

ICE

A CHRIS MATHESON
COLD CASE MYSTERY

BY
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“Why didn’t you ask her out?” Jacqui called over to break the memories of adolescent romance flowing through Chris’s mind.

“Why is it that every time a man admires a hot woman, people think they should immediately slip between the sheets?” Elliott asked.

Meanwhile, Bruce was pouring red wine into a goblet. His muscular frame and sun kissed face indicated long days working in his vineyard. Peering at Chris with green eyes, he held out the glass. “Taste and tell me what you think, Christopher.”

While Chris tested the wine, Jacqui waved her arm to indicate the work room behind Doris’s office. “I didn’t ask why he didn’t take her into the back room and hook up with her here and now. I asked why he didn’t ask her out. I was thinking about lunch. Your mind went straight to sex.”

Disregarding his colleagues’ conversation, Bruce stared at Chris. “Well?”

“It’s good.” He picked up a cracker which he covered with a slice of cheese from the tray.

“Maybe he didn’t want to be pushy.” Elliott handed a paper plate to Chris. “It isn’t like he doesn’t know where to find her. Her daughter works here.”

Chris set his copy of the book down on the table to fill his plate with Swedish meatballs, and cheese and crackers.

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“Good?” Bruce’s expression was similar to that of a man who had just lost his job, home, and family. “He said it was... good?”

Cursing under her breath, Jacqui struggled in setting up the computer and monitor for the remote hook up. Ray snapped instructions to her from a speaker phone.

Sitting down to eat, Chris noticed that he was the only one who had the copy of the book that Elliott had said they were covering that evening. Everyone else had folders and binders.

Must be some heavy duty reading group.

“Screw it, Jacqui!” Ray said. “Where’s Francine?”

“I’m right here, Ray.” A short woman dressed in a thick winter coat with a furry hat pulled down over her ears ran in from the side entrance. She dumped a book bag thick with folders and notebooks into a chair. “Sorry I’m late!”

With a sigh of relief, Jacqui backed away from the equipment. She moved on to fill a plate with cheese and crackers.

“The internet went out at home just as I was leaving,” — Francine checked the settings and pressed buttons on the keyboard — “and my grandson promptly became mildly hysterical. Luckily, all I had to do was reboot the system.”

Jacqui took a sip of white wine from a goblet. With a grin, she held up the glass in a toast. “This sauvignon blanc is lovely, Bruce. Delicate but strong. Its sweet taste complements hearty boldness of the cheese. Yet, it’s not a wimpy wine either.”

“So, you don’t think it’s *good*?” Bruce shot a glance in Chris’s direction.

Elliott took the seat between Chris and the vineyard owner. “Now, Bruce, not all of us are wine enthusiasts.”

“I said it was good,” Chris said, “which is a compliment.”

“Yeah,” Jacqui said, “he could have said it was bad.”

The face of a man with a gray beard and thick eyeglasses filled the computer monitor.

"Hey, Ray!" the members of the book group called out almost in unison.

"Nice to see you guys, too." Ray saluted them. Abruptly, his smile dropped. "Who's the kid?"

Francine spun around to notice Chris on the other side of the table. A broad grin crossed her wide face. "Well, it's about time we got a touch of class."

"Kind of young if you ask me," Ray said with a grumble.

"This is Kirk's boy, Chris," Elliott said. "He's retired FBI."

"He's forty-five," Jacqui said.

"Forty-six," Chris corrected her.

"Still not even fifty."

"I've got underwear older than he is," Ray said.

"And he doesn't know anything about wine," Bruce said.

"I said it was good. Look, I had no idea this book club was so selective about new members." Chris rose from his chair.

With a hand on his shoulder, Francine, who had rushed to move her seat next to his, shoved him back into his chair. "Elliott says he's retired FBI. That's good enough for me." She leaned over to whisper in his ear. "I'll do the talking, sweet cheeks. You just keep sitting there looking handsome." With a salacious grin, she admired his attractive features and let out a moan of pleasure.

"Doris suggested that I invite him to—"

"That explains everything," Jacqui said with a heavy sigh.

"What explains everything?" Chris asked.

"*Doris*," Jacqui said. "Elliott can't say no to Doris Matheson."

"I can so say no to her," Elliott said. "As a matter of a fact I said no to her just today."

"In reference to what?" Francine asked.

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“She asked if I’d gotten a haircut.” Elliott raised his voice to be heard over their laughter. “But that’s not important. Point is, Kirk was our founder, which means Chris here has a right to be a member of our group. Our primary rule for membership is retired law enforcement. Chris is retired FBI. If that doesn’t allow him in, then what does?”

“His retirement is basically only a technicality,” Jacqui said. “He’s too young. Some agency or contractor will make him an offer and he’ll be back out there talking about the Geezer Squad.”

“I’ve said nothing to him about the Geezer Squad,” Elliott said with a crooked grin.

“What’s the Geezer Squad?” Chris asked.

“Hey!” Bruce sat up straight in his seat. “What’s the number one rule about the Geezer Squad?”

“Never talk about the Geezer Squad,” the group, including Ray on the monitor, said in unison.

In silence, Chris peered at each of them. He pushed his paper plate, still half-filled with food, to the center of the table. “Since you aren’t interested in any new members—”

Francine shoved him back down into his seat. “Nowhere in our bylaws does it state a minimum age requirement to be eligible for the Geezer Squad.”

“When did we write up bylaws,” Ray asked, “and why didn’t I get a copy of them?”

“We don’t have any bylaws,” Bruce said. “If we did, we’d insist that our members learn *something* about wine.”

“Since we have no bylaws,” Francine said, “that means we have no rules saying that this hunk of beefcake here is too young to belong to the Geezer Squad.”

“And since his father was our founder, and he is retired,” Elliott said, “then I vote that we let him in.”

“Don’t I have a say in this?” Chris stood up. “Maybe I don’t want to belong to a group that calls itself the Geezer

Squad. What is it you guys do anyway?" He held up the book. "I suspect it has nothing to do with reading."

"You better hope we decide to let you stay, Christopher." Bruce poured the last of the pinot noir into a goblet and held it up to the light. "At this point, you've seen too much. So if you don't join our group, then we're gonna have to kill you."

"Are you serious?"

"No, he's not," Jacqui said with a laugh.

"Yes, I am," Bruce said. "It's in our bylaws."

"You don't have any bylaws," Chris said.

"Well, if we did have bylaws then that rule would be in them right before the paragraph about knowing the proper way to drink wine."

"When did we say that group rejects would have to be killed?" Elliott took a sip from the goblet.

"Hey, I've never been a reject in my life," Chris said, "and I'm not about to start now."

"Don't you remember back when we came up with our group name? Kirk said that it was imperative that no one know about us, especially Doris, on account that she'd kill—"

"Shh!" Elliott hissed at Bruce, who, seeing Chris's questioning expression, drained his glass.

Chris looked at each person around the table. "You're all retired law enforcement. You're not reading books. You're working—what? Are you private investigators?"

"Kind of," Jacqui said.