

Old Growth and Ivy

Jayne Menard

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Old Growth and Ivy will engage those looking for a thriller that also sweetly celebrates love.

Jayne Menard's romantic crime drama *Old Growth and Ivy*, the first in a trilogy, juxtaposes heart-pounding shootouts with warmhearted relationships that emphasize the importance of human connection.

Steve Nielsen, a loyal, longtime agent of the FBI, tries to ignore that he is nearing the end of his illustrious career. A man who has buried himself in his work to the point of isolation, he is now burdened by the suspicion that without his job, he is without purpose. A child sex slavery case brings him to Portland, Oregon, to unearth bank records from a consulting firm executive, Ivy Littleton. From the first handshake, the two rattle one another.

Steve's almost monomaniacal mission to solve the nauseatingly twisted case, and Ivy's sense of pride in her company's confidentiality, cause more than a few spats between the seasoned professionals. Yet, a sense of mutual respect and curiosity draws them together. Late in life, the two find a whirlwind of companionship, passion, and enrichment in one another that allows them to find meaning beyond their careers. When the FBI's perplexing case on an enigmatic drug lord endangers Ivy, Steve is drawn out of retirement and into the field for one last case—this time with Ivy's resilience and resourcefulness in his corner.

Through the ardent Ivy and the willful Steve, the author earnestly explores the fears of aging and retirement, as well as the struggle of the career-driven to know their identity outside of work and to be vulnerable enough to love another. This theme will surely unite the following two novels in the series as other characters find their mates.

Menard uniquely chooses to show much of the development of Ivy and Steve's relationship through correspondence. Their giddy outpouring of emotion through e-mail and their self-conscious anxiety feels organic. While Ivy and Steve's obstinate personalities and once-in-a-lifetime love might slightly mirror Heathcliff and Catherine, the initial hesitation quickly fades into a harmonious relationship.

The source of driving tension in the plot should be the FBI's hunt for El Zorro Astuto, the drug lord. However, the depths of his villainy, menacing quirks, and his fascinating motives, though alluring as a plot point, are not hinted at until almost immediately preceding the final showdown. If Astuto was developed as a character more gradually, the case's resolution would be more satisfying and the pace of the novel would quicken.

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PAIGE VAN DE WINKLE (August 11, 2015)

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