

# PROLOGUE

## NAMES

*November 1982*

In a city of white stone buildings and marble statues of great men long gone, they made an incision in the earth. From the fresh-laid grass rose a place to communicate with the dead. The leaves had turned gold, and there was a slight chill in the air. At dusk, as those in three-button suits who often decided the fate of the nation made for home under a purpling sky, workers polished the black granite, tracing the letters with their fingers. They, like the others, were taken aback by the immensity of it all: My God, the price in chiseled typeface. A terrible folly set forever in stone. Nearby, a long procession of monotone syllables echoed within the National Cathedral, like the reading at a holy day service: *John . . . Robert . . . Dale . . . James*. Each one a story.

The somber homecoming parade had begun.

Ann Armstrong Dailey was one of many on the way to Washington National Airport that second week in

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November. The nation's capital seemed even busier than usual. Election day had just passed, and Thanksgiving was still to come, yet the hotels were booked solid. The incomers were less official, less touristy—no briefcases, no boxes of Kodak film. Some wore ragged U.S. Army fatigues, medals over denim, embroidered patches that told their stories. Some had beards and long hair. They looked like they'd been to hell and back—they wore it on their faces. A few carried signs: "Never Again" and "Never Forget." There were the old couples, too, the ones whose hair, and lives, had gone gray. They walked with canes, weighed down by grief. Brothers and sisters, much younger, pushed strollers, carried children on their shoulders, or dragged along teenagers, for whom this was all part of the legend, family lore, someone they'd once known but whose face they couldn't recall. These people, pouring into Washington that fall, had a bond. "It was as if they were all drawn by the same ghostly bugle," a newspaperman had typed. Their eyes still welled up if you asked them about that time—the day the telegram came, the moment they held a hand for the last time, the day they lost their youth, the time when they knew everything that was would never be again. A line between then and now. A barrier hard and cold as stone.

Ann was there, looking for her youngest sibling, thinking of another.

She remembers Alan in a black bow tie and suit at Patricia's wedding in Edmonds, Washington. It was May 1968, at an uncle's old farmhouse—Chubby Checker on the record player, buttercream frosting, the constant flash of the Kodachrome. There's one photograph in particular. It's a snapshot of two

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beautiful sisters, one in a red sleeveless number Jackie Kennedy might have worn around Camelot, the other in delicate lace, crowned with a swath of snow-white tulle. Their mother, wearing a thick, wavy-haired wig, faces them. The wedding was rushed. Their mother, ailing with cancer, would be dead within months. That they knew. Their brother Alan stands tall, to their right, gazing forward. A young, stoic patriarch, he's wearing dark-framed glasses, the kind his comrades would joke about as a sort of birth control—if an ineffective one; at twenty-six, Alan already had a wife and young son. *His whole life ahead of him*. It might be a cliché, but it was true nonetheless, and it's how his sisters remember him. So young.

Incredibly bright, Alan scored high on intelligence tests and was good with his hands. In high school he built a ham radio and gave himself the call sign W7JBG—“Jumping Beautiful Girls,” to those uninitiated in the language of amateur radio. A university education seemed the obvious path. But despite his aptitude, Alan hated school, limping through his first go at college with Cs and Ds before calling it quits. After some talk with a family friend, a retired Army colonel, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy—the safest choice, he was assured, as war loomed on the horizon.

First he took on the life of a submariner. Not exactly safe, was his assessment after the Navy lost the USS *Thresher* and her crew of 129 men in the North Atlantic in 1963. That, and he saw firsthand the suffocating life of submariner. At the urging of some senior officers who were impressed with his intelligence, Alan applied to the United States Naval Academy, but was unable to secure a spot as a midshipman due to poor

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vision. In a story that made Ann chuckle, Alan intentionally left his eyeglasses home the day of his entrance exams so much that he squinted profusely during the tests, trying to mask the one inadequacy he couldn't help—nor hide, as a proctor would point it out immediately. But the Navy, likely keen on keeping him in the ranks, found him an alternative path to officer. On his second go, he finished a four-year college program in three, collecting a degree in engineering and a pretty young wife. He pinned ensign some time before his sister's wedding day.

The day the snapshot was taken. The last day they were all together.

Alan didn't have his assignment yet, but his sisters knew that their time with their brother would be brief. Eventually he'd do what sailors do: ship out. There was this war. A place no one could find on a map a decade before had become a hot zone—a dirty word on college campuses, a name intoned on almost every newscast. Vietnam.

A little over a year after the wedding, the war would take their Alan.

How fleeting their time with him would be, the young women in the photograph could never have imagined. It happened too fast, without warning. There was no peace about my brother's death, Patricia would say. "He was just gone, and that was it." In the years that followed, the thought of Alan would send this grieving sister to a mountain overlooking the ocean by her home, where memories and pain would roll fresh and raw. Life goes on, as they say. Yet years did nothing for Patricia and Ann. Alan was still young, would never grow old. They thought of him every day, but nothing could bring him

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back.

A decade drifted by; they woke to a new one. People were saying the war had been a waste, a mistake, a wrong turn in the fog. “Was there a point when the looming collision might have been averted?” one Vietnam War historian would ask. Rhetorically and with no answer.

And now two women found themselves woven into the droves of mothers and sisters, brothers and wives, children and fathers, descending upon Washington in the fall of 1982. All of them longing for meaning, for a chapter that would close the book. Something that memorialized their loss in a war nobody wanted to remember. Something that said: This all really happened.

There’d been nothing like that.

Nothing. Nowhere.

And then came the wall.

**T**he idea of a memorial to the more than 58,000 Americans killed in the Vietnam War was born in March 1979, the child of Hollywood and a tortured combat veteran who couldn’t sleep. As it did so many, the war haunted Jan Scruggs, who had spent a year in country with the U.S. Army 199th Light Infantry Brigade. The flashbacks were always the same. He’s back in Xuan Loc, South Vietnam. It’s the morning of May 28, 1969. He’s a skinny kid, the son of a milkman and a waitress, and he’s slogging along a trail in the hellfire heat. It was said the poor fought the war, those unfortunate sons. By the time the sun had burned the dew off the grass, the unseen enemy is at them again. Bullets graze him, a grenade

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goes off, and he's riddled with shrapnel. There's screaming and the sound of crushing leaves, crying and more screaming. It's deafening. People are scattering or down. He's alone. The thought is as unavoidable as the glaring sun: he's going to die. He says the Lord's Prayer and passes out. Another flashback takes him to base, a safe zone away from the fighting, where buddies are unloading an ammunition truck, and a crate full of mortars goes off. The sound is like nothing you want to remember, nothing you could forget. There are body parts everywhere, mangled flesh. They're all dead. Just like that. One year out of high school, most of them, just like him.

For many so fiercely wrung out by the war in Vietnam, especially around the crescendo that was 1969, the question became: Why were we even there?

By 3:00 a.m. Jan's in his kitchen. It's 1979, and the neck of his whiskey bottle rattles against his glass. That night he had gone to the theater with his wife to see *The Deer Hunter*, Hollywood's bloody depiction of blue-collar America's war, Jan's war, the one nobody cared about anymore. Vietnam veterans everywhere shared the darkness of these nights. Nobody will remember their names, he thought. They fought and died because their country told them to, sent them there, and no one will remember them.

"I'm going to build a memorial to all the guys who served in Vietnam," Scruggs told his wife the next morning over breakfast, the bright sun streaming through the window. "It'll have the name of everyone killed."

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**A**t that time few Americans knew precisely how many had been lost in Vietnam. Nobody had a number to go with the nation's longest war. Yet it had touched every town and every city. *He used to live there. He went to school here. He played football here. I sat next to him in math class.* The personal stories could fill a thousand phone books. *He was coming home in two days. We left his room as is. I never remarried.* It became a page in American history few wanted to write, or even confront.

Long over and best forgotten, was the consensus. It's why Jan's idea first appeared pie-in-the-sky. After all, the war had just ended forty-eight months ago. The wounds were fresh on the American psyche, the term "baby killer" was in the vernacular of just how bad it all had been, and for what? But Jan didn't care whether America wanted to move on; he knew he couldn't, and neither could thousands like him. Within days, he had a plan. A few might have thought the dungaree-clad, shaggy-haired man naive, but many agreed that it was time. The donations were a mere trickle at first—a bitter former prisoner of war, a college student with nightmares that his country would send him to die in a place he didn't understand, a ten-year-old girl who wanted to remember her dad.

The memorial's design was as controversial as the war it commemorated: one prominent Vietnam veteran would call it a "black gash of shame," though it was also likened to the harsh listing of the dead in Homer's *Iliad*. A chevron in stone, it simply listed in chronological order the names of those killed in the Vietnam War. Rather than uplifting white, a massive headstone to trumpet a life lived, it was funeral

black. Stone cold, dark and final as death, it made no attempt to glorify the loss.

The wall said only: This happened.

Some Americans didn't want to hear that. But Jan, now backed by a crew of veterans, persevered. By 1980 the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was unstoppable, a heavy iron ball rolling down a hill. In early 1982 workers broke ground in a coveted spot on the National Mall at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial, homage to a man who brought a divided country together, just as, eventually, this wall of granite would.

The lawmakers who fought ferociously for the memorial, the ordinary people who wrote letters to the papers, the journalists, the talk shows, they all, finally, said the same thing: the wall represented a decision, a peace, a consensus. Wholly funded by individual donations, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial belonged to the people. "They were ours," the guys who didn't come home, a newspaper columnist would write. It was that simple.

Months before the unveiling that November, an engraver at the Binswanger Glass Company in Memphis, Tennessee had just done her work. The woman took a cloth to the dark panel of granite, her eyes moist. She cleared the dust, and then polished enough to see her reflection and a name—her own brother's.

**F**or Ann, who lived about ten minutes from the memorial site, it was something she needed to do with Patricia, then living on the opposite coast in Oregon. She couldn't see Alan's name alone, so finite and cruel. Brother and sister had had a

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special bond. When money and space were tight the pair shared a room. Their twin beds lined up next to each other, the tender voices of children in the dark, going on about the grown ups, the funny stories, their schoolwork, and peculiar places like the moon until one of them drifted off to sleep. Patricia was just a baby. Unbelievable as it sounds, both Ann and Alan were considered Pearl Harbor survivors. On December 7, 1941, Ann had been a toddler racing alongside her mother, the swollen-bellied wife of an Army officer stationed in Honolulu, dodging the fire from a Japanese Zero targeting military housing at the opening of the channel leading to Battleship Row. After a long and hazardous evacuation to the mainland United States on a not-so-luxurious cruise ship, the family moved to their grandparents' home in Utah. The Armstrong family's traumatic experience made headlines, and Ann's mother, still pregnant with Alan, gave speeches to small community groups, a celebrity in a small way for what she had survived. On May 22, 1942, Alan was born, and Patricia arrived a few years after that. The family had their stakes in American history. Two pages of a book. The lauded and the forgotten.

Ann followed closely the news about the memorial in the making. At the nudging of someone who knew well about her brother and through her connections in Washington, she volunteered to read a section of names of the Vietnam dead. The vigil was carefully coordinated, enlisting the help of hundreds to read all 57,939 names, nonstop, over the course of fifty-six hours. That Ann would read Alan's name would be ceremonious. An opening and a closing all the same. It was time. She wanted Patricia, her only living

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sibling, to be by her side.

The dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial felt for many like a turning of the tide, a new beginning. People converged on the National Mall morning, noon, and night. As the *New York Times* put it eloquently, “Americans continued to arrive at the wall even after darkness fell. . . . They bore the slow grief of the Vietnam time and indulged in the simplest sort of human memorial, the act of touching stone, feeling the cold, stony texture of the engraved names of the dead that shows up by flashlight and in the wavering glow of matches struck in the dark.”

The outpouring of emotions triggered by the wall would never be equaled in this town. Immediately, people began to leave offerings at the foot of the dark granite, and they would never stop: medals, packs of Marlboro Reds, black-and-white photos, teddy bears, letters, and flowers. A mother wrote to her son, “I am the one who rocked him as a baby. I am the one who kissed away the hurts.” A widow left wedding photos, on which she wrote, “Our baby got married.” Almost overnight the wall became a place where veterans embraced and wept. One pointed and said, there he is, that good lieutenant. A chum scribbled a note to a fellow he called ‘Smitty: “Perhaps, now I can bury you. . . . I won’t again see you night after night when the war reappears and we are once more amidst the myriad hells. . . .” Some stood a hundred yards away, unable to face coming closer. Years later a suffering old veteran would take his life under an oak tree near the memorial.

The wall had a poignance the likes of which Washington had never seen. It could take you back, lift you up, crush you

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back down again. And then you'd see someone else there, doing the same thing as you, and you'd embrace one another. You were strangers, but you had a common bond. What was first a memorial to the dead became a place of healing for the living, so powerful that within years half-size replicas would appear around the country, giving people the peace that could only come from seeing and touching a name. From day one, it seemed, the world stopped to see the names. And it would keep coming to see them, decades later.

**I**t was about that time—sometime in the fall of 1982, before she drove to the airport to pick up Patricia—that Ann discovered that Alan's name was not on the list that she would have read aloud at a lectern in the National Cathedral. That it wouldn't be on the memorial. Surely there was a page missing. Someone had made a mistake—hadn't they? Patricia already had her plane ticket. If Ann told her over the phone she wouldn't come. And Ann needed her sister.

Ann told Patricia right away, in the car at the airport. She couldn't have hidden it if she'd wanted to. Patricia wanted to fight it. But it was lost in the parade; the whirlwind that came with the new memorial. Phone calls went unanswered. A television news interview faded after a few sound bytes. They dealt with it together—their anguish forgotten, their brother Alan, left behind. Something as simple as a name not on a wall. Something as devastating as a name left off that wall.

"It was like he was dead all over again," Patricia would say, remembering the days in Washington.



## THE MESS

*June 3, 1969*

*3:15 a.m.*

*The world as they knew it had gone sideways. Something had struck their back, their head, twisted their legs, tangled them in a mess of clothing, metal, and mattresses. In the middle of a deep, dark sea under a moonlit sky some would never live to see, the floor below them rose to become a wall, the wall became a floor. "It's called a bulkhead, son," they'd learned just weeks before while tying their first knots and chipping paint, "and that's not a floor, that's the deck." Everything was going, rolling, topsy-turvy. And fast. They tried to remember what their dog-eared Bluejackets' Manual had said. Were they supposed to wait for an "Abandon ship!" over some loudspeaker, the voice that would tell them what to do?*

*Roused from dreams that had carried them to storybook islands of white-sugar beaches, coconut palms, and sloe-eyed women, or home to Mom's cooking, to the cloud of dirt on a farm, they woke violently, and became bleary, confused. The sound was unlike anything they'd heard before. Steam and steel; something came apart. It paralyzed some of them. The racks were a jungle of mangled metal. There was crying and praying, shouting, blank*

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*stares that seemed to say, What do we do now? And there was water. A man from Colorado knew this sound too well—the gush and gurgle of water, like river rapids, but infinitely more sinister.*

*“Get out. Now!” one man would holler over the commotion, the praying, the crying. There was no time for pants. Shoes. The scene was the same one compartment over. “Fuck your pants and your shoes!” someone yelled to the men searching in spilled-out lockers for their dungarees. “GO!” Whatever was happening, it was happening fast.*

*No time to wait for a whistle or a call to general quarters. Was this just a test? They squinted to see who was in front of them. Where was the light? It was all the panic of an ambush minus the bullets. There was an explosion, and the floor tipped more sharply. More confusion and less light. Kaleidoscope vision. Dizzying. Some only saw auras, their eyeglasses now lost somewhere in a pile of mattresses, playing cards, dirty magazines, and boots. Small flickers of light only added to the confusion. They felt their way around the crowded space.*

*As the men tried to get out, their fingers grazed bulkheads, conduits, cold iron fastened by bolts, screws scraping the skin from their bones, tearing into bruised flesh as they pushed the man in front and the man in front pushed the one in front of him. Some had broken bones, their arms and legs shattered. The jolt had been like nothing they’d ever felt or could imagine. It’s likely some had never even woken up at all.*

*Get low. Crouch. Move. Fast! Hurry! But wait. Where to? Here! Over here! The voices were getting more desperate. In some areas, it was black. The water had risen past the battle lanterns. What do we do? Other compartments were faint, lit as if by*

*dying candlelight, flickering ominously, casting moving shadows, adding to the nightmare of where to go, what to do. What now? Stay calm, one of them said, and we'll get out of here. Half of them were new. Half of them couldn't grow a beard. Half of them were so homesick that in the nights if you listened, you heard their soft cries. Now they thought of home, they thought of their mothers. They were like lambs in a herd.*

*Some who got out were the strong types, the big brothers. But they said that they knew, right then, that half of them wouldn't make it. And that if you helped, you might not make it either. Those who did help didn't make it. Those who survived would be haunted by this fact, climbing out to a moonlit sky and a glassy calm sea, wondering, panicked, who was still inside? It would practically kill them, in the middle of the night, shake them loose, in another decade, in another lifetime, it would seem. "How the hell we even got out, I have no idea."*

*One of the men would recall, dimly, that he crawled up through a hatch. He knew that the compartment before him was the mess deck, where some miserable hours before weevils had been swimming in the watery, lumpy mess the cooks called mashed potatoes. There, days before, they'd sat in the dark on benches and wobbly stools, eyes riveted to a battered, dirty yellow screen as Elizabeth Taylor wailed and hissed, laughed her wicked laugh. They'd just been killing time, waiting out the war in this cafeteria no bigger than a classroom, on this ship. That was the irony; this was to be their lifeboat, their ticket away from the blood and hell on the shore miles away.*

*The floor of the mess deck was a dingy, spotted crimson*

*linoleum tile, chipped along the edges, curled slightly up at the corners like burnt toast. He knew this surface well. Others were heading for another hatch, but he knew that this could be, just maybe, a way out—and that there was no other way. He called out to the others. By now the men's screams were growing more desperate as the intrushing water licked at their heels. They lined up like ants, each pushing the man in front of him, looking for something to grab onto, as the water rose up their bare legs and, in seconds, reached their torsos. They clambered barefoot over the side of tables and stanchions, hopped the four feet between them. It was an obstacle course. Some slipped and fell, never to be seen again, sucked in and swallowed by the roaring water. The screams drowned out the telltale banging, fists on metal—someone was stuck. Someone was trapped. They knew it was bad, that it was really going down fast. The ship creaked horribly as it continued to roll. It was nearly upside down now.*

**T***hat the linoleum floor of the mess was crimson was no accident. The ship had been planned in another war many moons ago, when kamikazes would nosedive onto the decks of ships, or bullets from the sky mow down sailors at the guns. The designers had thought of everything. When all hell broke loose, on such a tiny ship this space would be the only open area, perhaps serving as a makeshift hospital. The deep red floor would disguise splattered blood, fool the eyes and the brain, ease the panic. Hide the blood of the wounded as their lives slipped away, keep them calm.*

*They were, after all, in a war machine.*

*And their war machine was sinking.*