

CHAPTER ONE

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, you’re not my father?”

“That’s not what I said, Gracie.” The man I had always called Dad shifted his weight uncomfortably and, for the first time that I could remember in my entire life, had trouble making eye contact with me. “Of course I’m your father. I’m just not your biological father.” I blinked a few times, then looked down at the open grave where the simple wooden coffin was resting. The two handfuls of dirt my sister and I had tossed on it moments earlier were still visible.

“Really? You’re telling me this now?”

Dad started to say something, then thought better of it and held his peace. That was so like him. He was never a big talker when things were going well and got even more laconic when things got rough. I just looked at him and shook my head. The smart money would bet he had wanted to tell me sooner, maybe much sooner, but the lady in the box at my feet had said no.

Don Maxwell — AKA Dad — whose wardrobe choice tended more toward denim and flannel than worsted, had added a few pounds since the last time he had worn a suit and tie. He’d had to pull and stretch the collar of the dress shirt he had found in the back of his closet to get the top button to reach its hole. From the moment he put it on, it had been chaffing his neck. With most of the well-wishers already heading back to their cars, he undid the top button and loosened the Jerry Garcia tie I had given him as a gag gift for Christmas a few years back.

Shaking my head again, I tried to make sense of all of this, but I kept coming up empty. I nodded in the direction of my younger sister, Sunny, whose fair skin and blonde hair were in stark contrast to the black dress she was wearing. She was sitting on one of the graveside folding chairs with an ethereal, almost trancelike, expression on her face. Next to her, in a well-tailored suit over a custom-made shirt topped off by a handmade silk tie, was her boyfriend, Willie Hanson. Hanson had been in my graduating class in high school, and I remembered him as being kind of a weird computer nerd who, like me, kept mostly to himself, and was a wicked keyboard player. He was also my top competition for valedictorian. The last I had heard of him, he had dropped out of Stanford to try his hand at a Silicon Valley startup. I was a bit surprised to see

him back in the Eastern Time Zone.

“I assume Sunny is all yours.”

His eyes locked on mine. Don Maxwell gritted his teeth and muttered, “Yes.”

“Does she know about me?”

“I can’t speak for your mother, but I never told her,” Don Maxwell answered.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man I had never seen before heading toward us. He was small and probably closer to sixty than forty. His nose was too big, his chin too small, and his eyes too close together for him to ever have been considered handsome by any measure. He paused, looked around, then zeroed in on me and began walking purposefully in my direction.

“Who’s that?”

Don Maxwell turned, and when he saw the approaching man, his shoulders slumped; he shook his head and sighed. Before he could formulate a response, the man arrived next to the grave site, and his eyes locked on me.

“Ms. Grace Bliss Maxwell?” the man said in a voice that was deeper than expected considering his diminutive size.

I nodded.

“My condolences for your loss. I am Wilson Prentice, attorney-at-law.” The lawyer pulled a number 10 envelope out of the interior pocket of his ill-fitting suit jacket that hung badly on his shoulders. He had the unhealthy look of someone who had lost a lot of weight in a short amount of time. “Your mother instructed me to give you this after her death.”

Don Maxwell was seething and now it was his turn to think *couldn’t this have waited until tomorrow?* Then it dawned on me. Don knew the lawyer might show up at any moment, and he wasn’t being cruel — he was being kind. He didn’t want me to hear this news from a stranger.

Reluctantly I accepted the envelope. “What is this?”

“My instructions were to deliver this to you unopened.” Prentice bowed slightly and handed me one of his business cards. “Again, my condolences for your loss.” Without another word, he turned and headed back in the direction of his car.

Examining the envelope, I immediately recognized the handwriting. On the outside of the envelope was written a single word.

Grace.

The thin, precise script bordered on calligraphy. My entire life I had seen it on everything from school permission slips to grocery lists.

With trembling hands, I carefully tore open the envelope.

Grace:

By now I assume Don has told you he is not your biological father. Please do not

be angry with him for not telling you sooner; that was entirely my decision. I had always meant to tell you, but when I got sick, time ran out.

To his great credit, when I came home pregnant with you, Don took me back, made an honest woman of me, and claimed you as his own.

He has loved you from the day you were born more than you'll ever imagine.

Trust him and listen to him. But most importantly, love him. More than anyone in your life, he has earned it.

You are now a full-grown woman, and it is only fair that you know the truth. Your biological father is a man known as Simon Alphonse Peterson.

You also need to know, having you back in my life these last few months was a blessing. I can only hope you find peace and happiness.

Peace Love & Joy Always, Mom

As I reread the cryptic note, Willie Hanson kissed my sister on the forehead and softly said, "I'll see you at the wake."

Sunny forced a weak smile and gave his arm a squeeze. "Okay." Her eyes locked on the departing lawyer, and she wandered over and joined the conversation. "What's going on? Who was that?"

I looked at Don for guidance.

With an odd expression on his face, he just shrugged. "Your call, Gracie."

Drawing in a deep breath, then releasing it with a snort, I said, "What the hell," and handed Sunny the letter.

She read the note, blinked a few times, shook her head like she was clearing it of cobwebs, then reread it more slowly. "Huh?" she said as she handed it back to me.

"Huh? That's all you've got?" I said incredulously.

"What? You've said it yourself a thousand times. We were always so different when we were growing up, it was hard to believe we were sisters."

I shook my head again and turned my attention back to Don Maxwell. "Who is Simon Alphonse Peterson?"

He lowered his eyes. Obviously this was a painful topic for him, but, like always, it wasn't going to stop him from toughing his way through it. He glanced down at the open grave. "It's a long story, and this isn't the time or the place. We need to get to the wake. After we get past that, I'll tell both of you everything I know."