

HER OWN VIETNAM

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## CHAPTER 1

DELLA BROWN pushed open her front door and stepped inside. The house felt clenched like a held breath, until she reminded herself that Abby was gone. Funny how the silence of a house where no one else lived felt different from the hush of a house where everyone was out.

But there were all kinds of silences.

When Abby was growing up, Della sometimes imagined the serenity of an empty nest. Now she had one, and it took some getting used to. No loud music, no dirty dishes in the sink. No one to talk to. Her knees creaked as she stooped to pick up the mail scattered across the dark linoleum floor.

In the kitchen, she watched blue flame bloom under the dented silver teakettle before she flicked on the light. The butter-colored walls and worn wooden table made the room feel cozy despite the afternoon chill. It was late February. Spring was weeks away from her corner of New York state. Della was wearing a blue short-sleeved scrub suit, and when she ran her hands down her arms, the skin felt pebbled.

She sorted through the mail. A bill. Another bill. Junk mail for recycling. *The Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing*. A hot pink card inviting Abby to rant and rave at some club. She hesitated before sailing that one into the recycling pile. Abby wouldn't care about a club here; she was sharing a rundown apartment in Manhattan with

six other girls, all trying to make it as actresses. Della slapped down another bill. Then she held up a slim white envelope.

It was a letter, an honest-to-God letter. She'd thought they were extinct. The handwriting was familiar, though she couldn't place it. The return address in Boston meant nothing to her. She raised the envelope to her nose, but all she found was the vanilla scent of her own hand lotion.

Della sat down at the table. The bentwood chair's gold corduroy cushion, which Abby had made in seventh grade, was worn to a velvety stubble like the miraculous new hair that emerges after chemo. The fabric prickled against the back of her legs as she slit the envelope and pulled out the single typed sheet.

Hello, Della.

Been a while, hasn't it? I tried to find you so many times, back in the day. Now here we are—well past fifty!—and thank goodness for the Internet.

Here's why I'm writing. My son Will is getting married this summer. Now, this isn't one of those June-moon-swoon kinds of wedding. Will is twenty-seven, and his bride is thirty-three. They're paying for the whole thing, and they don't want a big bash. My husband and I are only allowed to invite ten people. My son said, just invite the ten people who've meant the most to you.

There was something about the way he put it that really made me think. And what can I say, Della, you made the top ten.

Now I know that's kind of strange, since you and I haven't spoken since before Will was born. And I know that seeing each other again after all these years is more than a notion. So I'm not going to invite you to the wedding of a boy you've never met, but I am writing to ask if you will see me sometime. We

can meet in your town, my town, or somewhere in between. You choose.

Don't worry, I'm not going to stalk you like that little corporal from Minnesota. Remember him? I bet you do. I bet you remember all of it, like I do. They say time heals all wounds. I don't know about you, but I'm still waiting.

Della, I hope this letter doesn't upset you. If it does, just remind yourself... it don't mean nothin'.

—Charlene (Johnson) Randall

Della's heart racketed around in her chest. She twisted off the flame beneath the shrieking kettle. She refolded the letter and held it flat between her palms like a prayer.

Charlene Johnson. Her closest friend, her comrade, the one person she had ever trusted with her life. No way was she going to call Charlene Johnson.

It didn't matter that she missed Charlene, missed her with a yearning that had grown fierce and lean from feeding on silence. What mattered was that Della had spent the past thirty years trying to erase the one thing she and Charlene had in common.

Della was twenty-two years old when she returned from Vietnam, twenty-two and broken already. It was only a year of her life that took place ages ago. But the experience still fluttered against her heart, like a moth tucked away in a box of sweaters. Years later you could reopen the box only to find that the moth had chewed the sweaters into shreds, then vanished in a smear of dust.

"But why did you have to go to Vietnam?" her daughter, Abby, had once asked, peering down from the heights of adolescence, from which she could see that everything Della had ever done was wrong. "Why did you even join the Army?"

Abby could not imagine how few options a working woman had in those days, when the women's movement was just a rumor to be ridiculed on the evening news. After high school, Della had known exactly what her choices were. She could spend her life in restaurants,

as her mother had. She could learn to cut hair. She could be a secretary, or a teacher, or a nurse. But those careers would take years of schooling, and Della could barely afford a semester.

The bargain had seemed simple enough at the time. The Army paid for two years of nursing school. In return, they owned her for three years. And where did Abby think the military had sent its newly trained nurses in 1969—to Berkeley, perhaps, to care for the injured protesters?

No, ma'am. It was first stop, Long Binh; next stop, Cu Chi. Last stop, forget about humanity and hold on to your sanity. If you can.

Della knew her daughter never would have made such a bargain. She probably would have been an anti-war activist, flinging tear gas canisters back at the police. Abby had a life that allowed her to make choices, even mistakes, secure that there would be a margin of safety to protect her.

But no one could provide Della with that kind of life. So she began her adulthood sweating in a war zone, surrounded by carnage and courage and pure brutal stupidity. Even today, if she thought about it too long—if she thought about it at all—Vietnam could rise from the dead and blot out the sun with its powdery wings.

As she sat at the kitchen table, the letter began to rattle in her hands. It was only fear. Fear was an old companion, and she understood its many moods. This was not the spiky panic that followed a loud sound late at night. It was the deep cold dread that sometimes gripped Della when she began to realize exactly what she was in for. She had felt it after Abby was born, the first time she faced three a.m. with a screaming infant she could not comfort. She had felt it the day her husband moved out. And she felt it now as Charlene's letter threw its thin light on all Della had been refusing to see.

She recognized herself, a trim woman with hazel eyes and chestnut hair dusted with gray, finally ambushed by her own history. Her own anger. Her own nostalgia. Her own bloody shadow, and her nation's.