

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Iced* and *Snagged*

CAROL HIGGINS CLARK



WARNER
VISION

TWANGED

"Entertaining... exactly what Clark fans have been craving."—*USA Today*

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PRAISE FOR
CAROL HIGGINS CLARK
AND HER NEW REGAN REILLY MYSTERY
TWANGED

“A lighthearted, entertaining novel.”

—*Midwest Book Review*

“A breezy cozy, full of crazy characters . . . A pleasant and charming outing.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Hilarious . . . The characters are delightfully nutty . . . An utterly happy and charming book.”

—*Jerusalem Post*

“A dizzy and curious blend of Irish lore, the Gatsbyesque Long Island moneyed, and the country music scene . . . Avid mystery fans in search of something new will enjoy taking TWANGED to the beach with them.”

—*West Coast Review of Books*

“Clark writes with a breezy style that will quickly refresh readers.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A zany cast of characters . . . a fun read, filled with frivolity and humor, due to the refreshing and breezy style of the author.”

—*Southbridge Evening News (MA)*

“Clark writes with skill and humor.”

—*Miami Herald*

“Carol Higgins Clark tell sa fast-paced, suspenseful story, with never a dull moment and a refreshing sense of humor.”

—*Mostly Murder*

“Clark writes great dialogue for her idiosyncratic but lovable characters.”

—*San Antonio Express-News*

BOOKS BY CAROL HIGGINS CLARK

Decked

Snagged

Iced

Twanged

I wunged

Fleeced

Jinxed

Popped

Burned

Hitched

Laced

Deck the Halls

(with Mary Higgins Clark)

He Sees You When You're Sleeping

(with Mary Higgins Clark)

The Christmas Thief

(with Mary Higgins Clark)

Santa Cruise (with Mary Higgins Clark)

*For Maureen Egen and Larry Kirshbaum,
my good friends.
And Regan Reilly's too!
With love and thanks.*

*“Music oft have such a charm
To make bad good, and good provoke to harm.”*

William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure

SATURDAY, JUNE 21
BALLYFORD, IRELAND

The thick sweet scent of turf burning in the chimney of Malachy Sheerin's one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old stone cottage, set back from the road yet not too far from the rugged coastline of the West of Ireland, always made him feel at peace. He lived in a little town called Ballyford, just south of the Ring of Kerry. It was practically the westernmost point in all of Europe.

Outside, the weather was deliciously foul. Even though the calendar said June, the cold rain and lashing wind made the inside feel that much cozier. It was the kind of night when a cup of hot tea or a slug of whiskey never tasted better.

Malachy's one and only door didn't quite meet the jamb. It probably never had. As a consequence the gusty wind whistled shrilly through it and under it, creating its own night music and causing the door to shudder and shake.

Malachy didn't seem to notice. He was well into one of his lengthy oral discourses, expounding into his tape recorder. ". . . You can see why they used to call the fiddle the 'dance of the devil' or the 'devil's box.' It associated with dancing and drinking. Actually, I see it as one of the first great stress relievers. It helped people let loose after a hard day's work on the land." He lit his pipe again. This was what he loved: sitting in his favorite chair by the fire, inhaling the pungent aroma he cherished, and hearing himself talk.

Old Grizzly, he took to calling himself. His weathered appearance made him look as though he'd done a lot of hard living in the midst of frequent inclement weather. At seventy-four years of age his face was deeply lined, his shaggy hair was gray with dark streaks running through it, and a protruding belly hung over his favorite turquoise belt buckle.

"Music is people's release around here, even more than the rest of Ireland. Always has been. Out in the middle of nowhere like this, there's nothing more brilliant than gathering in the evening in a neighbor's parlor and telling tall tales around the fire. Nothing too small to hang your hat on, God knows. Anything at all that comes to mind is ripe for discussion. Talk of weather, ghosts. Old Granny McBride could talk the hind legs off a donkey with her stories of fairies and leprechauns. But then"—Malachy paused as if to savor the memory—"when the time was right, I'd bring out my magic fiddle and start to play. That moment was always grand. Before you knew it, toes were tapping, arms were raised, and the cares of the day were forgotten as even the most timid got out of their chairs and started to move to the music. Six days ago I bequeathed you the legendary fiddle, my pet, so now it's your turn to let the magic come alive and play on! Play on, Brigid! Ignore what they're saying about its curse. It's a bunch of blarney." He paused. "Now, this fiddle here . . ."

Malachy Sheerin, the former all-Ireland fiddle champion and notorious traveling storyteller, laid his pipe on the hearth next to his whiskey. After taking a hearty swig he leaned over to pick up the fiddle that was propped against the side of the chair, but the effort was great. With his arthritic fingers he grasped the bow and the fiddle and rested them in his lap.

"I'll just close my eyes for a minute," he said. A moment later he was asleep.

The tape recorder next to him whirred on.

Within seconds the door opened and the drenched stranger who had been observing him from the window quickly made his move. He stealthily extricated the fiddle and the bow from Malachy's lap and placed them in the case he had noticed in the corner of the room. His eyes brightened when he saw the tape recorder. Hurriedly he took off his raincoat, grabbed the little machine, and wrapped the coat around his stash for further protection from the elements.

He didn't notice the receipt that fell out of his pocket. It fluttered onto the floor, landing between the heap of Malachy's old newspapers and the fireplace.

Malachy was now snoring gently, but the increasing momentum of the snores made the stranger nervous. One good snort and Malachy would wake himself up. The intruder stole a final glance around the room, grabbed the whiskey bottle for a quick gulp, and slipped out the shaky door to his waiting car. He wanted to make as quick an escape as possible on the dangerous and winding coastal roads. Roads that hugged magnificent cliffs and overlooked the angry roaring waves of the Atlantic Ocean, the same body of water that lapped at shores nearly three thousand miles away on the South Fork of Long Island, on the famous beaches known simply as the Hamptons.

SUNDAY, JUNE 22
SOUTHAMPTON, NEW YORK

Chappy Tinka frowned at the sun from a cushioned lounge chair perched next to his swimming pool with the big black musical note he'd had painted on the bottom to show everyone his interest in the arts. His gams felt sweaty, particularly behind his pudgy knees. He had drowsed for several minutes hugging his legs to him, and now droplets of perspiration were forming miniature puddles on the cushion. The straw hat with the logo for the Melting Pot Music Festival was starting to itch around his ears, and strands of his salt-and-pep-per hair poked out from under the brim. The Sunday papers were in disarray around him, and whenever a breeze blew up from the beach they would begin to flap, threatening to scatter hither and yon. In general a great sense of irritability was settling into every fiber of his privileged being.

He sipped his now watery iced tea and reflected on the fact that he hadn't heard a thing all day regarding the bloody fiddle he wanted so badly. A fiddle he needed so desperately! A fiddle that belonged on the grounds of the Tinka homestead, which, after Mother died, he had dubbed Chappy's Compound, future home of Chappy's Theatre by the Sea—if they could ever get started with the construction!

Chappy fished the lemon out of his glass and sucked on it. His face puckered, although to the untrained eye there was no discernible difference in his countenance. It seemed to be a family trait. Most of his ancestors, though generally a friendly lot, looked as if they were born not with a silver spoon in their mouths but a slice of lemon. Premature frown lines appeared on the visages of many a Tinka, and numerous winces were captured on old black-and-white photos that were hung in the hallway.

As his tongue ran around the lemon, one thought ran around Chappy's head. That idiot Duke had better get the fiddle for him!

To think that he, Chaplain Wickham Tinka, had been in Ireland just last Sunday morning with his wife, Bettina, and they'd stumbled across that stupid pub in Ballyford on the last day of touring the castles in the West. The pub had been a mess: cigarette butts, dirty dishes, and a tired bartender who'd opened the door and waved them into a room smelling of stale beer. "Big celebration last night," he'd said. "It was grand. Just got here to start the cleanup."

Chappy had been disgusted enough to want to leave immediately, but Bettina had complained that her blood sugar was very low and insisted they stay and have something quick.

The bartender had started to yak with Chappy when Bettina went to the ladies' room. He droned on about the birthday party they'd had the night before for a young American girl named Brigid who was on her way to becoming a country music star. Her mother's family lived in town and they had all been in attendance. Brigid had performed several duets with the famous all-Ireland fiddle champion Malachy Sheerin; he, of course, had played his legendary Fiddle of the Cliffs.

"Why legendary?" Chappy asked.

The bartender's eyes widened. "Why, lad, it was fashioned from the wood of a fairy tree. There's a blessing on it. Whoever owns it will always have good luck and get his heart's desire."

Chappy's ears perked up. He believed in good-luck charms. Maybe if he owned the fiddle, he could be a musical-comedy star after all.

"How can I make arrangements to buy it?" he asked.

The bartender looked at him as though he were nuts. "That's a laugh. Out of the question. It's an Irish fiddle that will stay with the Irish."

When Bettina returned, he served them some dreadful leftovers. Then when Chappy handed over his credit card while Bettina headed out to the car, the bartender's eyes widened again.

"Chappy Tinka," he said with gusto. "CT. Those are the initials carved into the fiddle. Theories abound, but no one knows what they stand for."

Chappy Tinka, they stand for, you moron! Chappy wanted to cry out. Now he knew he had to have it! It was meant to be! Somehow or other he had to get it.

Slapping the bill in front of Chappy, the bartender continued, "Malachy Sheerin has had that fiddle for over sixty years now. It was given to him when he was a lad. He's carried it all over the countryside with him, going around playing and telling his stories. More Irishmen have heard that fiddle . . ."

Chappy could barely listen. For him to hear someone tell him there was something he couldn't have was very provoking. Throughout his fifty-four years of life, what Chappy wanted, Chappy got. Usually, anyway. The Tinka name was recognized everywhere. His grandfather had made a fortune in the thumbtack business, and Tinka Tacks was about as respected a company as you could get. Unfortunately for Chappy, people on the A-list for parties in the Hamptons didn't get too excited about thumbtacks. But Bettina was working tirelessly to get them on that list.

So was Chappy, actually. In the fall he'd finally be building a little theatre in the compound, a theatre where he could produce plays and maybe even star in a few himself. Who cares if he had, just last year, been encouraged to drop the improvisational acting class he had signed up for with such enthusiasm? Who needs it anyway? he'd decided. Some of the best actors in the world had never taken a lesson. The teacher was just envious of him, he was sure of it. To say that his range seemed to be limited due to his upbringing! What nerve!

Chappy had come away from that class with one bit of unintentional advice from the teacher, which he planned to heed.

If you want to work as an actor, you'd better build your own theatre.

Amen, Chappy thought. So be it.

And to have the magical fiddle! He would eventually mount a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* and cast himself in the lead. He'd keep the fiddle under the stage for good luck when he wasn't playing his heart out. The feng shui specialist brought in by the architect of the theatre to rearrange furniture so their life would be more harmonious also believed in the power of special objects. "Put a crystal in the wealth-and-power corner of the room, which is the far left," he'd said. "You'll be wealthier, happier, and more famous." Chappy had thought he was full of bull, but when he'd found out about the fiddle, he couldn't help imagining what the legendary fiddle would do for him if it were placed *stage left* in Chappy's Theatre by the Sea. Chappy nearly trembled at the thought. His plays would win awards and he would show off to all the Hamptons swells what an artistic and talented man he was.

Why, the 1910 picture of Grandma and Grandpa Tinka's wedding party hanging in the hallway had three or four fiddlers flanking the happy couple! Clearly it was time to bring fiddling back to the Tinka homestead.

So in that little pub in Ireland, Chappy had decided that no matter what, that fiddle would be his. Who cared if it was supposed to stay with the Irish? Chappy wasn't Irish at all. The thumbtack clan dated far back in this country, but not as far back as they would have liked. The *Mayflower* had been pulling out of the dock in Plymouth, England, when Chappy's forefathers had arrived late, screaming for its return. Too late. They had literally missed the boat and been forced to wait for the next pilgrimage. Ever since that day, the Tinka descendants had been neurotic about punctuality.

Chappy couldn't steal it himself, of course. There was no time and he couldn't let Bettina in on his plans. But when he got home he'd dispatched his idiot employee, Duke, to go to Ireland and bring it back. And for days now Chappy had had no choice but to wait and worry.

Of course he'd gotten phone calls from Duke, with nothing but the usual bumbling excuses. "I went to the wrong cottage." "He had guests who stayed late and I had jet lag, so I went back to my hotel." "He got drunk at a party and stayed over at his friend's house in the village." You'd think he was asking him to unload a Brinks truck! How hard could it be to steal a fiddle from a cottage in rural Ireland? There probably wasn't even a lock on the door.

Chuckling the lemon into the pool, Chappy got up and went into the house, entering through the sliding glass door with the trumpet-shaped handle. A few notes of "When the Saints Go Marchin' In" played every time the door opened.

Constance, the beady-eyed fortyish housekeeper who always looked confused, came running. She was wearing a denim skirt, and a bottle of window cleaner was fastened to a holster around her scrawny hips. She had just finished spraying a glass display case of harmonicas that Chappy had installed about the same time he'd had the musical note painted at the bottom of the pool. "Mr. Tinka," she asked breathlessly, "is there something else I can get for you?"

"No. Nothing!" he shouted. "Nothing. Where is my number one sweetheart?" he asked, referring, of course, to his wife, Bettina. In actuality, she was sweetheart numbers one and two. They'd married each other twenty-five years ago, after Bettina had graduated with honors from charm school at age twenty-one. But since the course of true love was never rock-free, and charm school training only goes so far, and Chappy's mother, who had never approved of the match, had done her best to break them up, they'd divorced.

"I've never seen a gold digger with a bigger shovel," his mama had said.

But the story had a happy ending. Bettina, just separated from a husband she couldn't stand talking about, had called Chappy to express her condolences when she'd learned of Chappy's mother passing. So what if she'd only heard a couple of years *after* Hilda Tinka's demise?

"I've just heard the terrible news," she'd said. "We've lost Mother."

Funny, Chappy had thought at the time. Bettina had never called her anything but "that old bat" during their marriage. But Chappy had realized that maturity brought forgiveness and understanding to Bettina. They'd been reunited and in September would celebrate the one-year anniversary of their second go at marriage. Now they divided their time between a sprawling Park Avenue apartment and their castle in Southampton.

"She's getting ready for a season with Peace Man in the meditation room. The ladies have all arrived," Constance said breathlessly.

"Very well," he grunted as he charged down the hallway, past the old family snapshots of his parents and grandparents in their Sunday best sitting in the sand under the broiling hot sun. Framed pictures of celebrities in the grips of his and Bettina's arms also adorned the walls. Most of the celebrities wore the expression of deer staring into headlights, having been pounced on by Bettina at the moment of recognition.

A blown-up picture of a miniature Chappy smiling out from his baby buggy was Chappy's favorite.

He kept walking. At the other end of his gargantuan summer home was a turreted room with floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on the Atlantic. Peace Man was Bettina's new guru, and he liked to lead his chanting sessions in there.

"We are close to the sea and the salty air. We are close to the source of life. Peace Man likes it in

here,” he’d said, as usual referring to himself in the third person.

Chappy stood in the hallway and watched as ladies from other expensive houses, who had been scrounged up by Bettina, sat down in yoga position on the floor and shut their eyes. Peace Man was busying himself plugging in his lava lamp. Bettina was sitting right up front, anxious to soak up every scrap of New Age garbage that Peace Man would offer. It really bugged Chappy to see her so mesmerized by a weird guy with a shaved head who wore a light green outfit that looked as if it had been issued by the state.

Finally, Peace Man spread out his hands to the assemblage. “My sisters, are you ready to get in touch with your inner child?”

“Yes, Peace Man,” they answered in hushed tones.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Peace Man.”

“Now I want you all to relax. We need to open ourselves up. To be available to what the universe sends us. To pick up its energy and heal ourselves. To see the light. Have any of you, my sisters, had near-death experience?”

“YES! I did, Peace Man!” a platinum-haired twig called out with her eyes still shut tight.

“Tell Peace Man about it,” he said in a soothing tone.

“My husband cut up my American Express card.”

Gasps rippled through the room. “That’s worse than death,” a nasal voice honked from the corner.

“Sisters, sisters, hush now. Material goods are not what we seek. Spirituality is something that money can’t buy. . . .”

Chappy turned away. “Then what do you do with all that money you collect from me?” he grumbled to himself.

“Mr. Tinka, oh, Mr. Tinka,” Constance called, breathless again, as she came running toward him, practically skidding in her cowboy boots on the slick mahogany floor. Chappy liked it when the staff wore western-style clothing.

“What now?” God, what a day, he thought.

“Duke is back. He’s looking for you.”

“He’s back! He didn’t call first. Well, where is he? Where? Where? Where?” he asked, spitting out the words.

Constance gestured dramatically. “I told him to wait in your study and I’d find you. This house is so big and I feel old today.”

Chappy didn’t run very often, never really exercised much because he was out of shape and it was so hard to start, but this occasion deserved a bit of a sprint on his part. He reached the double doors of his study and frantically pushed them open.

Duke, grinning like the Cheshire cat, sat in the studded leather wingback chair, holding on to the fiddle case. “I’ve got it, boss!” he cried, raising it up in the air as if he had just won Wimbledon.

Fumbling, Chappy closed the doors behind him. “Give me that,” he blurted, grabbing the treasure and laying it out on his antique desk. Carefully he unbuckled it. “I’ll have to replace this cheap case.”

He pulled out the fiddle, examined it as Duke sat there smiling, and suddenly screamed, “I ALWAYS KNEW YOU WERE AN IDIOT! THIS ISN’T IT! WHERE ARE MY INITIALS?”

Duke, an aspiring actor himself, who had devoted the last ten of his thirty-five years to working as Chappy’s assistant when he wasn’t chasing down a part or memorizing lines from plays, frowned at the employer he’d actually met in an acting class a decade before. Chappy had had to secretly sign up for it because his mother was still alive: She disapproved of Chappy’s thespian aspirations almost as

sample content of Twanged (Regan Reilly Mysteries, No. 4)

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