

Spruce Harbor, Maine, 2011

“You what?” Molly gasps, leaning forward in her chair.

The two of them have been sitting for hours in the wingbacks in the living room. The antique lamp between them casts a planetary glow. On the floor, a stack of blue onionskin airmail letters bound with string, a man’s gold watch, a steel helmet, and a pair of military-issue socks spill out of a black steamer trunk stamped with the words U.S. NAVY.

Vivian shuts off the tape recorder. The never-used baby quilt is on her lap, its calico squares still vivid, the intricate stitching pristine. Molly can’t read her expression.

“I don’t understand,” Molly says.

Vivian gives her a steady look. “It was a long time ago. A different time.”

“That doesn’t excuse . . .” Molly’s words linger in the air. Springing to her feet, she goes to the window. Outside, the Rorschach shapes of the apple trees are barely visible in the light from the house. “Dutchy was the love of your life,” she says, turning back to look at Vivian. “That’s what you said, right?”

Almost imperceptibly, Vivian nods.

“So how could you—why would you . . . I mean, you knew what it was like to feel unwanted. To have no one in the world who cared about you.”

Vivian bows her head. For a moment there is silence between them.

Then Molly hears a snuffle. Oh no—this is not good. Did she really just make a ninety-one-year-old lady cry? She hurries over and kneels beside her chair.

Vivian lifts her hand, waving Molly away.

Molly looks around the room and spies a tissue box on the bookcase. She jumps up and retrieves it, pulling out one white sheet after another, then presents Vivian with the peonylike bunch. “I’m sorry. It’s not my business. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Vivian plucks a tissue from her hand and holds it to her nose.

“I guess I’d better go,” Molly mutters.

But she motions to the other wingback. “Please. Stay.”

Molly hesitates. Is she just being polite? (On the other hand, when has Vivian ever just been polite?) “Okay.” Deep breath. She walks slowly to the chair and perches on the edge of the seat.

Vivian smooths the quilt on her lap. “I know what you’re thinking,” she says without looking up. “That I must be heartless. Unfeeling.”

“No, I—” Molly starts to protest, but Vivian holds up a small, veined hand.

“It looks that way. But you have to know . . .” She gives her a tremulous smile. “You have to know that I’ve thought about that baby every day of my life since then. Every day.”

Molly doesn’t know how to respond. She doesn’t know how she feels.

“I want to try to explain, even though . . . even though I’m not sure I understand it completely myself,” Vivian continues. “It took all the energy I had to get out of bed in the morning. I could barely take care of myself—how would I ever take care of a helpless infant? There were days when I didn’t know if I wanted to go on living.”

“Because Dutchy died.”

“Because Dutchy died. And because . . . because I had lost so much over the years. My grandmother. My parents, my brothers. Maisie. Even Carmine. Everyone I’d ever truly cared for. I felt cursed—like I wasn’t worthy of love. It always slipped through my fingers.” She holds up her hands, her thin fingers moving like sea fronds. “Truly, I think I was afraid.”

Molly's heart constricts. She feels as if Vivian is articulating her own latent feelings, things she has been afraid to confront in herself. "Of what?" she asks, holding her breath as she waits for Vivian's answer.

"That I wasn't"—she seems to choke on the words—"strong enough, good enough, to keep her. I felt so utterly . . . alone."

Molly hesitates, measuring her words. She doesn't want to upset Vivian further, but she needs to ask. "You weren't exactly alone, though, were you? Mrs. Nielsen would've helped you."

"Mrs. Nielsen was a kind woman, bless her soul. But you know, there was a distance between us, a kind of . . . formality. And she was busy with the store and her bridge club and the church. When I told her I was considering giving the child up for adoption, she agreed that it was probably the best option, given my circumstances. It wouldn't have been easy raising a child alone in that time, in that place. And quite frankly the Niensens had gotten used to me helping out in the store."

Molly nods. She both understands and doesn't.

"But I want to be honest with you," Vivian says. "That wasn't the main reason." She exhales. "Deep down, I think I was afraid that I wouldn't be a good mother. My own mother was so . . . incapable. So damaged. She had so little to give. Who was I to imagine I could do better? Who's to say I didn't inherit her black moods, her erratic temperament? I was so despondent I thought maybe I did. Maybe I was just like her. I didn't trust myself to give the baby what it needed. I thought someone else would do a better job. Some nice young couple . . ."

Tears are streaming down her face. Swallowing back her own tears, Molly offers the rest of the tissues. Vivian takes them all, blotting her eyes and cheeks with the small white bundle.

"I didn't think I deserved to keep her," Vivian says quietly, at last. "Maybe I thought I didn't deserve to be happy."

Molly reaches for her hand. For a moment they sit silently. Then Vivian rises from her chair, setting the quilt on the seat, and goes to the tall bay windows. Molly is struck by how frail she is, how narrow her silhouette. Vivian unfastens the silk loops from their hooks at each side of the casing,

letting the heavy paisley curtains fall across the glass. Except for the lambent light through the amber shade, the room is dark.

“I wonder if . . .” Molly ventures cautiously. “Have you ever wondered what became of your daughter?”

“Of course. Every day.”

“You might be able to find her. She would be”—Molly calculates in her head—“in her late sixties, right? She could very well be alive.”

Adjusting the drape of the curtains, Vivian says, “It’s too late for that.”

“But—why?” The question feels like a dare. Molly holds her breath, her heart thumping, aware that she’s being presumptuous, if not downright rude. But this may be her only chance to ask.

“I made a decision. I have to live with it.” Vivian is still in shadow, standing by the heavy drapes. She shakes her head. “Like you said, I could have kept her. Mrs. Nielsen would’ve helped. How could I ever expect my . . . my daughter to forgive me?”

“You’d tell her what you told me. She would understand.”

“Really? I don’t know if she would. I don’t know if I can even forgive myself. After all, I ended up married again soon enough. I could’ve looked for her then.”

Molly reaches out and touches the baby quilt, running her fingers along the cotton squares in the basketweave pattern. Jim Daly. Dutchy’s best friend. Did she fall in love with him, or was he merely consolation? “Did you . . .” She hesitates. “Were you happy with your second husband?”

Vivian makes her way back to her chair. “I can honestly say that I never regretted marrying Jim. I did not love him the way I loved Dutchy: beyond reason. Maybe you only get one of those in a lifetime, I don’t know. But it was all right. It was enough.”

It was all right. It was enough. Molly’s heart clamps as if squeezed in a fist. The emotion beneath those words! Feeling an ache in her throat, she swallows hard. Vivian’s resolute unsentimentality is a stance Molly understands only too well. So she just asks, “So how did you and Jim end up together?”

Vivian sits, draping the quilt over her lap again. “About a year after

Dutchy died, Jim returned from the war and got in touch with me—he had a few small things of Dutchy’s, a pack of cards and his harmonica, that the army hadn’t already sent. And so it started, you know. It was a comfort to have someone to talk to, I think for both of us—another person who knew Dutchy.”

“Did you tell him about the baby?”

“I never did. It seemed like too much to burden him with. The war had taken a toll on him; there were a lot of things he didn’t want to talk about either.

“Jim was good with facts and figures. Very organized and disciplined, far more than Dutchy was. Honestly, I doubt the store would’ve done half as well if Dutchy had lived. Is that terrible to say? Well, even so. He didn’t care a whit about the store, didn’t want to run it. He was a musician, you know. No head for business. But Jim and I were good partners. Worked well together. I did the ordering and the inventory and he upgraded the accounting system, brought in new electric cash registers, streamlined the vendors—modernized it.

“I’ll tell you something: marrying Jim was like stepping into water the same exact temperature as the air. I barely had to adjust to the change. He was a quiet, decent, hardworking man, a good man. We weren’t one of those couples who finish each other’s sentences; I’m not even sure I could’ve told you what was going on in his head most of the time. But we were respectful of each other. Kind to each other. When he got irritable, I steered clear, and when I was withdrawn and hard to reach—sometimes I’d go days without saying more than a few words—he left me alone. The only problem between us was that he wanted a child, and I couldn’t give him that. I just couldn’t do it. I told him how I felt from the beginning, though I never fully explained and he didn’t ask me to. I think he always hoped I’d change my mind.”

“Do you ever regret that you didn’t?”

“Regret?” Vivian raises her shoulders in a shrug. “I’m not sure what good it is to regret. After Dutchy and the baby . . . I found a way to go on. What else could I do? I married Jim and I put one foot in front of the next.

We worked hard and built a successful business. Those were good years, for the most part. Undramatic. Quiet. I tried not to think about the past; there didn't seem to be any point. I tried not to feel regret. And I never told anyone about what I'd done—about giving away the baby. Until now."

"Oh, Vivian," Molly says. Words feel inadequate, flimsy. "I'm really glad you told me."

Vivian smiles hesitantly at her, and she smiles back.