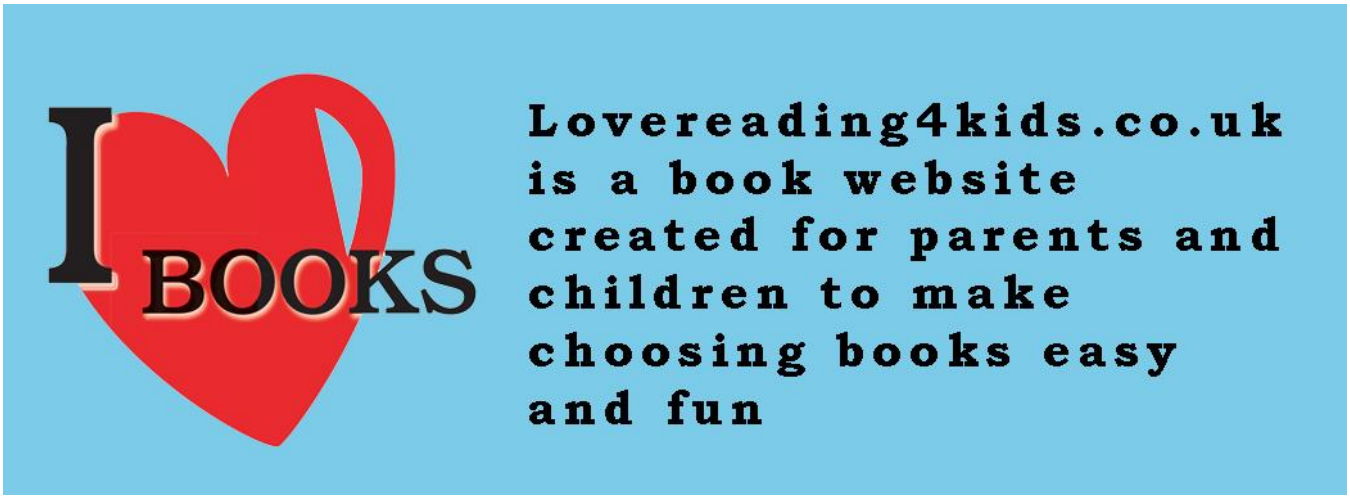


Opening extract from

Letters to the Lost

Written by

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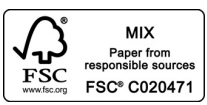
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CHAPTER ONE

There's this photograph I can't get out of my mind. A little girl in a flowered dress is screaming in the dark. Blood is everywhere: on her cheeks, on her dress, in spattered droplets on the ground. A gun is pointed at the dirt road beside her, and you can't see the man, but you can see his boots. You showed it to me years ago, telling me about the photographer who got the shot, but all I remember is the scream and the flowers and the blood and the gun.

Her parents took a wrong turn or something. In a war zone, maybe. Was it Iraq? I think it was Iraq. It's been awhile and I'm fuzzy on the history of it. They took a wrong turn, and some spooked soldiers started firing at the car. Her parents were killed instantly.

The little girl was lucky.

Unlucky?

I don't know.

At first you see the horror because it's so perfectly etched in the girl's expression.

Then you see the details. The blood. The flowers. The gun. The boots.

Some of your photographs are equally gripping. I should probably be thinking of your work. It seems wrong to be leaning against your headstone and thinking about someone else's talent.

I can't help it.

You can see it on her face. Her reality is being ripped away, and she knows it.

Her mother is gone, and she knows it.

There is agony in that picture.

Every time I look at it, I think, "I know exactly how she feels."

I need to stop staring at this letter.

I only picked up the envelope because we're supposed to clean up any personal stuff in front of the gravestones before we mow. I usually take my time because eight hours is eight hours, and it's not like I'm getting paid for this.

My grease-stained fingers have left marks along the edges of the paper. I should throw it away before anyone knows I touched it.

But my eyes keep tracing the pen strokes. The handwriting is neat and even, but not perfect. At first I can't figure out what's

holding my focus, but then it becomes clear: a shaky hand wrote these words. A girl's hand, I can tell. The letters are rounded just enough.

I glance at the headstone. It's newish. Crisp letters are carved into shiny granite. *Zoe Rebecca Thorne. Beloved wife and mother.*

The date of death hits me hard. May twenty-fifth of this year. The same day I swallowed an entire bottle of whiskey and drove my father's pickup truck into an empty office building.

Funny how the date is etched into my brain, but it's etched into someone else's for something entirely different.

Thorne. The name sounds familiar, but I can't place it. She's only been dead a few months, and she was forty-five, so maybe it was in the news.

I bet I got more press.

"Hey, Murph! What gives, man?"

I jump and drop the letter. Melonhead, my "supervisor," is standing at the crest of the hill, wiping a sweat-soaked handkerchief across his brow.

His last name isn't really Melonhead, any more than mine is Murph. But if he's going to take liberties with *Murphy*, I'm going to do the same with *Melendez*.

Only difference is that I don't say it to his face.

"Sorry," I call. I stoop to pick up the letter.

"I thought you were going to finish mowing this section."

"I will."

"If you don't, then I've gotta. I want to get home, kid."

He always wants to get home. He has a little girl. She's three

and completely obsessed with Disney princesses. She knows all her letters and numbers already. She had a birthday party last weekend with fifteen kids from her preschool class, and Melonhead's wife made a cake.

I don't give a crap about any of this, of course. I just can't get the guy to keep his mouth shut. There's a reason I said I'd handle this section alone.

"I know," I say. "I'll do it."

"You don't do it, I'm not signing your sheet for today."

I bristle and remind myself that being a dick would probably be reported to the judge. She already hates me. "I said I'd do it."

He waves a hand dismissively and turns his back, heading down the opposite side of the hill. He thinks I'm going to screw him over. Maybe the last guy did. I don't know.

After a moment, I hear his mower kick on.

I should probably finish clearing the mementos so I can get on my own mower, but I don't. The September sun dumps heat on the cemetery, and I have to shove damp hair off my forehead. You'd think we were in the Deep South instead of Annapolis, Maryland. Melonhead's bandana almost seemed like a cliché, but now I'm envying him.

I hate this.

I should be grateful for the community service, I know. I'm seventeen, and for a while it looked like they were going to charge me as an adult—but it's not like I killed anyone. Only property damage. And lawn maintenance in a cemetery isn't exactly a death sentence, even if I'm surrounded by it.

I still hate this. I say I don't care what people think of me, but that's a lie. You'd care, too, if everyone thought you were nothing more than a ticking time bomb. We're only a few weeks into the school year, but half my teachers are probably counting the minutes until I start shooting up the place. I can already imagine my senior portrait in the yearbook. *Declan Murphy: Most likely to commit a felony.*

It would be hilarious if it weren't so depressing.

I read the letter again. Pain flares in every word. The kind of pain that makes you write letters to someone who will never read them. The kind of pain that *isolates*. The kind of pain you're certain no one else has felt, *ever.*

My eyes linger on the last lines.

> You can see it on her face. Her reality is being ripped away, and she knows it.
>
> Her mother is gone, and she knows it.
>
> There is agony in that picture.
>
> Every time I look at it, I think, "I know exactly how she feels."

Without thinking about it, I fish a nubby pencil out of my pocket, and I press it to the paper.

Just below the girl's shaky script, I add two words of my own.

CHAPTER TWO

Me too.

The words are shaking, and I realize it's not the paper; it's my hand. The foreign handwriting is almost burning my eyes.

Someone read my letter.

Someone read my letter.

I look around as if it just happened, but the cemetery is empty. I haven't been here since Tuesday. It's Thursday morning now, so it's a miracle the letter is still intact. More often than not, the envelope is gone, taken by weather or animals or possibly the cemetery staff.

But not only is the letter *here*, someone felt the need to add commentary.

The paper is still shaking in my fist.

I can't—

This is—

What—who would—how—

I want to scream. I can't even think in complete sentences. Rage is burning up my insides.

This was private. *Private.* Between me and my mother.

It has to be a guy. Greasy fingerprints line the edges, and the handwriting is blocky. It smacks of arrogance, to insert himself into someone else's grief and claim a part of it. Mom used to say that words always carried a bit of the writer's soul, and I can almost feel it pouring off the page.

Me too.

No, *not* him too. He has *no idea*.

I'm going to complain. This is unacceptable. This is a cemetery. People come here to grieve privately. This is my space. MINE. Not his.

I stomp across the grass, refusing to allow the cool morning air to steal any of my fire. My chest hurts and I'm dangerously close to crying.

This was ours. Mine and hers. My mother can't write back anymore, and his words on my letter seem to drive that point home. It's like he stabbed me with the pencil.

By the time I crest the hill, tears hang on my lashes and my breathing is shuddering. The wind has turned my hair into a mess of tangles. I'm going to be a wreck in a minute. I'll show up late for school with reddened eyes and running makeup. Again.

The guidance counselor used to have some sympathy. Ms. Vickers would pull me into her office and offer a box of

tissues. At the end of my junior year, I was getting pats on the shoulder and whispers of encouragement to take all the time I needed.

Now that we're in the middle of September, Mom's been dead for months. Since school started, everyone has been wondering when I'm going to get my act together. Ms. Vickers stopped me on Tuesday, and instead of giving a kind look, she pursed her lips and asked if I was still going to the cemetery every morning, and maybe we should talk about more constructive uses of my time.

Like it's any of her business.

It's not *every* morning anyway. Only the mornings when Dad leaves for work early—though half the time I'm convinced he wouldn't know the difference either way. When he's home, he makes himself two eggs and eats them with a bowl of grapes I've washed and pulled from the vines. He sits at the table and stares at the wall and doesn't speak.

I could light the place on fire and it'd be even odds that he'd get out in time.

Today was an early-work morning. The sunlight, the breeze, the peaceful tranquility of the cemetery all seemed like a gift.

The two words scrawled on my letter feel like a curse.

A middle-aged Hispanic man is blowing leaves and lawn clippings from the paved road, and he stops when I approach. He's wearing some type of maintenance uniform, and the name across his breast reads *Melendez*.

"May I help you?" he says with a hint of an accent. His eyes aren't unkind, but he looks tired.

There's wariness in his voice. I must look fierce. He expects a complaint. I can tell.

Well, I'm about to give him one. There should be some kind of regulation against this. My fist clenches around the letter, crumpling it, and I inhale to speak—

Then I stop.

I can't do this. She wouldn't want me to do this.

Temper, Juliet.

Mom was always the calm one. Level-headed, cool in a crisis. She had to be, what with jetting from war zone to war zone.

Besides, I'm about to sound like a jacked-up freak of nature. I already look like one. What am I going to say? *Someone wrote two words on my letter*? A letter I wrote to someone who *isn't even alive*? It could have been anyone. Hundreds of graves line the field around my mother's. Dozens of people must visit every day—if not more.

And what's the lawn-care guy going to do? Babysit my mother's headstone? Install a security camera?

To catch someone with a hidden pencil?

"I'm fine," I say. "I'm sorry."

I walk back to her grave and sit down in the grass. I'm going to be late for school, but I don't care. Somewhere in the distance, Mr. Melendez's leaf blower kicks up again, but here I'm alone.

I've written her twenty-nine letters since she died. Two letters every week.

When she was alive, I wrote her hundreds. Her career kept her on the cutting edge of technology, but she craved the permanence and precision of the old-fashioned. Handwritten letters. Cameras

with film. Her professional shots were always digital, stuff she could edit anywhere, but film was her favorite. She'd be in some African desert, shooting starvation or violence or political unrest, and she'd always find time to write me a letter.

We did the normal thing, too, of course: emails and video chatting when she had a chance. But the letters—those really meant something. Every emotion came through the paper, as if the ink and dust and smudges from her sweat lent weight to the words, and I could sense her fear, her hope, and her courage.

I'd always write her back. Sometimes she wouldn't get them for weeks, after they'd filtered their way through her editor to wherever she was on assignment. Sometimes she was home, and I could hand her the letter on my way out the door. It didn't matter. We just thought on paper to each other.

When she died, I couldn't stop. Usually, the instant I get to her grave, I can't breathe until I'm pressing a pen against the paper, feeding her my thoughts.

Now, after seeing this response, I can't write another word to her. I feel too vulnerable. Too exposed. Anything I say could be read. Twisted. Judged.

So I don't write a letter to her.

I write a letter to him.