if to warn the others that "the felon" had returned after a three year absence—like a neighborhood watch program for stuffy parties.

Maybe I was being paranoid, but Taylor noticed it too, mentioning, "I guess 'Jailhouse Rock' woulda been too obvious."

I would have taken pleasure in my entrance creating one of those moments where the crowd froze in horror, and a hush came over the room. But most of the guests were too distracted by their revelry ... and alcohol ... to notice.

I did spot a couple of my former brothers-in-law with their bra-bursting second wives, who were trying to put the ho, ho, ho back into Christmas. The

rest of the guests appeared to be the usual hodgepodge of old, money, and old money. Despite reports of it being a “down” year for Wainwright & Lennox, which was connected to the lingering martyrdom from the Kerstman debacle, there was no evidence of it in this room.

W&L is an investment bank that dates back to the Civil War. It holds a pristine reputation in the world of high finance. Mainly because its reviews had always been written by the clients they’d made gobs of money for. The investors, the ones who were often bilked by the fraudulent IPOs that W&L underwrote, had another tale to tell. But luckily, W&L employed an in-house law firm that worked endless hours to fend off lawsuits and bad publicity to keep the firm’s pristine image unsullied. I had firsthand knowledge of this, since it was my first job out of NYU Law School. They preferred family members to work there—a club that they reluctantly admitted I was a member of during my marriage to Libby—because they were less likely to risk their inheritance by having a heart to heart with the feds about some of the firm’s tactics. But working for Wainwright wasn’t all bad—it actually made my job representing celebrities seem authentic.

In the center of the room an enormous Christmas tree towered over the partygoers. But in keeping with the party theme, this tree was a fake. Next to the plastic pine, fittingly, was a throne. It was occupied by a Santa Claus, who held two six-year-old girls on his lap.

After Taylor ran off to meet up with a few of her cousins, I made a surprise attack on the throne, sneaking up behind the two girls. They felt my presence, which blew my cover. But that didn’t stop me from pulling them into an embrace, causing them to giggle. I received a dirty look from Santa, not that it affected my standing with him—I’d been on his “naughty list” since my first date with his daughter. I shot one right back at him, but quickly looked away—the sight of Alexander Wainwright dressed as Santa Claus was always too much for me to take. It was the equivalent of Bernie Madoff playing the role of Baby Jesus in the upcoming Nativity play.

The twins were the result of the never discussed “save the marriage” crusade led by my former wife. It didn’t work, and we learned the lesson that all parents should be taught in Marriage-101—never drag your kids into your problems, especially ones that aren’t even born yet. But so far the girls haven’t held it against us, which we’re thankful for.

We named them Franny and Zooey, because our devotion to Salinger was one of the few things Libby and I could agree on at that stage of our union. Alexander and Beatrice still held *Catcher in the Rye* responsible for Libby’s rebellious streak, which was blamed for her marrying a middle-class schmuck from Tarrytown, and gasp, becoming a lowly prosecutor. Although, a rebellious streak for a Wainwright was much differently defined than one for normal people. She would never be compared to James Dean, and as far as I know, doesn’t even have a parking ticket to her name.

I took a long look at the identical twins. I often mixed them up, which made me feel like a horrible father. But Libby recently mentioned that she’d often done the same. This made me feel better, since her mothering skills and devotion to our children was beyond reproach.

“So what did you ask Santa for?” I inquired.

Zooey answered for both of them, “A castle!”

I could tell she wasn’t referring to a plastic, toy version of one. They were definitely more Wainwright than Collins. But I was trying to make up for lost time in Collins-izing them. Over the last nine months, I’d gone from being a total stranger to “Daddy,” which I’m sure hadn’t gone unnoticed by their grandfather.

“Nice suit,” Alexander said to me. “I was concerned that you might wear prison stripes out of habit.”

I noticed a smile peering through the opening in his Santa beard. It seemed that they’d added some extra snark to the eggnog this year. But I refused to let him bait me in front of the girls. “I was honored to receive an invitation.”

He leaned in close to my ear. “I like to keep my enemies close, and those who steal my money even closer.”

To be fair, I didn’t steal his money. But Alexander suspected that I knew where it was, which was no different to him than if I robbed him at gunpoint. The FBI also suspected me in such matters, as did Alexander’s former business partner, now rival, Stone Scroggie, who was the mastermind behind the initial heist. It was irrelevant if I knew the location—the important thing was that they thought I did, and were convinced I was the only one who could deliver it. It was more effective than any life insurance I could have purchased.

I reached the maximum two minutes I could spend in Alexander’s presence without blood shooting out of my eyes. And since I thought that might scare the girls, I decided to move on. But just as I was about to slither away, my former mother-in-law cornered me. Alexander looked as annoyed by this turn of events as I was.

Beatrice was a Lennox, the other wealthy Connecticut family that had its name on the stationery. The Wainwright and Lennox families were constantly marrying each other—I could count six marriages off the top of my head—which was either creepy, or a well-organized plan to maintain the species, and eventually take over the world.

The not-yet-corrupted Franny and Zooez greeted their grandmother by running to her. They hugged each of her legs, which were covered by her designer gown. I hoped that this might dislodge her robot limbs, and the Stepford Wife scheme would be publicly exposed ... but no such luck. And Franny and Zooez couldn’t catch a break either, as Beatrice made them aware that their affectionate act was not acceptable etiquette for young ladies, especially since they almost spilled Grandma’s drink. She threatened to lock them in the coal cellar if they didn’t drastically alter their behavior.

This was not an idle threat. The manor house did contain an actual working coal cellar, which Alexander liked to brag about. It was dormant

when I'd lived here, but it was revived after W&L made a large financial investment into clean coal technology this past year.

Once Beatrice was done scaring the dickens out of my kids, she turned her contempt on me. She admonished the "rude behavior" I exhibited upon my entrance, and informed me that I was lucky she didn't revoke my parole, which apparently she had the authority to do. Having seen the Wainwrights in action, I would never bet against their power and how far it reached.

Out of habit I put my finger on my nose, which had always been the distress signal between Libby and me when one of us was trapped at these parties. But when I caught a glimpse of her across the room, engrossed in a conversation with her current boyfriend, Ned Blaine, I remembered that I was living in a whole new world these days. One that I would have to survive all on my own.

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