

A MADDIE LANDON MYSTERY

Her Last



Message

ELLEN SHAPIRO

Her Last Message

by

Ellen Shapiro



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For my daughter, Carrie, whose love and support fills my heart each and every day.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHAPTER 1

I had just wrapped up a report for a client when I heard the front door creak open, followed by footsteps approaching my office. Instinctively, I reached for the gun tucked away in my desk drawer, keeping it close at my side. Moments later a woman stood before me, clearly upset.

“Are you alright?” I said, as I slid my gun back in my drawer.

“No, I need to speak with you immediately. Please, I don’t have an appointment, but it’s urgent. My daughter is missing,” she said, her voice trembling.

“Let’s sit, Ms...”

“It’s Mrs. Dorothy Peterson.”

“Can I offer you something to drink?”

“Maybe some water. My throat is dry.” I filled up a glass of water and handed it to her.

“Were you referred by someone?”

“I don’t remember. Does that matter?” she replied, her hands twisting nervously on her lap.

Mrs. Peterson appeared to be in her fifties, her small brown eyes reflecting a mix of concern and determination. Her pointed chin gave her a distinctive profile, while her mousy, curly brown hair was cropped short in an unflattering hairstyle.

“No, just curious. I don’t get many walk-ins.”

“I apologize if I seem a bit anxious; this is my first time speaking with a private investigator. As I mentioned, my daughter is missing and I’m absolutely frantic. I desperately need your help.”

“I understand this must be incredibly difficult for you. Why don’t you start from the beginning and fill me in?”

Mrs. Peterson took a deep breath.

“My daughter Katie recently called and left a message on my answering machine that I regret missing. When I got home it was too late to return her call. The next morning when I tried to reach her, I was disappointed when it went straight to voicemail.”

“What did the message say?”

She played the message for me, her hands fumbling with the phone. “Mom, I’m going away for a few days. I need time to think about my marriage. I’ll be in touch.” Mrs. Peterson had tears in her eyes as she listened to the message.

“I’ve tried calling her back several times but she hasn’t answered.”

“What do you think your daughter’s message meant?”

“Katie and her husband separated a few months ago. Maybe she’s having doubts now,” Mrs. Peterson said.

“Did she initiate the separation?”

“Yes. I thought it was a mistake, but she wouldn’t listen to me.” She paused, staring off into the distance. “I went over to her apartment yesterday thinking something might be wrong, but she wasn’t home.”

“Why do you think something may have happened to her?”

“It was her voice,” she said softly. “I know my daughter, and something’s not right. Katie’s a teacher, and she wouldn’t just leave her students. It’s not like her to do something so impulsive. I don’t understand why she didn’t confide in me,” she said, looking bewildered.

I had no idea if Mrs. Peterson was overreacting, but decided to keep that to myself.

“So, she never hinted that she planned to go away for a few days?”

“No, I would have remembered that,” she said, frustrated.

“How long ago did she leave the message?”

“It was last Friday.”

“You said you went over to her apartment. Was there anything you noticed that was different from the last time you were there?”

“Nothing that I can recall. I was so worried about Katie, my mind wasn’t on anything else.”

“That’s understandable. Did you speak to any of her friends?”

“I only know her best friend Gail, and she hasn’t heard from her in the past few days.”

“What about her husband? Was she in touch with him?”

“I have no idea. She doesn’t really talk about him. The last time I spoke with Paul, he mentioned he hadn’t seen or talked to Katie in quite some time.”

“How long ago was that?”

“About a week ago.”

“Is there a reason why you’re still in touch with her husband?”

“Well, sometimes he calls me to check on how Katie is doing.”

I wondered if he was keeping tabs on his wife.

“Why are you asking me all these questions? I know something’s wrong.”

“I’m trying to gather as much information as possible regarding your daughter. I just have one more question. Did you go to the police?”

“I did, but I knew the detective wasn’t taking what I said seriously. It doesn’t make sense. Even if she did go away, why wouldn’t she call me back? I just know something’s wrong. I filled out a missing person report, but I didn’t get the impression they’re going to help me.”

I could understand why the police would be skeptical.

“Can you tell me what precinct you went to and who you spoke with?” Mrs. Peterson took out a business card from her purse and handed it to me.

“I know Detective Marks,” I said, looking at his card. “I used to be a detective with the NYPD. I’ll make a call.”

“Thank you, but that’s not why I’m here. My husband and I want to hire you to find out what happened to our daughter. I don’t think the police believe me and I need to know she’s safe.”

“Where’s your husband now?”

“He’s at work.”

“Will he be home around 6:30? I could come by then since I’d like to speak to both of you together.”

“Yes, thank you so much.” Before leaving, Mrs. Peterson wrote down her address and contact information.

I thought about my conversation with Mrs. Peterson after she left. It was certainly understandable why she would be upset, but I just wasn’t convinced that something happened to her daughter.

CHAPTER 2

Later that day, I drove from my apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to Mrs. Peterson's home. Crestwood is a small community in lower Westchester County, with well-tended Colonials, Tudors, and Victorian single-family houses just west of the Bronx River Parkway. The Bronx River Parkway is a narrow, winding scenic road that was completed in 1925, designed to accommodate the Model-T, whose top speed was probably forty miles an hour. Much of the parkway remains unchanged.

The Petersons lived in a Tudor-style house on a small plot of land with flower boxes full of white and pink chrysanthemums outside of their second-floor windows. I rang the doorbell. When it opened, Mrs. Peterson was wearing the same canary yellow pantsuit that she had worn earlier in my office.

"Please come in. James, Ms. Landon is here," she shouted. The foyer was quite dark; from what I know about Tudors, they often have a dim interior. Mrs. Peterson led me into the living room.

"James, this is Ms. Landon." We shook hands. I sat down on a three-cushioned, beige overstuffed sofa with decorative pillows casually placed. It was quite comfortable. They sat opposite me on matching club chairs. Mr. Peterson was about the same age as his wife, with a medium build, weathered complexion and a full head of dark wavy brown hair.

"As I mentioned to your wife, I thought it would be best if I spoke to both of you together. Your wife seems to think something may have happened to Katie. What do you think?"

"I just don't know. It does seem out of character for her to just leave without telling us. Since she separated from her husband, I noticed she's been acting different lately."

"In what way?"

"The one thing that comes to mind is that she's been more distant lately, and we don't talk as much."

"Would you say you were close to your daughter?" I asked, trying to gauge his reaction.

"We both were," Mrs. Peterson interjected quickly, her voice almost defensive.

I couldn't help but wonder if there was something going on between them.

"Do you know why they separated?"

"My daughter is a very private person," Mrs. Peterson said, her gaze dropping to the floor. "We're not sure." Mr. Peterson remained silent, his expression unreadable. What wasn't he saying?

Since I'm not a mother, I had no idea if it was that unusual a daughter wouldn't confide in her parents about her personal life.

"Has Katie said anything to either of you recently that she was worried about something or if someone was bothering her?"

“She told me that her husband had been calling her lately, wanting to get back together. Other than that, I can’t think of anything else,” Mr. Peterson said.

“I didn’t know that Paul was calling her,” Mrs. Peterson said, her face slightly red as she glared at her husband. He just shrugged.

“Do you know if anyone at the school was harassing her?”

“If there was someone, she never mentioned it,” Mrs. Peterson said.

“Is there anything you can remember? It might be something in passing that at the time you didn’t think was important.”

“As I said, everything seemed fine. You might want to check with her husband or her friend, Gail Davis,” Mrs. Peterson said.

“One last question. Did you contact the school to find out if she had showed up?”

“Yes. They said she had called and told them she would be out for a few days—something had come up that she had to take care of. She never said anything to us,” Mrs. Peterson said, with a worried look on her face.

“Do you know who Katie spoke with at the school?”

“It was Mrs. Roberts in the administration office.”

Before leaving the Petersons, they signed a retainer agreement and provided me with the contact information for their daughter’s husband as well as her best friend. Mrs. Peterson agreed to meet me at Katie’s apartment the following day. I wanted to take a look around. Maybe I could find something that would give me a clue as to what may have happened to Katie.

CHAPTER 3

Driving home, I wasn't sure if the Petersons were being totally honest with me. I've learned from my years as a police detective and a private investigator that people hold back, whether it's because they have something to hide or because they may be embarrassed about revealing certain details. Whatever the case, it usually winds up spilling out at some point. Pressing them now, when their daughter might be missing or worse, was not in my best interest.

I arrived back at my apartment at 8:30 p.m. For the past twelve years, I've lived on the Upper West Side in a one-bedroom apartment on the third floor. Though my decorating skills have a lot to be desired, between a mix of my mother's antiques, interspersed with mostly modern furniture that I bought at Pottery Barn, my place is warm and cozy. I placed my keys on my favorite piece, a black medallion antique wood console that greets me in my foyer as I enter my apartment.

I quickly showered. While drying myself off, I noticed how all my running and hard work at the gym was paying off. I slipped on my boxer shorts and a T-shirt before peeking into the refrigerator in search of something to eat.

"Hey, babe," I said, when I saw it was Jesse calling.

"How's everything in the Big Apple?"

"Great. Just got a new case." I went on to tell him about it. Jesse is also a private investigator, who works for two criminal defense attorneys in Connecticut.

"Are we all set to look at some apartments on Wednesday?" Jesse said.

"We're meeting with the realtor at 10:00 a.m. She's scheduled a few places for us to see."

Jesse lives in a small brick house in a rural but very charming town on the Connecticut River. He completely renovated it, with a loft area that accommodates a bedroom, work area, and bathroom. Though I love the house, what I love most is hanging out on the back porch, where we barbecue when the weather allows. Us city folks don't have that luxury.

"What are you up to?" I said.

"We have a client who swears he was at a friend's house the night of a burglary. I have to check out the friend, since I'm not sure if he'll make a good witness, but even if I think he's lying, we might have no choice but to put him on the stand."

"I'm glad I don't have to represent criminals. When I was a detective, I liked putting away the bad guys."

"Did you forget that there are people who are accused and are innocent?"

Jesse was referring to a client of mine on my last case. A seventeen-year-old boy was accused by a classmate of rape. It turns out the accuser pointed the finger at my client because the person who raped her threatened harm to her family. In the process of finding the real rapist, I was almost killed. But what if I never found the person who raped her? If

my client was convicted, he would have spent a good part of his life in prison. It made me think about all the other innocent people who were wrongly accused, convicted, and sitting in prison.

"I'll see you on Wednesday," I said to Jesse, keeping my doubts about moving in together to myself.

In the morning, I took the subway to meet Dorothy Peterson at her daughter's apartment in the West Village in Manhattan.

I love New York and everything about it, including the New York City subway system. It's an easy way to get around the city. My only problem is my fear of enclosed spaces. Every time I walk onto the train, my anxiety level shoots up, and every time the train stops for any reason, I start to worry, going over in my head all the scenarios why the train would come to a halt. None of them very comforting. Most of the time the conductor never tells us why we're waiting, and if he does, it's usually garbled, hard to understand. I breathed a sigh of relief as we rolled into the station without any complications. I walked the few blocks to Katie Lewis's apartment building, where her mother was standing outside waiting for me.

Katie's apartment was a small one-bedroom on the fourth floor. The furnishings had seen better days. The tattered brown couch was faded in spots, and the only thing that looked new was a 52" television hanging on the living room wall above a walnut credenza.

"What do you expect to find?" Mrs. Peterson said, following me around.

"I don't know. Can you tell me if she had an overnight bag or any luggage that might be missing?"

"I didn't think to look. Let me check her closet."

A few minutes later, Mrs. Peterson said that her daughter's overnight bag was gone. "That's good, isn't it? Maybe I overreacted and perhaps she did go away for a few days."

At this point, I didn't know what to think.

"Did you notice if anything else was missing?"

"Her cell phone and laptop are gone."

"Does anything look different from the last time you were here?"

"I don't think so. Again, it's been a while since I've been in the apartment."

I noticed a table with several photos. I picked one up.

"Is this your daughter?"

"Yes, that's Katie and me. She looks so happy there."

"How old is Katie?"

"She just had a birthday. She turned twenty-eight."

Katie didn't look anything like her mother. She was beautiful, with large brown eyes, high cheekbones, and a perfect nose. Her wavy, dark brown hair came down to her shoulders. I took a photo with my cell phone.

"By the way, does Katie drive?"

"She has a license, but living in the city it's difficult to have a car. Mostly she takes the subway or gets a cab or an Uber."

I quickly looked around, seeing no signs that Katie hadn't left of her own accord. I thought I would come back another time when I was by myself for a more thorough search. On our way out, I told Mrs. Peterson I would be in touch with her as soon as I had any news.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Growing up I had an affinity for reading mystery books. I guess choosing to become a private investigator shouldn't have surprised me. Working in the field has provided me the opportunity to use my skills and knowledge to write the books I enjoyed reading growing up.

Bringing my protagonist, PI Maddie Landon, to life has allowed me to craft stories that I hope will captivate my readers to follow Maddie as she navigates both her personal and professional life.

My heartfelt gratitude to my wonderful friends for their love and support. A special thanks to everyone who has contributed to the writing of this book, including Alexa Recio and Siobhan Mitchell for their invaluable input. I also want to thank my friend Sue and my daughter Carrie for taking on the task of reading my pages and providing me with their insights.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



As a private investigator with more than thirty years of experience, Ellen Shapiro's professional expertise has brought an authenticity to her characters and the storylines she has created for her novels. Acting on her passion for writing, she enrolled in the Sarah Lawrence Writing Institute where she took courses in creative writing.

Ellen has written articles in her field for both local and nationwide newspapers and is the author of seven mystery novels. Ellen is a member of Mystery Writers of America and resides in Scarsdale, New York.

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