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# CHRIS CROSSED MURDER

A Chris Matheson Cold Case Mystery



*International Best-Selling Mystery Author*

**LAUREN CARR**

**CHRIS CROSSED  
MURDER**

A CHRIS MATHESON  
COLD CASE MYSTERY

By

**LAUREN CARR**

**EXCERPT**

# **CHRIS CROSSED MURDER**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Dulles International Airport, Virginia - Present Day

“Mom, are you sure you want to do this?” Justin Taylor felt like a killjoy asking his mother to reconsider her decision. Despite that feeling, he could not stop the twist in his stomach when he saw a helicopter, only big enough to carry a pilot and a passenger, lift from one of the four helipads outside and fly off. His full-size SUV was more substantial than the flying school’s helicopters.

While he felt like he was going to lose his breakfast, his mother was grinning broadly and holding two thumbs up alongside his granddaughter—her great-granddaughter. The girl was documenting the event for her friends on social media.

*What seventy-six-year-old woman takes helicopter flying lessons?*

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“I wouldn’t have paid all that money to the flight instructor if I wasn’t sure I wanted to learn to fly a helicopter,” the elderly woman said.

“She wouldn’t have put ‘fly a helicopter’ on her bucket list if she didn’t want to do it,” Justin’s daughter said.

“Just because you write something on your bucket list doesn’t mean you’re legally obligated to go through with it,” Justin said. “Like number seven. Have a one-night stand with a rock star? Since you don’t know any rock stars, that’s not likely to happen.”

“Day’s still young, Sonny.” Beatrice jumped out of her seat when a man wearing a flight jacket stepped out of the instructor’s office and called her name. “That’s me!” Waving her arm, she trotted as fast as her orthopedic shoes could carry her across the waiting area.

The young man eyed the enthusiastic student and her family with a mixture of amusement and dismay. His student’s wrinkled face glowed with excitement. The paperwork on his clipboard confirmed that the elderly student had been through the required hours of classroom instruction, as well as the minimally required hours of simulation flights. Plus, as Beatrice noted, many hours of watching online videos detailing how to fly a helicopter.

He held out his hand for her to shake. “I’m Rusty, your flight instructor.”

“I certainly hope they don’t call you Rusty because that’s the condition of your helicopter,” Justin said with more than an ounce of concern.

“Don’t pay any attention to him, Rusty,” Beatrice said. “He’s always cranky before the caffeine kicks in.” She pointed out the window at the three small helicop-

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ters parked in the helipads. “Which helicopter am I going to fly? I hope it’s the red one. I always wanted to have a red car, but my late husband Derrick didn’t like red cars. He thought they were too flashy. Please let me fly the red helicopter.”

Ignoring the roll of Justin’s eyes, Beatrice and Rusty went through the doors and crossed to the red helicopter.

After what Beatrice considered an exceedingly long and much too detailed instruction about the pedals and controls inside the cockpit of the small aircraft, they finally started the engine. Gently, the small aircraft lifted off the ground.

Justin held his breath as the helicopter sailed toward the trees that made up the wooded area separating the international airport from the freeways and planned communities across northern Virginia.

The red aircraft went out over the trees. There, it halted. It hovered above the trees for several minutes.

“I guess he’s teaching her how to hover,” Justin’s wife said.

Then, the helicopter jerked around and zig-zagged back toward them. As it drew near, it swayed in the air. It jerked back and forth as it closed in on the helipad from which it had lifted. They could see Beatrice holding onto the stick, her face pinched with determination. Next to her, Rusty was bent over with his head between his knees.

Once the helicopter was about four feet above the pad, Beatrice landed the helicopter with a plunk. It collapsed to the ground with a loud smash.

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Sensing something was wrong, Justin rushed toward the aircraft, careful to duck below the propellers, which were slowly rotating to a stop.

“They were only up in the air for about seven minutes,” his daughter complained. “What happened, Gram?” she asked as Beatrice climbed out of the cockpit.

They could hear the flight instructor throwing up in his seat.

“Mom, what did you do?” Justin watched while Rusty stumbled out of the cockpit and staggered into the building.

“I saved our lives, that’s what I did.” Beatrice jabbed a thumb in the flight instructor’s direction. “Rusty lost it after I pointed out a dead body hanging in the trees over there.”

Beatrice’s granddaughter and great-granddaughter watched Rusty drop into a chair and place his head between his knees.

“You saw a dead body ... hanging ... in the trees?” Justin felt the color drain from his face.

“I guess I shouldn’t have pointed it out to Rusty. He lost his breakfast—right there in the cockpit. I had to take over the controls and fly us back while he was having a hissy fit.” Beatrice shook her head. “Clearly, moxy isn’t required to become a pilot.” She took out her phone. “I’m deleting number four from my bucket list—joining the mile-high club with a pilot.”

“Mother!”

“You said my bucket list wasn’t a legally binding contract.”



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The chilly December air cut through Special Agent Ripley Vaccaro's black trench coat to send a shiver throughout her body when she slid from the driver's seat of her SUV.

Federal vehicles lined the wooded strip of land running next to Dulles International Airport's runways. Crime scene investigators scoured the area for evidence. Voices of agents shouted to be heard above the rustle of the trees dancing in the wind.

Clad in a coat with "FBI" emblazoned across the back, a slender young man with thick auburn hair and a stubble mustache and beard broke away from a group of forensics officers to hurry toward her. "Special Agent Vaccaro, thank you for coming. I'm Special Agent Iain Collins."

He stuck out his bare hand to shake hers, clad in a black leather glove. His grip was firm.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I'm looking forward to working with you." In his mid-thirties, Special Agent Collins looked fresh despite the freezing wind. His rosy cheeks gave him a boyish appearance.

Pushing past the inclination to shiver against the gust of wind that cut through her like a knife, Ripley said, "I'm afraid the pleasure will be brief, Collins. Three weeks from Friday and I'm out of here." She followed the tall, lean agent as they trudged through the several inches of packed snow to duck under a crime scene rope.

Several feet inside the roped-off area, the medical examiner and her assistants carefully lowered a dead body by a rope and pulley from the top branches of a tree. Two forensics investigators worked their way down through



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the branches of the tree while monitoring the body's progress.

"He was in a tree? Is it a suicide?" Ripley turned to look up and down the nearby runway. "At an airport? Suicide or murder?"

"Definitely a murder," Agent Collins said. "A student spotted him during a flying lesson. One forensic officer found his identification in his jacket pocket. The medical examiner thinks you might provide an official ID."

Once the dead man reached the ground, the assistants stepped aside to allow Ripley to examine him.

He resembled many corpses she had seen during her career as a federal investigator specializing in homicides. Male. Dressed in gray slacks and brown work boots. He wore a khaki winter jacket, which was riddled with holes and brown blood stains.

After what had to be several days of decomposition, he bore little resemblance to how he appeared in life. In the cold December month, with snow, wild animals had made a meal of him. Ripley recognized bullet wounds among bite marks made by predators on his decomposing face.

There was not enough face for her to go by to identify him.

"How long has he been here?" Ripley asked the medical examiner, Dr. Olivia Paxton, who kneeled next to the body to examine it.

"At least a week. I'll know more when we get him back to the lab."

"A week? No one saw him hanging in that tree?"

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“This side of the airport has the smaller runways for helicopters and small aircraft,” Special Agent Iain Collins said. “Depending on the wind direction, most aircraft don’t fly over this side of the airport.”

The medical examiner held up one of the dead man’s hands to show that something had chewed his fingertips off. “It’s a miracle that his body is mostly intact. Every bone appears to be broken. That’s what happens to a body when you toss it out of an airplane.”

“How do you know he came out of a plane?” Ripley looked up into the tree. She saw where the freshly chopped bare branches were at the very top.

The medical examiner pointed to where the tree branches touched the sky. “If you were going to kill yourself, would you exert that much energy to climb up to the top of that tree?”

“Forget I asked.”

Dr. Paxton continued. “Looks like a shot to the mouth did a number on his teeth. That will make identification via dental records difficult.”

“What makes you think I may know who he is?”

“The forensics officer attaching the rope to lower him found this in his pocket.” The medical examiner held up an evidence bag containing what Ripley recognized as the gold shield of a federal investigator. It also contained the picture identification in the leather case.

Ripley felt her heart skip a beat when she saw the picture in the identification. Her fingers shook when she reached for the bag.

“I believe you two used to be partners,” Dr. Paxton said.

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Ripley Vaccaro's heart sank into the pit of her stomach when she read the name.

*Special Agent Christopher Matheson.*



### Lexington, Kentucky

“Pizza’s here!” Debit card in hand, eleven-year-old Nikki Matheson leaped from the bed and bound across the motel room to the door.

His tall ears erect, German shepherd Sterling watched while the girl peered through the peephole to confirm that it was indeed a delivery person with the pizza she had ordered. Bathed in the light from the lamp above the door, a middle-aged woman in a red and green jacket waited. She clutched a thermal carrier containing their dinner.

Nikki released the chain lock, turned the deadbolt, and opened the door. “Hi!”

The woman’s eyes bulged.

The auburn-haired girl held out the card. “They said you take debit cards.”

The door to the next room at the roadside motel flew open. The gleeful sounds of a children’s movie exploded into the parking lot. Three small children emerged from the room. “Pizza!” one exclaimed. They looked as if they were about to pounce on the woman to steal the food for themselves.

A cry erupted from inside the room. “What did I tell you about keeping the door shut?”

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“I want pizza!” one youngster whined in protest when her mother yanked them back inside.

After shooting an apologetic glance at Nikki and the pizza delivery person, their mother slammed the door shut. The door and walls of the room vibrated from the parents shouting at the herd of small children to be heard over the movie.

The delivery woman referred to the name on the takeout order. “Nikki?”

“That’s me! Here’s my dad’s card.” She pointed over her shoulder at one of the two beds inside the room. “He’s right over there.”

The woman leaned into the room to see a German shepherd lying prone across the foot of the bed nearest the door. His unblinking gaze was on them. A man filled the rest of the bed. She couldn’t see his face because he had pulled up to a blanket to cover himself. Was it because he didn’t want her to see his face?

She ran the card through the takeout place’s tablet. “What brings you and your dad to Lexington?”

“A horse, of course.” Nikki signed the tablet with her finger and handed it back to her. “He’s just retired from racing. He’s a black stallion.”

“How long are you staying here?”

“Just tonight. We were supposed to leave this morning, but Peanut body-slammed Dad. Then we got to ride to the hospital in an ambulance with lights and sirens and everything. It was *awesome!* Tomorrow, we’re going to try again.” The girl took the debit card and the box. “Thank you for the pizza.” Unaware of the look of concern filling the delivery person’s face, she closed the door.

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After securing the chain lock, turning the deadbolt, and locking the door, Nikki trotted across the room to her bed. "Want some pizza?" She adjusted the volume of the television to hear the superhero movie she was watching over the racket in the next room. Remembering the debit card, she opened the top drawer of the nightstand between the two beds and returned it to his wallet.

Realizing she hadn't heard a response, she asked, "Are you asleep?"

When he didn't reply, Sterling pawed at his leg.

"Dad, are you okay?"

"I got body slammed by a horse. Of course, I'm not okay." Slowly, Chris Matheson pulled the blankets down. The right side of his face and jaw was swollen. His right arm was in a sling and secured to his chest to protect his dislocated shoulder.

The motel stay had not been planned. They only had the clothes on their backs and Sterling, Chris's German shepherd, a retired law enforcement canine.

Chris was glad he had worn a button-down flannel shirt. His shoulder was so badly injured that the nurse at the emergency room had to take a pair of scissors to his undershirt to remove it. If they had done the same to his outer shirt, he'd be driving home to West Virginia wearing nothing but his outer jacket over his riding pants.

"It could have been worse." Nikki opened the box and took out a slice of pizza, which she gave to Sterling. The impromptu overnight stay meant they didn't have dog food for the dog, which granted him the privilege of sharing at the pizza party.

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“We could have driven seven hours to get trampled to death by a horse?”

“Now you sound like Helen.” She held out a slice to him. “Pizza?”

“I’m not hungry.”

He jumped when he heard banging on the door. Wondering who would visit them since they didn’t know anyone in Lexington, they waited in silence until they heard a door open and “hello” uttered in a stressed-out tone from the next room.

“Maybe now that they got some pizza, those kids will quiet down some,” Nikki said.

“If they’re anything like you and your sisters, I doubt it. Food provides energy. Energy in kids produces noise.” Moving carefully to not jostle his injured shoulder, Chris pushed up on his good arm to sit up against the headboard.

She took a big bite of the pizza. “I think your ego got hurt worse than your shoulder.” While chewing, she gazed at him imploringly. “I told the trainer that we’ll stop by to look at Peanut again in the morning.”

He cocked his head at her. “One ride to the ER in an ambulance wasn’t enough?”

“I thought it was fun,” she said. “I’ve never ridden in an ambulance before. Did you see all the trucks and SUVs clearing the way for us?”

Chris narrowed his silver eyes. “I was too busy being unconscious to notice.”

She frowned. “You promised I’d get a racehorse for Christmas to train for my 4-H project next year.”

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“Peanut’s motor runs too fast for you. It runs too fast for me. It runs too fast for anyone. Tomorrow, we’ll go back home, and I’m sure we’ll find another racehorse for you.”

With a pout, Nikki took another slice of pizza from the box.

Focusing on the door adjoining the room next door, Sterling uttered a low growl from deep in his chest.

Chris let out a pained sigh. “What did Nonni say when you called her from the hospital?”

“Nothing.” She bit out her answer.

“Nothing?”

She lifted a shoulder. “She didn’t answer the phone. I left her a voicemail.”

“Did you try calling Helen?”

Nikki nodded her head. “I left her a voicemail, too.”

Chris lifted his eyes to the ceiling. “Did you actually *talk* to anyone back home to tell them what happened? That we weren’t getting home tonight? That we were spending the night here and going home tomorrow?”

The girl hesitated, as if to recall whether she had indeed spoken to her grandmother or her stepmother. She shook her head.

Chris searched the room for a clock to check the time. Darkness had fallen over Lexington. If things had gone as expected, they would have been home in Harpers Ferry before dark. “What time is it?”

Nikki found the clock radio on the nightstand. It read 8:23.

Sterling stood up on the bed.

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“If Nonni and Helen don’t check their voicemails, they’re going to be worried.” The loud noises from the next room had stopped. He cocked his head to listen. He could hear familiar slow stealth movements from the other side of the wall.

Nikki shrugged her shoulders in a sign of indifference. “So what if they get worried? What are they going to do?”

The battering rams smashed through the two doors of the room with the ease of a fist through paper. The SWAT team descended into the room to surround them.

One man whisked Nikki up into his arms and carried her out of the room—a pizza slice gripped in her hand. She screamed in terror. “Dad!”

Spotting law enforcement badges on the armored uniforms, Chris shouted, “Police, Nikki! Do what they say!”

He sprung from the head of the bed to grab Sterling by the collar with his good hand. Intent on defending his master, the hundred-pound dog lunged toward the invaders. “Sterling! Stand down!” The excruciating pain from his shoulder and assorted bruises from the fall sent shockwaves throughout his body.

In a split second, the intruders surrounded Chris and the dog. They pointed ten weapons at him and the German shepherd. One move and both would be dead.

“Police! Show me your hands!” the leader of the team demanded. “Raise your hands where we can see them!”

Opting for pain over having his brains splattered across the room, Chris forced his right arm up out of the



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sling. It felt like a butcher's knife being plunged into his shoulder.

“Do you know why we're here?”

“My mother didn't check her voicemail.”