

ONE



Fall, 1988
Washington, D.C.

The sky was bleak. Silent, shivering, the two walked toward the Vietnam Memorial. Cora reflected that she was a forty-year-old woman with a grown child. The war was over. Fran dragged one step behind, her attention darting from the booth soliciting support for MIAs to the knots of families carrying thermoses and flowers. She paused to listen to a middle-aged man in a wheelchair singing “Greensleeves” under a tree. Cora refrained from hugging her daughter, who was wisely absorbing the present rather than racing through history.

She studied Fran, taken aback once again by the mix of familiar and unfamiliar: the tall, thin frame was classic Casey as was the strong jaw, fair skin and brown eyes—genuine Irish, Pop would have a chance to say any day now. In many ways Fran was the spit of herself, although Cora’s hair was black, not red, and lately she had found secret stores of cellulite and new wrinkles. Then there was the difference in style. Chic, cool Fran, her hair sculpted into spikes at the front and drawn into a ponytail at the back. Did she envy or admire her daughter’s ease? Her daughter—who, on alternate days, could pass for twelve or twenty-one—this young woman. Had they really come here, back home, below the border, together?

White stars, red stripes, American flags everywhere—on t-shirts and purses and tiny plastic sticks. Cora steeled herself to be angry, to respond, if necessary, to nitwits speaking slogans, calling the vets heroes. *Every* war had its heroes. Once you had honored the heroes then you got on with . . . with the next war perhaps. As they walked across the grass from the parking lot, Cora was filled with palpable fury—at the arrogance, the stupidity, the waste. Innumerable people, still the count continued, slaughtered. Miles of land completely destroyed. And now the fires continued elsewhere. She thought

of the petitions and articles and marches which had brought her to the point of ignition. Recalling how her family cut her off, Cora felt that cold, hard place inside herself that she feared and cherished. If Ron or George or Pop had died in the war, they would have deserved it. They knew what was going on. They refused to talk, to listen. She would have grieved heavily if they had died—more than she grieved now—but they would have been responsible. What a terrible thing to believe.

Fran paused again and Cora was forced to look at a bronze statue of three soldiers, clearly weighed down by exhaustion and what was it? Despair?

“Beautiful,” a short man behind her was saying as he focused his zoom lens on the statues’ faces.

“Beautiful?” she responded, in spite of herself. Fran reached for her elbow.

The man had not heard her. Cora knew it was pointless to argue that the statue romanticized the agony of three handsome individuals; to ask, What about those who had half their faces blown off? This statue was saying: All war is the same. Young men suffer. Suffering is virtue. Heroes earn honor. Heroes? Victims, maybe—or survivors. The best she could come up with was survivors.

Suddenly the hillside was sliced with dark marble. From this distance Cora could tell the lines across its face were names. Thousands of names.

She and Fran walked down a concrete ramp past people who were tracing the name of a friend or relative. They were not as she expected—neither the dead nor the living. No rhetoric here about freedom, courage, sacrifice, leadership—this was a family affair. Children skipped ahead of parents who sought brothers and friends. Old people supported one another as they lay down flowers. Poems to departed husbands were plastic-wrapped against the rain. In front of the blocks of endless names were teddy bears, flags, books, photographs.

The endlessness of those names was what finally broke Cora—each a person killed during her lifetime. She had seen war memorials before—to Canadians who fought in World War II, in World War I, in the War of 1812, in the struggle between Wolfe and Montcalm. But they had been bearable in their distance and magnitude. Usually they expressed an air of local commemoration: Peterborough honoring its war dead or Saint Mary’s parish praying for immortal souls. Here, however, military anonymity was at its most brutal. The cold words honored no one, represented no place. Tears raced down her cheeks.

Nothing about that time was as simple as it seemed. That time, if only she *could* compartmentalize it. But now at the end of the monument, they were adding more people—women and men who had somehow been overlooked, lost among the lost.

She felt herself turning back, walking down to the center, promising to memorize at least one name on each panel. But she didn't make it past five men.

Daniel. Eugene. Juan. Frederick. James. She wiped her wet cheeks with the back of her shaking hand. What right did she have to weep in front of these mourning families? But the tears would not stop. She began, slowly, to realize that it was *for* these young men she had fought all that time. She allowed herself to think—as she hadn't in twenty-odd years—of the dozen boys from her high school class who had gone straight into the army. She remembered those scared kids who came through the draft counseling center in Oregon—and later the gawky deserters who had somehow made their way to Canada. Deep down, she knew it had been for *these guys* she had been fighting. And they had been too unlucky or too cocky or too misinformed to see she had been on their side. Somewhere along the line—after she had lived in Canada several years, she had come to see the U.S. soldier as the enemy. Of course some of them were, as they returned home and joined the protestor-smashing police. But others became active against the war. For a decade, she had nightmares about uniformed men: campus police wielding billy clubs; National Guardsmen posing with bayonets; Green Berets slitting the throats of little Vietnamese girls.

They became her enemy, those men in uniforms, when in fact she had just wanted them released from their own wrongheaded notions of duty and sacrifice. After everything was said, recollected and psychoanalyzed, she had loved her father and her brothers. She understood now, fully for the first time, how *she* had been one of the losers of that war. So what if she had been right about pulling out? So what if she were halfway innocent of the deaths? The rest of her family were allowed to live safely here below the border. At home.

"What about the people who were wounded or died protesting?" She asked her daughter. "All this belated welcome-home nonsense is not so much reconciliation as *reconstruction*. What about the COs, the people who went to prison, the ones who would never return from abroad?"

She did not ask who would welcome her home.

Fran shook her head sadly.

Cora had been aware of Fran's concern. The girl had quietly clasped her elbow as they walked the length of the memorial. Still she wasn't ready to return to being a mother yet. She looked over Fran's head at the family groups leaving the parking lot, at the single men and women who had come here to commemorate a soldier's birthday or wedding. Cora had a ridiculous impulse to turn to Fran and ask permission to stay. But she could not bear the seriousness she would find in the eyes of her daughter who had grown up in the threatening shadow of a mad grandmother. Cora pulled herself together.

Jacques told her she was too controlled, but he didn't understand maternal responsibilities. Calmly, Cora nodded toward the Potomac.

Resting against a railing, she stared at the grey river and felt sadness trickle from her. She was conscious of a light arm around her shoulder and of a shaking. This was unreal, as Fran liked to say. Cora had never permitted herself to lean on her daughter; she was too busy protecting her and apologizing to her. Now she was filled with an entirely new poignancy. Fran's arms were sure. She could smell the coffee on her daughter's breath.