

THE LAST THING

SHE SAID

**A CHRIS MATHESON
COLD CASE MYSTERY**

By

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Excerpt

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From the station a few blocks away, the EMTs arrived at the library so quickly that the Matheson girls didn't have time to realize what had happened before their father ushered them and the two dogs into the family van and took them home.

The hundred-acre farm, nestled along the Shenandoah River, had been passed down in the Matheson family from generation to generation. The three-story farmhouse had been renovated numerous times. The most recent change was the addition of a spacious country kitchen and sunroom that looked out on a heated in-ground pool and spa in the back yard.

A horse enthusiast, Kirk Matheson had taken in retired racehorses, many from the thoroughbred track in Charles Town. Chris and his daughter, Nikki, had inherited that same love for the graceful animals. The farm currently had almost a dozen horses.

Doris was on the board for the local animal welfare league. It was common knowledge that the Mathesons were soft touches for anything with paws, claws, and fur. Many mornings, Chris would go out to the barn to discover a new cat enlisted in their feline army to fight against the rise of the

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rodents. Each spring, they'd take a load of cats to the veterinary clinic to have sterilized to keep the population down.

The canine population was more under control. Two dogs made up Doris's "entourage" as Chris liked to call them. A Doberman, Sadie was a retired law enforcement canine. Mocha, a golden Labrador, had retired from search and rescue. Both dogs followed Doris everywhere when she was home.

Sterling belonged to Chris. At two years old, the hundred-pound German shepherd had been a law enforcement canine when his handler was brutally gunned down in an ambush. Locked in the rear compartment of the cruiser, Sterling almost died after taking two bullets himself. As a result, the dog had become claustrophobic and failed the "psyche exam" to return to duty.

After Chris had adopted him, the German shepherd quickly overcame his fear. It was either ride with Chris in his truck or remain home with "the ladies."

Even the Matheson's fifteen-pound French lop-eared rabbit was a female. Chris's late wife had gifted the baby tan and white bunny to their daughters before leaving for a state department assignment overseas, which had resulted in her death. Each girl had wanted to give the rabbit a different name. Chris had settled the argument by putting the names into a hat and drawing one.

The winning name was "Thor."

Thor could often be found chewing on a carrot while lounging around the farmhouse in some frilly ensemble—usually in the hue of pink.

Normally, Chris and Sterling would have been happy with the addition of one more male to help even out the odds against them. Unfortunately, the five-pound Jack Russell named Cutie-Pie proved to be a menace. By the time they'd returned home from the soccer match, the puppy had bitten

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each one of them—including Sterling—and peed in the back seat.

Chris renamed the pup “Chompers.”

They got home in time for Sierra Clarke, the sixteen-year-old daughter of Chris’s girlfriend Helen, to arrive for her weekly horseback riding lesson.

Chris couldn’t think of a better way to take his mind off Shannon than to saddle up some horses and go for a trail ride. Katelyn agreed to stay behind with Emma and the new puppy. Always ready to explore, Sterling accompanied the riders across the fields and through the woods.

The fresh breeze swept up off the Shenandoah River to make for a pleasant afternoon. Emma played endlessly with Chompers, the name seemed to stick, who had great fun checking out his new home. Uncertain about the newcomer, Sadie and Mocha lay on either side of the porch chaise where Katelyn read a book on her tablet.

When the two dogs’ ears perked up, Katelyn looked across the front pasture to see her grandmother’s Malibu racing along the river to the farm’s main entrance. Helen Clarke’s unmarked state police cruiser followed close behind it. Mocha and Sadie rose to their feet and wagged their tails in anticipation of their master’s return. After entering the security code to open the electric gate, Doris drove up the lane to the farmhouse. Helen parked her cruiser next to her daughter’s mini-SUV.

Beyond the vehicles, Katelyn saw the riders trotting up the hill and across the field toward the rear of the barn.

Upon seeing Helen, Emma scooped up the puppy and ran to show off the new addition to the family. “Did Nonni tell you about my new puppy? I got him at the soccer game this morning. He’s *free*. I named him Cutie-Pie. Dad calls him Chompers. I think that’s mean.”

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Helen reached out to take the squirming pup. “Why does he call him Chompers?” she asked as the growling pup bit her fingers. With a yelp, she pulled her hand back. “Sorry I asked.”

“Where’s your father?” Doris called to Katelyn while petting Mocha who had rushed to greet her.

“They’re in the barn. They just got back from a trail ride.” As they hurried into the barn, Katelyn noticed that Helen was carrying a plastic evidence bag. *Hmmm, wonder if they want to talk to Dad about a case?*

Helen was a lieutenant with the West Virginia State Police, in charge of their homicide division. It was a position that the late Kirk Matheson had held before being promoted to captain.

Chris had retired from a distinguished career with the FBI. He had spent many years working on long dangerous undercover assignments. His work resulted in breaking up organized crime syndicates and other ruthless operations. As a result, Chris Matheson’s name was on more than one hit list. For that reason, the Matheson farm was secured with gates and surveillance cameras. Chris had weapons on him at all times—often concealed in a pocket or an ankle holster. When out on a trail, he had a small semi-automatic tucked inside one of his riding boots.

Certified as a service dog, Sterling provided an additional layer of protection. When asked what service the German shepherd provided, Chris would say that Sterling helped with his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a believable lie considering the amount of action he had seen during his military and law enforcement career. Chris found that people were less threatened to think the large dog was trained to comfort him rather than rip apart would-be assassins.

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Doris and Helen stepped into the barn to find Chris, Nikki, and Sierra rubbing down their horses while talking excitedly about what had been a pleasant ride.

Chris had changed from his soccer coach uniform to a pair of worn, discolored jeans and button-down work shirt that he wore untucked. The spring breeze rustled his auburn hair, liberally mixed with silver, to loosen the waves of his shaggy locks.

Exhausted from his adventure, Sterling sprawled out in the middle of everything—forcing everyone to step over him.

Chris's horse was a gray Thoroughbred named Traveler, his favorite among the herd. The gelding had been a gift to his father from a trainer, whose life Kirk had saved. The police captain and horse had developed such a tight bond that Traveler stopped eating after Kirk's sudden death. To comfort the grieving horse, Chris had slept in Traveler's stall with him until they overcame their pain together.

Nikki's horse was a roan mare named KitKat.

A huge grin on her face, Sierra lovingly brushed her quarter horse mare named Coco. The name fit the chestnut.

Sierra loved riding and had a natural talent for it. She had begged her mother for months to purchase the horse. Frightened of horses, Helen decided her daughter's talent had come from a gene that had bypassed her. While it made Helen feel good to see her daughter so happy, she always felt a giant sense of relief when she returned in one piece from a riding lesson or trail ride.

"Mom, we saw a fox." Sierra gushed upon seeing her mother. "And she had a litter of babies!"

"She was over at the edge of the woods on the other side of the pasture," Chris said.

"How many pups did she have?" Doris asked.

"I counted four," Nikki said before laying a kiss on the side of KitKat's head.

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“Yeah, I counted four, too,” Sierra said. “Mom, can Chris teach me barrel racing?”

“Barrel racing!” Helen’s eyes bulged.

Chris shot a glance in Sierra’s direction. As Helen advanced, he ducked behind Traveler.

Sierra proceeded to comb out the mare’s tail. “Coco is really good at making sharp turns. She used to be a 4-H horse. I bet her previous owner did barrel racing. Chris said that with practice, I could maybe enter some competitions and win some trophies. He said he’d teach me if you’d agree to it.”

Helen closed in on Chris. The only thing between them was Traveler’s head. “Barrel racing is dangerous.”

“Mom, barrel racing is not *dangerous*.”

“All I did was mention it,” Chris said in a low voice.

“When are you going to learn to stop *mentioning* things to my daughter?” Narrowing her dark eyes to slits, she fired off a glare through an opening between Traveler’s jaw and neck. “Doris, what is wrong with your son?”

“Well, you were bound to find out eventually,” Doris said with a heavy sigh. “It’s all my fault Christopher is the way he is. Blame me. I drank while I was pregnant with him.”

Helen blurted out. “What!”

“It was only wine with dinner.”

“And martinis,” Chris added. “They drank martinis at cocktail hour.”

“We didn’t know any better back then,” Doris said. “I’m sure with love and understanding, you can—”

“I’m talking about barrel racing!” Helen said.

“Nikki does barrel racing,” Chris said.

“Yeah, it’s lots of fun.” Nikki gave Doris a hug before leading KitKat out the door to the pasture. “Maybe you’ll get good enough to enter the competition at the county fair.”

“Wouldn’t that be awesome?” Leading Coco, Sierra followed Nikki.

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Helen cocked her head to look around Traveler at Chris. "Wouldn't that be awesome?"

"You're beautiful when you're sarcastic," Chris said in a low voice before blowing her a kiss.

"You're incorrigible."

"You're right," he whispered. "You should spank me."

"You think you're so cute," she hissed as the two girls returned.

"I'm sorry about Ms. Shannon, Nonni," Nikki murmured to Doris while giving her a warm hug. "She was a nice lady. I really liked her."

"We all did, sweetie." Doris blinked away the tears in her eyes.

Chris finished brushing down Traveler and led him out to the pasture. Doris and Helen waited for the girls to leave the barn to talk to him when he returned.

"What did I do now?" Chris asked while coaxing Sterling to wake up with a treat from a jar in the feed room. "Besides mentioning barrel racing to Sierra?"

"It could have been worse," Doris said. "He could have mentioned trick riding."

"She's got a point." Chris tossed Sterling a second treat, which he caught in mid-air.

Helen walked across the floor to hold out the evidence bag to him as he stepped out of the feed room. "We found this on Shannon's desk. It's addressed to you."

"Did you ask Shannon to order a book for you?" Doris asked.

Shaking his head, Chris opened the bag and removed the hardback. *The Last Thing She Said*. "You have your own copy of this book. Autographed and everything. Why would I need to order it?" He opened it to reveal the front page, which was signed.

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He read the inscription:

To My Dear Christopher,

A Mystery for You.

From Your Friend & a Fellow Mystery Lover,

Mercedes Livingston

Chris's brows furrowed. "This is a joke." He read the writing underneath the signature. It was that day's date. He held out the book to Helen. "Did you see this?"

As he asked, a white envelope dropped to the floor.

"Yes, we did." Helen knelt to pick up the envelope and held it out to him. "We also saw this. That's why we're here. It's addressed to you and sealed. You have to open it."

"Are you thinking Shannon's death was foul play?" Chris asked.

"Chris, you left so fast with the girls, I didn't get to tell you," Doris said. "Shannon was acting weird this morning. She told me twice that she missed Billy and wanted to be with him. I think she committed suicide."

"We found no signs of foul play," Helen said. "No obvious evidence of her taking an overdose or poison. Our forensics people have gathered up her teacup and things in her office, the library's kitchen, and coffee station. We found this book and envelope addressed to—"

"Why would Shannon leave a suicide note addressed to me? Mom was her best friend." Chris shook the book in his hand. "This book is crazy. Shannon signed it. I recognize her handwriting. And she dated it *today*. Mercedes Livingston was murdered almost forty years ago. That's just plain insane."

He went to Doris. "Mom, you said she was talking weird this morning."

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“Yes, she was. She was talking about when we’d first met, but what she was saying was nothing like when we’d met. She said I was wearing my lilac pantsuit. I remember that pantsuit. I only wore it for special occasions. Well, it was not a special occasion when I’d met her. It was her first day of training at the library. It was August and we were in the middle of a heat wave. I don’t remember what I was wearing, but I know it would not have been *that* pantsuit. It would have been a sleeveless top, and light slacks or a skirt.”

“She must have been suffering from dementia,” Chris said.

“If she thought she was Mercedes Livingston then why was she saying that she wanted to be with Billy?” Doris asked. “The two don’t go together. She would have been wanting to be with George Livingston, who Shannon had never met.”

“People with dementia don’t always make sense,” Chris said. “If people with dementia made sense, then there would be no problem with them.”

“Chris, read the letter,” Helen said. “We need to know if it’s a suicide note.”

Sitting in front of him, Sterling uttered a bark as if to back up her order.

“Okay.” Chris dropped back against a stool next to the barn door. He slipped a finger under the flap and ripped it open. The envelope contained a handwritten letter that was several pages long. Chris recognized Shannon Blakeley’s elegant cursive script. “This isn’t a suicide note. It’s a novel.”

“Shannon was a born writer,” Doris said. “She had an exceptional sense of observation and a way with words. If I’d told her once, I’d told her a million times that if she’d set her mind to it, she could have been a great novelist.” She let out a mournful sigh. “She’d tell me that all she wanted was to be Dr. William Blakeley’s wife and the mother of his children. I

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guess after their kids grew up and left home and he died, she lost all purpose for living.”

“If she committed suicide, we need to figure out how.” Helen turned to watch Chris, whose brow furrowed as he rose from the stool and crossed the floor.

“You never heard of dying from a broken heart?” Doris asked.

“Only in the movies.” Helen stepped over to where Chris was slowly shaking his head as he turned to the next page in the letter. “What’d she tell you?”

Chris’s mouth hung open. Slowly, he shook his head. “It’s ... it’s an unbelievable mystery.”

“What kind of mystery?” Doris asked.

“Remember the Mercedes Livingston kidnapping?” Chris asked.

“Of course,” Doris said with a scoff. “Shannon and I were talking about that just this morning. That’s why I brought my book home. She told me it wasn’t safe at the library.”

“Everyone knows about the Mercedes Livingston case,” Helen said. “It happened at Hill House like ten minutes from here.”

“Her husband was kidnapped, too,” Chris said.

“What does the Livingston case have to do with Shannon Blakeley’s suicide?” Helen asked.

“I attended that conference,” Doris said. “Suddenly, out of the blue, Mercedes’s agent had called the organizers for what was usually a small mystery writers conference held at Hill House. Mercedes Livingston offered to appear and asked for nothing. Of course, the conference organizers jumped at the offer. Some folks in the know speculated that Robin Spencer, who was also appearing, had talked her into it. Robin Spencer was truly the grande dame of mystery writing and I’d heard rumors that she had taken Mercedes under her wing.”

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“I bumped into Robin Spencer at that conference,” Chris said.

“Quite literally,” Doris said with a frown. “Practically knocked her over.”

“She gave us an advanced copy of her next book,” Chris said.

“Can we get back to Shannon’s suicide novel?” Helen tapped the letter in Chris’s hand.

“Mercedes Livingston’s literary agent stated Mercedes had left the hotel to go meet her husband for cocktails,” Doris said. “He was speaking at a business networking conference going on at the Bavarian Inn that same weekend. She didn’t show up later to accept an award after the banquet. Meanwhile, in Shepherdstown, George had told some friends that he was going out for dinner with his wife. When he didn’t return for that evening’s presentation following their banquet, friends and associates went looking. Mercedes’s rental car was gone from Hill House. George’s was still in Shepherdstown. The police were called in.”

“Mercedes’s father got a ransom demand for half a million dollars,” Helen said with a nod of her head. “Horace Billingsley paid the ransom, but they never let either of them go. George Livingston’s skeletal remains were discovered buried in some thick woods in Kearneysville a decade later when the highway crews were building the bypass to Martinsburg. No one knows what became of Mercedes.”

Chris held up the letter. “Until now.”