

CHAPTER 1

THE LETTERS

I knelt down in front of the large, grayish headstone and gently passed my hand over the rugged top. I could feel the roughness of the rock as my hand grazed the front lettering, which only spelled out the last name. I looked around to see if there was anyone else nearby and saw no one; I looked back at the stone, which had to be at least a foot thick at the base and perhaps two feet tall from the base upward. There was moss growing around the edges and I peeled some of it back, careful not to chip my freshly manicured fingernails. I noticed that someone had recently planted a small American flag in the front, which reminded me that I was remiss in not bringing flowers to plant. I told myself I would come back another day and take care of that task, but somehow the guilt began to set in. I felt sadness that I had not visited more frequently. Why was I always so preoccupied with my own life? Why hadn't I taken just an hour or two to buy some flowers at one of the big-box stores and plant them? I looked at all the moss and it was soft to the touch; it reminded me of his gentleness and the reason I was here.

“Dad,” I exclaimed, “you won't believe what I found!” My excitement made me want to jump up and down. “You

know that old, tattered coat box with the fancy writing on it that had been sitting under the eaves in the attic for decades? Well, I opened it up, and guess what I found?” I suddenly realized that my enthusiasm might have been mistaken for dancing and hoped no one saw me do the little jig in the cemetery, but I couldn’t contain myself. “You know those old scrapbooks that your mother put together? I just browsed through them and I understand—I mean, I really understand everything now.”

I suddenly realized that I was saying all this out loud. I looked around, but there was still no one in sight. Just then, a little breeze, warm for this time of year in Maine, blew across my face. It hit my bangs, and they flew up and then back onto my forehead. It happened just as though my dad had brushed them aside, like he did when I was a little girl. I paused, wondering if that was just a coincidence—or was there somehow a chance he really heard me?

A car door shut, and I looked over my shoulder to see an elderly woman deliberately heading for another headstone in my direction. I looked back at my father’s grave and said, “I want to share your story—you were an amazing man with an incredible tale to tell. You told me you wanted to tell others what happened, but you left this world too soon. It’s because of what’s in the box and the letters you left behind that I can share it.”

I stood up and saw the woman close by, so I decided it was time to head for my car, which I did slowly, as I wasn’t quite ready to depart. I slipped into the driver’s seat and looked back at my father’s grave. I whispered softly, “Thank you, Dad. I will try to tell the story the best I can, but I suspect if you had the gift of time, the tale would be better coming from you.” I could feel my eyes water, but I managed to keep the tears at bay as I turned on the ignition.