

# ICE

A CHRIS MATHESON  
COLD CASE MYSTERY

BY  
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The department store's parking lot was sparsely filled and dark—much to Chris's disappointment. He hated going to the store late at night—not that he made a habit of doing so.

The odds of being a crime victim increased significantly in all-night store parking lots. The lack of police presence and high risk people who frequented around-the-clock businesses made them magnets for criminal activity.

After locking the car door, Chris shoved his hands deep into his coat pockets. He laid his right hand on the small semi-automatic that he always kept close by. With luck, he'd find the pancake mix, grab a gallon of milk, use the self-checkout, and return home before the roads got too slick.

The road along the river iced up fast. The Mathesons had chains to put on their vehicles to get in and out without relying on the state plow.

The last thing Chris needed was to be stuck on the side of an icy road putting chains on Doris's sedan in the dark in the middle of an ice storm.

He wanted to go home and climb into his warm bed.

When he returned to the front of the store, Chris sighed with relief to see that there was no line for the automated cashiers. He hurried to one of the stations and pressed the button to begin checking out.

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“Please scan your frequent shoppers card,” the computerized voice instructed.

Chris vacillated between saving time from searching his pockets for his keys with the tag to save a few cents or not to.

He could hear his mother asking him if he remembered to use the bonus card. If he did use it, she’d never ask. So, she wouldn’t know. Yet, it was guaranteed that if he didn’t use it, she’d find out.

With a groan, he fished through his pockets while the automated voice nagged him to scan the card. Finally, he extracted his keys only to find that the cashier had given up.

“Please scan your first item.”

He pressed the plastic tag onto the reader.

The cashier ignored him. “Please scan your first item.”

“After you scan my card.” Chris moved the plastic tag back and forth across the screen to get the cashier to read the bar code.

“Please scan your first item.”

“Come on. Scan it already.”

“Please scan your first item.”

Muttering under his breath, he dropped his keys into his pocket and slid the pancake mix across the scanner.

“Get your hands off of me, bitch!” a shrill voice demanded a few stations away.

“What you gonna do about it, tramp?”

Chris recognized the voice of one of the women, but was unsure how he knew her. He peered down the row of check-out stations. Kicking and scratching for all they were worth, two women were engaged in a brawl. A male employee and a security guard attempted to pry them apart by wedging their bodies between the fighters.

A ding and instructions from the automated cashier prompted Chris to scan the gallon of milk. It sounded like the men managed to break up the fight.

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“I’m pressing charges,” one of the women yelled. “I’m pregnant and she assaulted me! Call the police!”

“You! Come back here!” the security guard demanded when the other woman grabbed a suitcase of beer and hurried out the door.

Unfastened, her worn winter coat was askew. Its hood dropped down behind her back. Her long hair was yellow from a bad dye job. She reeked of cigarettes and stale booze.

Chris caught a glimpse of her skeletal face before she darted past him and out into the darkness. It was a mass of wrinkles.

*She’s kind of old to be getting into fights.*

The first woman wailed about being the victim of an assault while demanding that everyone stay to act as witnesses in her lawsuit for pain and suffering.

At once, people scattered.

Chris tucked the box of pancake mix, wrapped in the store’s plastic bag, under his arm and picked up the gallon jug to head home.

Outside, he made his way down the aisle toward his mother’s sedan. He recognized the woman from the fight several feet ahead of him. The suitcase of beer hung at the end of her arm. Her coat slipped to expose one shoulder.

A dark van approached from the opposite end of the parking lot to catch her in its headlights.

Chris heard the swish of a van’s side doors opening. While the vehicle quietly cruised toward them, he recognized the silhouette of an assault rifle’s muzzle aimed out of the open door.

Chris’s heart leapt up into his throat to gag him so that he had to force out the word. “Gun!”

He dropped the jug. Milk splattered onto his pant leg before Chris dove for the grassy plot of earth between two rows of parking.

The patter of automatic gun fire was drowned out by the woman's anguished screams as a barrage of bullets ripped through her body. The van's driver gunned the engine. At the end of the row, he spun the van around to make a U-turn and raced down the next aisle.

Chris yanked his gun out of his pocket and sprinted toward the far end of the parking lot. By the time the van was gunning for the exit, Chris stepped directly into its headlight beams. He raised the gun and aimed it at the van's windshield.

Amused by Chris's display of bravery, the driver pressed the gas pedal to the floor. It didn't matter to them if he was too foolish to get out of their way. They had proven they weren't shy about taking a life.

With the van firing at him like a four-ton bullet, Chris pulled the trigger of his gun again and again—aiming for the dark figure behind the steering wheel. If he was lucky, he'd hit the shooter in the back as well.

In a matter of seconds, his semi-automatic was out of bullets.

Chris stepped to one side.

The van swerved past him. Hitting a patch of ice, it spun from one side of the lane to the other. At the end of the lot, it mowed down a stop sign and jumped the curb. After plowing through an old jeep, the van rolling over onto its roof and skidded several yards before coming to a halt.

The sparks of the metal ignited gasoline spilling from the van's gas tank, which had been punctured by the pole from the sign. The van exploded—lighting up the dark parking lot with brilliant orange flames.

Stunned, Chris watched the black smoke billowing up into the night sky as a sheriff deputy's police cruiser, with its blue lights flashing, arrived on the scene. Upon seeing a vehicular bonfire and a lone man holding a handgun, the deputy screeched to a halt.

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His partner spilled out of the passenger side and crouched behind the open door with her weapon drawn. “Drop the gun! Now!”

There was no point in arguing. What were they to do? They answered a simple assault call and arrived to discover a van engulfed in flames, a bullet riddled body, and a guy with a gun.

Wordlessly, Chris held out his arms with his hands and fingers spread out. He allowed the semi-automatic to dangle from his index finger. Slowly, he eased toward the ground and dropped his weapon onto the pavement. As he got on his knees, he placed his hands on top of his head and laced his fingers together.

While her partner called into dispatch for assistance, the deputy hurried over to pat him down for more weapons.

“I have a backup weapon in a holster on my left ankle,” Chris told her.

“You sound like you’re no stranger to this drill.” She lifted his pant leg to remove the thirty-two caliber semi-automatic.

“Been through this *several* times.”