

In Washington, D.C., Tom Flanagan's sister, Kate, with whom he has persistent differences about the political landscape in general, and the war specifically, decides to join the staff of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy as RFK's campaign for the presidency begins to formulate.

Shall Never See So Much

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Shall Never See So Much

Gerald Gillis

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Debby.

Together we've raised wonderful kids, traveled to far-off places, and been blessed in ways too numerous to list. You have stood by me and supported me in everything I've ever done. You have the heart of an angel, and I love you for who you are and what you mean to me. This one's for you, babe!

Author's Note

Shall Never See So Much is a work of fiction, an historical novel. The subject is the Vietnam era, and the settings include the combat zone as well as the home front. In the main, the story is set in the first half of the year 1968—one of the most chaotic, challenging, and dissonant periods in the history of the United States. It is an account of America at war, not only with a foreign enemy in a strange, distant place, but sometimes even with itself. For the more than one-third of today's American populace who had yet to be born by the war's conclusion in 1975, it may be useful to know that the nation's current discomfort and divisiveness over sending (and then keeping) U.S. troops in harm's way is hardly without precedent. The Vietnam era sliced hot and hard into the cultural and political fabric of this country, with a sharp edge not seen since the Civil War.

The overarching theme of the novel stems from my belief that the human spirit is fundamentally heroic, despite the darker facets that are always there, always crowding out the more virtuous. The valor of American troops that was so frequently displayed in Vietnam was every bit as noteworthy as any of their wartime predecessors in uniform. Likewise, the efforts of those who strove unselfishly and in good faith to put an end to the conflict provided an important counterweight to the national discourse, sometimes at their own peril. It is my hope that readers will fully discern this theme in the pages that follow.

A sizeable portion of this novel is a story about U. S. Marines. That choice was intentional, given my own previous service with the Marine Corps. Time spent in Marine green reaches well beyond active service and becomes a lifelong

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affiliation. I am no different than the many others with whom I share the same bond.

With regard to the history, it is also my hope that readers will find a responsible and realistic depiction. Robert F. Kennedy is one of modern history's most compelling characters, and his impact upon the course of events in 1968 was profound, to include his sudden loss. I have attempted in every way to portray RFK with what I believe to be an appropriate and deserved respect.

Several individuals merit a nod of appreciation in assisting me with this undertaking. Sally and Tim Degnen were the first to provide me with important feedback and encouragement from their reviews. Atlanta radio host J.J. Jackson was helpful in reaching back and uncovering the popular music of the period. Phillip Massengill, M.D., kindly offered important medical information and helpful explanation. My uncle and long-time mentor, Henry Hughes, implored me to keep the project moving forward, often at those very moments when my motivation was flagging. Suzanne Akins, my daughter, enthusiastically contributed her many talents and insightful counsel in a number of categories. My heartfelt thanks to all.

Gerald Gillis
Marietta, Georgia

“The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne the most: we that are young
Shall never see so much nor live so long.”

--William Shakespeare
King Lear

PART ONE

January – February, 1968

CHAPTER ONE

Ashau Valley, South Vietnam

The sudden eruption of small-arms fire seemed to snatch away the available air from the already anxious U. S. Marines in the column. Twenty-four-year-old First Lieutenant Tom Flanagan licked his parched lips and strained to see ahead in the green shroud of vegetation. The tired Marine needed little reminder that enemy soldiers were almost always in his midst, even in the remote, dark places that otherwise seemed untouched by any sort of human intrusion. Hence the putrid, misty jungle became a cocktail of clamor that included, in order, the burst of gunfire, the shrieking flight of startled birds, and the shouts of men involved in a death struggle from an up-close, whites-of-the-eyeball range. Fragments of leaves that were shot away by the flying bullets floated softly to the ground. The rising smoke of the gunfire was visible through the oblique light shafts angling down through the jungle canopy. From up ahead, a frantic shout for a medical corpsman by an unseen Marine carried with it an urgency that all other Marines within earshot recognized as ominous. It was barely forty seconds into the fight before the final shots echoed away like the receding shadow of a cloud.

As Flanagan crouched beneath the weight of his field pack, with his muscles as tense as bowstrings, the young Chicago native could feel his heartbeat pounding at his temples as if trying to escape. He overheard radio traffic that the short fight had produced one dead Marine and at least three dead North Vietnamese Army soldiers (NVA). Since other Marines could be heard shouting orders up front, Flanagan sensed that things had yet to be fully sorted out. His platoon, along with the rest of Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division, was stalled along a narrow east-west jungle trail deep within the infamous Ashau Valley.

Flanagan leaned his trim, athletic, six-foot frame against a tree and gulped the warm water from his canteen. His almond eyes were fixated on the map he held until he noticed his own

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trembling hand and the sweat from his chin splattering onto and rolling off the map's laminated surface. Flanagan poured canteen water over his short brown hair as he fretted over the Ashau and the visceral dread associated with the mere mention of its name; about the hardcore NVA who roamed beneath its triple-thick canopy; about the harrowing and often grotesque stories of those who had survived in there, and the haunting memories of those who hadn't. Of all the adjacent geography he had thus far trod in Vietnam—the rugged mountain peaks of the Annamese Cordillera chain to the west; Hue, Phu Bai, and the sandy shores of the South China Sea to the east—it was the Ashau, seventy-five kilometers south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ), that was clearly his least favorite.

There was a sudden stirring up ahead. Flanagan heard the sounds of men struggling with a load, their labored breathing interspersed with an occasional profanity. He then noticed the damp red hair of the dead Marine who was being carried to the rear in a poncho by two of his comrades. Once again here was the inexplicably strange yet natural sight in a world that was difficult to fully grasp and impossible to describe. There were the shots, the shouts, and then the bodies. Always, at the end of the sequence, the bodies were broken, sometimes horribly mangled, sometimes just pale and still. And they were always young, always just kids. The dead Marine's red hair reminded him of his sister Kate, which in turn reminded him of her anti-war politics and her dovish fiancé, all of which he despised and considered as evidence of Kate's serious lack of substance. He spat out a mouthful of warm water and muttered a barely discernible, "Screw it," when his bear-like platoon sergeant appeared at his side.

"My sentiments exactly," said Staff Sgt. Dennis Jankowski, age forty-three, his helmet wedged between his arm and his large torso, a stubby unlit cigar jutting from the corner of his mouth. Jankowski swiped his hand through his wet salt-and-pepper hair and accepted the canteen from Flanagan. "What the hell's happening up there?"

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"Not sure," said Flanagan. "Either they ambushed us or we surprised them."

Jankowski took a drink and placed the cigar back between his stained teeth. "Ain't no ambush," he said, shaking his head and glancing up the trail where idle Marines knelt and faced outboard. "Too goddamn short and too little following on. I'd say we probably surprised the little shithooks."

Flanagan shot a weary glance at Jankowski. "Surprise isn't something we generally do to the little shithooks."

Jankowski laughed softly, his shoulders and upper body shaking in that manner common to people of his large physical size. "Point well taken," he said with a nod.

Flanagan's radio operator, a freckled-faced Oregonian named Wenrick, handed over the handset of the PRC-25 radio that was strapped to his back. "It's Bayou Six," said Wenrick.

Flanagan took another quick sip of water before keying the handset. "This is Bayou Three, over."

"Be advised that we're holding here until we can get some supporting fire up the trail," radioed the company commander. "Set your people in and report to me at the forward command post, over."

"Roger, out," replied Flanagan, who then turned to Jankowski. "Skipper's gonna blast the trail up ahead. Set 'em in."

Jankowski placed his helmet on his head and then turned and called out in a deep, gravelly voice, "Gimme the squad leaders. Chop-chop! Squad leaders up."

Flanagan moved out along the trail with Wenrick close behind until they reached Capt. Robert Tanner, a tall, prematurely balding, twenty-eight-year-old, Yale-educated native of New Orleans, near the front of the column. Tanner had dropped his pack and was down on all fours, hovering like a hawk over the documents recovered from one of the dead NVA. For weeks now Tanner had been sharing with Flanagan and his other platoon leaders the concern from headquarters over the supposed large enemy troop movements throughout Vietnam. And since hard

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evidence had been scarce, Tanner glanced up at Flanagan, raised his eyebrows, and winked.

"All kinds of arrows and unit designations scribbled over this damn thing," Tanner said calmly. "Multiple units—looks like infantry, signal, demolition, medical; all moving west to east, linking up with other units to the north and south. Hell, it appears that the whole friggin' NVA army just might be out here in the Ashau with us, gentlemen."

Tanner's tone was flat and unemotional. Tom Flanagan glanced at his counterparts from Second and First Platoons, Lieutenants Kevin Riordan and Dave Espy, respectively, and Sgt. Jeff Auer, the leader of Weapons Platoon. Lt. Walt Davies, the Executive Officer, was also listening in.

Flanagan moved in closer for a look.

"From where we are," said Tanner as he swept his hand along the map, "some of these same trails could be used to break out to Hue and Phu Bai. Good cover and concealment, good avenues of approach, the ability to mass once everybody's where they're supposed to be. They could bring a whole lot of hurt to a whole lot of different places. I don't quite know what to make of it, tell you the truth, but this friggin' terrain's dense enough to hide gallons of the little bastards, even though we're only seeing 'em a few pints at a time. But if we're getting all this 'movement' that headquarters keeps talking about, then we could be on to something big here, gents, something boocoo big. This map convinces me that somebody sure as hell thought this stuff through. This is hardly amateur work here, gentlemen. No sir, not this. Charlie's got his shit *wired* if he's about to come at us with this."

Flanagan sensed an uneasiness creeping into Tanner's typically unruffled demeanor. He also noticed Lt. Riordan's forced grin and Lt. Espy's hard swallow.

"If the boys from Hanoi are up there," Tanner said, rising and dusting the red dirt from the knees of his trousers, then pointing east, up the trail, "then let's see if we can bust 'em up a

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little and make 'em pay for leaving these nice maps and this good scoop with some hapless little snuff in the rear."

Tanner again glanced at Flanagan and winked.

As Tanner folded the maps away and then made ready to radio his findings to headquarters, Riordan inconspicuously leaned toward Flanagan and whispered out of the side of his mouth, "What the hell does 'hapless' mean?"

"Standby for the artillery," Tanner called sharply.

Flanagan, Wenrick, and the others took up positions off the trail. Soon the dull thud of the first two 105mm howitzer rounds being fired from a nearby Marine artillery fire base could be heard. Flanagan listened as the rounds shrieked overhead with a sound resembling that of a large sheet tearing, until the shells impacted up the trail with two deep, successive crunches. He then heard the uplifted dirt and jungle debris as it cascaded back down through the trees.

Flanagan overheard Tanner shout, "Follow 'em on up the trail," to the nearby forward observer. Over the next five minutes, Flanagan counted nearly two-dozen explosions as he lay face down in the stench of the rotting foliage a few meters off the path. He silently worried about a mistake—the short round that might land in the midst of the friendly position and blast him and his fellow Marines into little more than a pink mist. Thank God it didn't happen often, but then again there were lots of rounds fired in-country, *lots*, and the fog of combat inevitably raised the odds that one would stray off its course. And it was much worse with the air-delivered stuff. Napalm was horribly unforgiving, and the red-orange-black inferno played to every man's most deeply hidden fears.

Proper skin care can sometimes be a bitch in this part of the world, Flanagan thought as he raised his head enough to see a large brownish-black beetle crawl across his hand. He started to grin but then felt his front teeth sticking to his upper lip. His head ached again, and he wondered if it might be caused by the arduous physical and emotional strain he was constantly enduring. Maybe it's caused by some strange allergy or some

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peculiar infection from some godawful Asian plight. Or maybe, he thought, it's because he's scared one-third to death over what the other two-thirds might be like if and when he and a chunk of Russian steel meet in the final act that sends him home in one of those silver metal containers he'd often seen lined up on the runway in Da Nang.

It was a struggle beyond belief, he pondered. Survival in Vietnam was unlike anything he could've ever conjured up in even his wildest imagination. No amount of training could have ever prepared him for what it was actually like, or what he knew it would be like over the next seven months. He was good at his job—he'd already received the Bronze Star for his intrepid leadership during which his platoon had torn into and defeated a significantly larger enemy force. And he had the respect of his troops and fellow officers. He knew that other junior officers looked to him for guidance, and his opinion was often sought on a variety of topics. But he struggled in the field as did everyone else. He got bone tired, hungry, thirsty, hot, cold, irritable, horny, homesick, and scared stiff, sometimes all within the span of an hour. Death, misery, and suffering were all around him, like the dense jungle that enshrouded him, and he knew he was always only a breath away from eternity.

Die you Marxist assholes, Flanagan thought with a surge of hormonal aggression. It really *was* him or me, he reminded himself once again. This is Vietnam, where the Marines had trained him to come and fight; where killing was the mission and bodies were the scorecard. It was early January, 1968, the date or day of the week of which he was uncertain. But if he could make it to August, he knew, August 14th to be exact, then his tour would be completed. If he was to make it through his thirteen-months of combat duty and wake up to his Rotation Date and get back home again to Chicago, alive and with everything attached and in good working order, then it was the other guy who would have to do the dying for *his* country. Not just today, but the next day and the day after that and every day thereafter until he was finally on board the Freedom Bird and headed back to The World. His mission was to

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survive, to live long enough in this nightmare of a place by killing the other guy with better efficiency than the other guy could do in return. He reminded himself again to concentrate on just one hour at a time, knowing that those hours would accumulate into days and those days into weeks and eventually into months. And then finally, *finally*, he'd wake up one morning and go the hell home.

No sooner had the artillery barrage lifted when scattered small-arms fire broke out at the tail of the column, to the west. "Dammit!" Flanagan mumbled under his breath. "They're trying to pinch us on both ends."

"Keep shelling the same position," shouted Capt. Tanner to the nearby forward observer as the CO calmly stood up to get his bearings under the watchful eyes of Flanagan and the others nearby. "Seal this east flank and keep 'em off me while I get a handle on the other end."

Under Tanner's orders, Flanagan immediately moved his platoon off the trail and deployed to the north. By the time he had his Marines in place, no more than one-hundred meters from the trail, the firing ceased as the enemy seemed to evaporate into the silent jungle. The short firefight had left two additional friendly wounded, and a blood trail left behind by the NVA.

Flanagan and his men waited as twenty minutes of steady artillery pounding discouraged any further enemy movement. Once the fire was lifted, Flanagan placed his platoon on the point of the company and moved without incident several hundred meters to the east to an area suitable for a landing zone.

After a Marine CH-46 chopper had come in late afternoon to retrieve the wounded, Tom Flanagan, helmetless but with his flak jacket still wrapped around his torso, sat alone in the bottom of a freshly dug fighting hole. It was dusk, and the evening air was damp and still. Flanagan's platoon was spread out and positioned inside a line of trees to the north of the clearing. He leaned back and relaxed as he cooked his C-ration meal of beans and franks—the first time he'd had hot food in three days, and while it was still only C-rats, it was nonetheless hot, and hot almost always meant better.

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Lt. Kevin Riordan, chow in hand, walked up to Flanagan's position and peered into the hole. Riordan was short and stubby, with thinning dark hair and the thick chest and heavy arms of a weightlifter. Flanagan glanced up at his friend and Basic School classmate and motioned him down.

They sat beneath the ground surface amid the odors of freshly dug earth, hot C-rations, and unbathed infantrymen. Flanagan's radio operator, Wenrick, with whom he shared the hole, was elsewhere visiting a buddy.

"Heard anything from Chicago lately?" Riordan asked as he began heating his own meal.

"Only that my baby brother's freshman year in college is already a bummer, and my kid sister's in D.C. working with an ad agency and living in sin with a dipshit, pussy lawyer student."

Riordan frowned. "Bet you're crazy about that."

"You bet I am," Flanagan said with a frown. "I can't think of my sister as anything but a colossal failure now. She's wasting her life living with this spineless ass and trying to stop a war she knows nothing about but thinks she understands better than everyone else, including those who are deciding on the policies and those of us who are actually fighting these little Commie bastards. She thinks it's a bad war serving a bad purpose; therefore, by extension, anyone involved in its conduct must also be bad. She's always had strong opinions about the things she really cares about—both of us are alike there—but this friggin' war has shown a side of her that I have a hard time recognizing. She now thinks I'm a complete warmongering asshole and she's convinced that this entire Vietnam episode is going to wreck the country. And she believes in her gut that the people who share her convictions are the only ones who can save us, thank God. It's hard to imagine that she and I sprang forth from the same parents. She turned on me like a mongoose the day I told her that I'd joined the Marine Corps, and we haven't passed a civil sentence between us since."

"And I'll bet she knows her boyfriend isn't your favorite person, right?" Riordan asked.

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Flanagan grinned slightly. "I've hinted at that, yeah."

They both laughed.

"What do your parents think?" asked Riordan.

"Of what?"

"Of you being a Marine and her being a protestor, and splitting the family apart?"

Flanagan sighed. "They don't know *what* to think. And they don't dare take one side or the other, at least not where it's apparent to Kate or myself. I think they're like a lot of others nowadays—they just wish this whole Vietnam thing would somehow vanish into thin air. Just wake up one morning and it's peace on earth and goodwill toward men, even toward the friggin' Communists. But they also know that it won't go away, and that their son and daughter will likely be at odds over this for a long time to come."

"My guess is the whole *country* will be at odds over this for a long time to come," added Riordan.

Flanagan sighed again and shook his head in resignation.

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"What about Jill? Any word from her lately?" Riordan asked.

Flanagan tensed slightly. Jill Rohrbach, the middle of three daughters from a loving, tight-knit, southern Wisconsin farming family, had been the love of Flanagan's life, and to whom he had nearly proposed marriage. Blonde, blue-eyed, poised beyond her years and smart enough for ongoing academic honors, Jill was intent upon a career as a public accountant. The German-American beauty queen had fallen for the baseball-hero Flanagan while both were in their junior year at Northwestern. For well over a year they were inseparable, and their love for each other seemed deep and genuine. Flanagan had purchased Jill's engagement ring and was planning a proposal to her at third base on the baseball field, at night with their friends and his teammates conveniently out of sight. His plan suddenly unraveled when a seemingly innocuous disagreement somehow escalated into a nasty, bitter feud from which neither seemed willing to back down.

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He and Jill failed to reconcile before Flanagan soon thereafter finished school and immediately reported to Marine officer's training at Quantico, Virginia. Still deeply in love with Jill, Flanagan blamed himself unmercifully for allowing the couple to divert out of their marriage trajectory after their future together had seemed so certain and so inevitable for so long.

"Nope, nothing," Flanagan answered, looking away.

"Does she have another guy now?" Riordan asked in a softer tone.

Flanagan shrugged self-consciously. "I don't know," he answered, his voice trailing off.

Both men shifted uncomfortably.

"Enough about me," Flanagan said finally. "What about you? Heard anything from Boston?"

Riordan drew a deep breath and paused for a moment. "My best buddy from the neighborhood got shot to pieces down in Dak To with an Army airborne outfit; he's been medevaced back to The World. My favorite professor in college has turned hippie radical. He's got a beard and hair to his ass and dresses like Jesus. Oh, and one of my former girlfriends—one of my favorites, too, a dark-haired beauty with huge knockers and a butt like a basketball—has up and married a soul brother. I almost shit a crab cake when I found out. How could she do that? How could she be so stupid?"

Flanagan stopped eating and stared at Riordan. "What the hell's the matter with you, man?" Flanagan asked in disgust.

Both officers suddenly heard the heavy footsteps of Wenrick as the young radioman approached on the run.

"There's a problem at LP Two, sir, to the north," Wenrick said breathlessly as he kneeled down and thrust the radio's handset down to Flanagan.

"This is Bayou Three. Advise your situation, over," Flanagan said calmly, though he could feel his pulse accelerating rapidly.

The only response the listening post offered in return was three successive clicks of the handset, indicating a need for

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silence. "I ain't *even* liking this," Flanagan mumbled. He immediately dispatched a runner to the command post to alert Capt. Tanner. With Sgt. Jankowski's assistance he put his platoon on full alert before he gathered a four-man fire team and, along with Wenrick, left the company perimeter for the listening post.

Flanagan quickly alerted the two Marines at the listening post that he was en route to their position. In addition to the potential presence of enemy soldiers, Flanagan tensed over the thought of his two fatigued and scared Marines up ahead with their fingers on the triggers of their weapons. It was barely light enough to distinguish movement, and clear identification would thus be made more difficult. By the time Flanagan and his five Marines had carefully covered the three-hundred meters to the listening post, they were bathed in sweat.

"There's been lots of movement, sir," the corporal whispered in a distinct Southern drawl when they finally linked up. "NVA regulars, and lots of 'em, on the trail and heading east. For sure there's a couple of rifle companies, maybe more. They've got crew-served weapons, bandoleers, rockets, full packs—just a whole shitpot full of 'em. And they may still be down there for all I know. God almighty damn, sir, I ain't never seen that many live damn gooks in one damn place in my whole damn life."

Flanagan attempted to calm himself with a deep breath as the perspiration dripped steadily from the tip of his nose. He strained to see ahead in the dark. There was nothing—no sights, no sounds, no vibrations. He briefly considered the possibility of pushing ahead, nearer to the trail, but the prospect of stumbling headlong into a battalion or, worse yet, maybe even a full regiment of NVA held little appeal.

"We'll stay put, right here. Pass the word: Full alert for the next two hours, then fifty percent until first light."

Flanagan overheard the corporal's slow exhaling before the young Marine crawled away and disappeared into the darkness.

Flanagan remained awake with half his Marines and all of the insects for most of the chilly night. The jungle could be a damp and cold place after sunset, especially to men already moist from

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exertion. When he finally did succumb to his fatigue only two hours prior to first light, Flanagan was awakened by Wenrick after barely an hour of sleep.

"Sir?" came the whisper, followed by two quick shoves on the shoulder. "You awake, sir?"

Flanagan's body jerked and stiffened. Instinctively he felt for the M-16 rifle beside him. "What? What's the scoop?" he whispered back hoarsely.

"They're on the move again," said Wenrick.

Flanagan sat up, braced by his elbows, and waited for his head to clear. He was cold and stiff. His mouth tasted of early morning slime, and his neck, shoulders, and back ached as if he'd been stuffed into a lunch pail to sleep. He noticed the stale odor of the rubber poncho he had used to ward off the chill, then the familiar stench of the jungle, and he was suddenly hit with the grim reality of his and his Marines' situation. The heavy-eyed fog quickly lifted from inside his head, like steam off a coffee cup.

The corporal belly-crawled to Flanagan's side. "Sir, they're no more than fifty meters to our right front," he said in a whisper. "I'm telling you this place is shitty with gooks, Lieutenant."

"Everybody awake?" asked Flanagan.

"Yessir."

Flanagan wiped at his face with a dirty hand, then took a deep breath and glanced out into the dark jungle. "What the hell's going on here, Corporal?"

"Wish to hell I knew, sir."

"How close can we get?"

This time it was the corporal who took the long, deep breath. "Close as you want, sir, I guess."

"Then let's move. You and me and Wenrick, and the rest stay here."

Before leaving the position, Flanagan crawled around to each man, and to each man his whispered message was identical. "Listen up: Nobody moves, sleeps, smokes, talks, or farts, or it's your ass and my ass and everybody's ass. There's a blue friggin' horde of 'em just up ahead, so for crissakes don't do

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anything to stir 'em up. And if we somehow get discovered and you hear firing ahead, hold your own fire until you see us or hear us, then move up to cover us coming back into the position. As soon as we're all in again, we'll *didi mau* back the same way we came."

Each man acknowledged his understanding.

Flanagan followed the corporal as the three Marines crawled out slowly, carefully, to a point where the NVA soldiers could be heard as they moved on the trail, some sixty feet ahead. By the time Flanagan and his Marines were in place, wide-eyed with pounding hearts and a trepidation that grabbed at and squeezed hard at their innards, there was just enough light to see the outline of the enemy troops through the thick undergrowth. Flanagan strained to see as the uniformed NVA unit moved single-file along the narrow path, their weapons slung, their pith helmets and full packs camouflaged with foliage. They were moving west to east, briskly, with good discipline and interval. The thick jungle mostly absorbed their footsteps, but what little noise emerged was the unmistakable sound of infantry on the move—serious soldiers embarked upon a serious mission.

The Marines stayed in position for a half-hour, waiting perhaps ten minutes after the final NVA soldier in the column had disappeared before Flanagan gave a hand signal and they began crawling back to their original position.

"Send it in the clear, Wenrick: Tell 'em we're on our way back to the perimeter, and that we've had more movement on the trail. Estimate an enemy battalion with full gear, on the march heading east, looking like they're trying to get somewhere in a hurry."

Wenrick immediately keyed the radio and sent the message. Word was radioed back to Flanagan to return to the company position immediately.

Something's up, Flanagan kept thinking on the way back to the perimeter. Something big. He'd just seen more NVA in the open than he'd ever seen before. He noticed the quick glances from his Marines as they attempted to measure their leader's

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reaction to the large enemy troop movements. They, too, knew that something treacherous was taking shape.

Though there had been conflicting reports for the past several weeks, each Marine knew with certainty that unusually large numbers of enemy soldiers were now in the same geographical space as they. And, with an inevitability that left each Marine with a baseball-sized knot in his belly, a confrontation of major proportions was developing with all due haste.

Flanagan felt a sudden chill.

"What the hell is going *on* here?" he mumbled under his breath again.

CHAPTER TWO

McLean, Virginia

Kate Flanagan, age twenty-three, sat quietly off to the side, listening and absorbing. More than one admiring glance had already come her way as she sat up straight and attentive, an occasional smile highlighting her striking facial features. She scanned the bright, warm living room that had been converted into an assembly hall, of sorts. There were more than a dozen people crowded together, all seated except one and often all talking at the same time. They ignored the occasional forays of two dogs—one a huge black Newfoundland named Brumus, the other a cocker spaniel called Freckles—and several small, pajama-clad Kennedy children chasing about in a whirlwind of giggles and barks. The haze of cigar smoke was thick, and several of the men held after dinner drinks of coffee or Irish whiskey (or both) up and away from the little feet and the marauding paws. At first Kate had been put off by the outward bedlam of it all, but the more she observed, the more she scrutinized the interactions of the participants, the more the entire setting seemed in perfect accord.

Kate watched as Robert F. Kennedy, the former Attorney General and current United States Senator from New York, turned and glanced over at the proceedings from where he stood across the room with a telephone to his ear. Kennedy had thus far said little, preferring instead to listen and ponder and occasionally ask a question as the debate carried on around him, almost as if he wasn't there.

She leaned forward with interest when her host began to speak.

"Look guys, hear me out on this one. I've been silent all evening, but I can't hold my tongue any longer or I'll choke on it. I've got only one thing to say, one thing only, and it's this: I swear to God that if Bob Kennedy's not occupying the White House in January of Nineteen Sixty Nine," the young staffer exclaimed, now wide-eyed with passion, "then we may as well throw up our hands

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and give up on this two-hundred year experiment with American-style democracy. And if we do that, if we fail to get him elected, then by God we should *all* walk to the gallows with a look of shame on our faces."

One person applauded and called out, "Here, here. A nice revolutionary touch, Dan."

Another raised a snifter of brandy into the air. "Sixteen-hundred Pennsylvania Avenue or the gallows. Has a nice democratic ring to it. Give me Kennedy or give me . . ."

Kate chuckled out loud.

Another more mellowed advisor called out, grinning, "Good grief, Dan. Sit down and have a cup of black coffee."

Things were buzzing at Bobby Kennedy's Hickory Hill estate. Kennedy still stood alone in a far corner of the room, head bowed, his white shirt wrinkled and unbuttoned at the collar, the telephone still affixed to the side of his face. He seemed to be straining to hear, turning away from the others, sometimes nodding or shrugging and sometimes offering a few words. He gestured occasionally and then ran his fingers through the hair that fell over onto his forehead. Mostly he remained composed and quiet as he listened to the steady stream on the other end, the source of which Kate had deduced to be his brother Teddy.

Ethel Kennedy occasionally popped into the room to offer a few suggestions or make a point or counterpoint, then just as quickly disappeared.

The arguments proceeded.

Pro: RFK's got to announce for the Presidency; McCarthy doesn't represent the poor, the disadvantaged; LBJ doesn't represent anyone anymore; someone has to end this terrible war; someone's got to bring the American people together again.

Con: RFK can't announce; LBJ's not as vulnerable as he might seem, especially given the power of the incumbency; it would be politically much more the wiser to wait until '72; Vietnam will likely dissipate under its own weight, but even if it doesn't, the country will be far more favorably inclined toward a Kennedy candidacy in 1972 than in 1968.

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Dan Marinelli, age twenty-six, a full-time member of Bobby Kennedy's congressional staff, sipped from a coffee cup and then leaned over to whisper to the attractive young advertising professional he had invited to the meeting.

"Care for a little fresh air, Kate?"

Kate smiled and nodded. While she had never been easily awed, she had likewise never before witnessed such a scene or been in such prominent company. "Sure," she answered as she shook her red hair from her eyes and reached for her wool coat on the back of the chair.

They went out a nearby door, out onto the porch that was partially illuminated by the inside lights. The late-January night was brisk, and the fresh night air burned Kate's nostrils as she inhaled the first few breaths.

Dan lit a cigarette and took a long pull. Lean and angular at six-foot three, he ran his hand through his dark hair and turned to Kate. "Okay, tell me what you make of all this."

Kate folded her arms against her chest to ward off the stiff evening chill. Tall at five-foot eight, with the long, slender features of a dancer, she cut a striking figure with her shoulder-length red hair and her probing, dark-brown eyes that projected not only her propensity toward warmth and friendliness but also her seriousness and inability to suffer fools. "I've always been interested in the 'behind-the-scenes' stuff of national politics," she answered, her breath vaporizing in the air. "And I can say with complete certainty that this is all very, very fascinating."

Kate glanced up at the winking stars in the ink-black sky above. She wondered if their alignment favored another Kennedy candidacy, perhaps another Kennedy administration. Or, she mused, might there be something even more surprising, more unforeseen, or perhaps more ominous in the offing. She pondered briefly about how her Marine brother would react if he could see her now, visiting at the home of Robert Kennedy and listening to a high-level political-strategy discussion that involved many of Kennedy's closest advisers.

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She smiled at the thought as she twisted a lock of red hair around her index finger. "I'm a little surprised they'd let you bring an outsider in when they're talking such heavy strategy," Kate said with a self-conscious grin.

"I told everyone you'll be with us soon, so it's no big deal," said Dan with a nonchalant shrug.

Kate's eyebrows quickly raised. "I beg your pardon?"

Dan grinned. "I told 'em to get used to seeing you around, that you were going to hire on and help us. That's why they're not worried. I've already cleared you. You're one of us. Sorta."

Kate stood in silence for a moment, her confusion evident.

"So, I suppose we should nail it down, right?" Dan pressed.

"Nail it down? Nail *what* down?"

"That you'll come to work for us. You will, won't you?"

Kate laughed. "No, Dan, I will not. I have a full-time job already. Remember?"

"I remember."

"And you still haven't told me how you managed to find out about me and get my name," said Kate.

"Look, I've gotten to know a lot of people in this town. I have a lot of sources, I really do. And so I asked a gentleman I greatly respect to give me the name of the best young ad pro around, and he immediately told me about you."

Kate gave him a sideways glance. "I've only known you a few days but I've already concluded that you're an incredibly accomplished liar, I swear."

"It's no lie, really. Now that I've met you, I can tell he knew exactly what he was talking about."

Kate shook her head in disbelief, suppressing a grin.

Dan shrugged. "Let's see now: Chicago native; Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in journalism from a small liberal arts college in central Illinois; the middle of three children; headstrong, independent, creative, insightful; a real, honest-to-goodness hotshot in a town full of hotshots and hotshot charlatans. How's that for a quick thumbnail sketch?"

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Kate finally grinned. "Everything after the city, college, and family stuff is highly debatable, especially the 'hotshot' part."

"He's gonna go, Kate," Dan said, moving slightly closer and lowering his voice. "He's gonna do it, honest to God. And when he does, we're gonna need your talents. The country's gonna need your talents. The whole world's gonna need your talents."

Kate held out her hand to stop any further approaches. "A bit more dramatic than necessary, but I think I get your point. And maybe it's just me, but have you noticed there's nothing near a consensus in that room, from the people closest to him?"

"He'll go," Dan said confidently. "There's just no other solution. He's *got* to, and he damn well knows it."

"Oh?" Kate said as she blew into her cupped hands. "How can you be so sure?"

"I just know, that's all. Your fiancé Harold—"

"Everett."

"Yeah, Everett. He wants you to join him in Gene McCarthy's camp, right?"

"Correct."

"Please don't do that. We need you a helluva lot more than they do. We can win, Kate. Our guy can win," Dan said emphatically.

"So can McCarthy."

"Only if Johnson turns blue and falls over clutching his chest. And only if Bob stays out."

"Dan, you don't have a candidate yet. And I'm not leaving my job," she said firmly, pausing to measure his reaction. "So please, let's get back inside. It's freezing out here."

She turned and started back toward the door. Dan quickly crushed out his cigarette with his foot and followed after her.

"Kate, wait."

"Look," she said, slightly irritated, "I appreciate the invitation, I really do. And even though it's been an extremely interesting and invigorating evening, I'm not about to stop and start my professional life on a whim. It's a moot point, I'm afraid, and besides that, it's cold out here and I'm freezing my young—"

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He reached for her, stopping her, then turned her toward him. He gently, tentatively took her hands in his, which she immediately pulled away.

"You know as well as I do what's at stake here," Dan said. "You've even got a member of your own family at risk."

Kate winced slightly. "Sorry, but I'm not seeing where my other family members fit into all this."

"I was in the Army in Vietnam just a year ago and I know from personal experience that this war's like a cancer. And it's spreading faster each day, each week. I saw how it's eating our country's young, and the sooner it ends, the better."

She took a step back. "Listen, here's the way I see it: McCarthy'll get us out of Vietnam, even if he does nothing else. And come to think of it, that'd be entirely enough for one measly little politician to accomplish. So there it is, Dan. There you have it. I'm glad I could clear that up for you tonight, although the setting is a bit ironic, I have to admit."

Dan Marinelli chuckled and shook his head in polite disagreement. "If McCarthy were to do well in the primaries," he said, again speaking in a soft, conspiratorial tone, "Johnson would then be exposed and weakened, and Bob could emerge out of the smoke and rescue the Democratic Party. Nixon's likely to be the Republican, and we know from before that he's beatable. Then it all comes down to winning the national election and then ending the war."

"That simple, huh?" Kate asked, her eyebrows arched.

"Not quite, but you see my larger point. It all reduces down to this: The country can't take another four years of Lyndon Baines Johnson. Period, exclamation point."

"What about those people inside?" Kate countered. "Some say now, some say later. Others say they're not sure. Even if he entered and won all the primaries, the opinion in there is still divided on whether he'd actually be elected. You told me yourself that the Senator's own brother is telling him to wait until Seventy Two, that LBJ will be reelected. His own brother!"

"Yeah, okay, but—"

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"Yes, that's right," came the unmistakably rich Boston accent of Robert Francis Kennedy, walking up alongside wearing an unzipped leather flight jacket and holding a cup of hot steaming coffee.

Kate turned toward Kennedy. Even in the dim light his familiar face appeared tired, Kate thought, as if he were aging beyond his forty-two years.

"My brother told me again, too, just now," Kennedy said. "He's very convincing, I have to say. And very consistent. I certainly know where he stands, and I suppose I have some idea on where you stand, Dan. Perhaps you have an opinion on all of this, Miss Flanagan. Care to make a contribution to this friendly quarrel?"

It suddenly struck Kate that she was standing face to face with the reigning member of America's First Family—the familiar toothy grin, the hooded blue eyes, the shock of hair, the casual stance with one hand thrust into the pocket of his trousers—and when she finally opened her mouth to speak, nothing came out.

Bobby Kennedy immediately raised his hand slightly, as if to shrug off the question. "Listen, I'm glad you could join us tonight. I don't know how much good any of this has done you," he said, pausing and then grinning boyishly before adding, "I'm not even certain how much good it's done me, but I'm glad you could stop in and be with us. I hope you'll come back and visit again."

Dan cleared his throat. "I was just trying to convince Miss Flanagan to join the staff, Senator. She's the one I told you about earlier, the one who works for the D.C. ad agency and came so highly recommended. We could sure use her to help get our message out."

"Yes, I remember. And are you having any success?"

"Modest, at this point. But there's hope," said Dan.

"Yes, well, I suppose there's always hope."

There was an awkward moment of silence before Kate suddenly blurted out, "So, are you gonna become President of the United States?"

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Dan Marinelli swallowed hard; Bobby Kennedy grinned self-consciously; and in spite of the cold, Kate Flanagan was suddenly tingling with warmth and flushed with embarrassment. All she could hear in her head was the sound of her own voice, repeating the question she now wished she could somehow reel back into her possession.

"Only if I can't become Emperor of Rome, I suppose," Kennedy said, smiling. "I wish it were that easy."

Kennedy finally turned and walked slowly back toward the door. He paused before stepping inside and turned back toward the pair, another grin uplifting his face. "And they call *me* blunt and ruthless," he called out. "If you should decide to join us, Kate, and I hope you do, then my guess is you'll fit right in."

* * *

Dan Marinelli drove Kate back to the fashionable Georgetown townhouse she shared with her law-student fiancé.

"God, I can't believe I said that to him," Kate mumbled in disgust when Dan pulled over at her address. "The only full sentence I spoke to him all evening, and it had to come out like that. I should've just kept my big mouth shut."

Dan laughed as he slid the blue Camaro's floor shift into park. "Don't think anything of it. He loved it."

"Well, it doesn't matter," Kate said as she reached for the door handle.

"Hey, hold on. What do you mean, it doesn't matter?" Dan asked.

"It doesn't matter because I won't be changing jobs," Kate said firmly.

"Why not?"

Kate took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I have a job, Dan. We've been over all of that. And besides, I—"

Dan reached across for her hand.

"—also have a fiancé," she said in an aggravated tone, avoiding his touch.

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Dan shrugged. "I hope he knows how lucky he is."

Kate reached for the door handle. "Thank you for such a memorable evening, but I really must be going."

"Wait," he said, touching her arm. "Tell me about your brother in the Marines."

"What about him?" she asked after a brief silence.

"Tell me where he is in Vietnam; tell me what he's like; tell me what he's written to you about what he's doing and seeing over there."

Kate gave a resigned sigh and shook her head. "I'm afraid we don't communicate a lot."

"No? Why not?"

"Because," Kate answered defensively, "my older brother and I aren't in contact anymore. We disagree on a lot of things, on *most* things, and it's gotten worse over the last couple of years."

"Yeah? Like what?" Dan pressed.

"Like the war," Kate answered quickly.

Dan nodded but otherwise remained quiet.

Kate's expression hardened. "I've lost a lot of the admiration I used to have for him. He's mocked me and my beliefs. He's questioned my sincerity, my motives. He takes issue with just about everyone and everything in my life. I've all but given up on our ever having a normal relationship again."

Dan remained silent.

"It's sad, but my brother and I have almost nothing in common anymore."

"Have you been open to listening to him?" Dan asked after pausing.

"Of course. I just remember that he couldn't wait to tell me he'd volunteered for the Marines so he could get overseas and 'blow away some gooks' and get the war over. He was so arrogant about it, so cocky. He knew my feelings about the war, and he rubbed it in my face all the harder. Told me I must be a 'goddamned pinko commie' when he found out that Everett and I took part in the protests at the White House and the Pentagon." She sighed. "This was the same Tommy that I'd always looked up

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to—the athletic star and the academic star and the one all the guys wanted to be like and all the girls wanted to be with. He was the one who could fill up a room just by walking into it. He was my big brother, my protector, my standard of excellence that I knew I'd always have a hard time meeting, no matter how hard I tried. But now, Tommy seems like the world's biggest asshole to me."

"How does Tommy get along with your fiancé?" Dan asked tentatively.

Their eyes met only briefly before Kate looked away. After a pause, she cleared her throat and turned to face him.

"Let's make sure we understand what's happened here tonight, Dan. It's important to me that you know how to interpret all of this."

Dan gave a confused look. "Interpret?"

"Yes, interpret. And here are the specifics. Number one: I have nothing further to say about my relationship with my brother, or for that matter about my brother's relationship with anyone else. Number two: I have no intention of leaving the agency. I have a good job and a good future with a good firm, and I don't want you to think that I'm anything but happy with what I'm doing with my professional life. Number three: I'm engaged to be married, and I don't want you to think that I'm anything but perfectly happy with *that* part of my life, too. And number four: Even though we've known each other only a few short days, I appreciate your interest in me, I really do, although I'm not at all sure whether it's personal or professional, which is neither here nor there. But, based on what I've just explained and what I'm certain a man with your great intuitive powers can read between the lines, I suppose the proper conclusion would be that there's very little need for you to contact me again."

Kate heard Dan's sigh, then glanced over and saw an expression of disbelief pulling down on his face.

"My God, I think you've just told me to take a hike," he said in a pained voice.

Kate looked away.

"Well?" he asked.

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"Well what?"

"Is my 'interpretation' correct?"

"Your words, Dan. Not mine."

"Dammit, you can help us, Kate. You can make a difference and be part of something bigger than either of us. And you'd be doing your brother and a bunch of others like him a world of good, too. And I can make that happen for you bright and early tomorrow morning."

Kate stared ahead and said nothing. She thought about reaching then and there for the door knob and abruptly ending the conversation, but she remained seated.

"You may never again have a chance like this the rest of your life," he continued. "Twenty years from now you'll look back on this time and place and kick yourself if you let this opportunity get away. We've got exactly the right man at exactly the right moment in this country's history. Everything he's ever done in his entire life has prepared him for this. He'll use his experience and his insight and his capacity to grow, and he'll provide us with the leadership this country desperately needs. It's our job to help him get to the Oval Office. He'll do the rest once he's there. You can be part of something that can change the world, Kate. *And as an insider*, for crying out loud! So for God's sake don't let this slip away."

She turned and faced him, but still said nothing.

"When I came back to Brooklyn from the Army last year, I honestly didn't know *what* the hell I'd do. I really thought that my best moments had already passed, that the rest of my life would be spent just going through the motions. Can you believe that? I'm only twenty-five and yet I'm thinking that maybe I've peaked as a productive human being. But when I got lucky and eventually hired on with Bob's senatorial staff, I knew right then and there that my life was really just beginning, that now I'd be able to hit a lick that would end up making a difference, and probably a very big difference."

Dan grinned, but Kate sat expressionless.

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"And what you mentioned earlier about not being sure whether my interest was personal or professional, well, let me assure you that I'm greatly interested in what you can do to help us advance our political agenda," he said, pausing and then adding in a softer voice, "and honestly, the fact that you're a beautiful, intelligent, alluring woman is something that I've hardly noticed."

Try as she might, Kate couldn't hide her smile.

"So, Miss Kate Flanagan, when can we meet for lunch and discuss your job change?"

Kate laughed. "I've already given you the answer. Besides, I'm going to Chicago to visit with my family for a few days."

"Great. It'll give you some time to get away and think about things. Chicago's a terrific town, and a good Kennedy town, to boot. And please be sure to give your family my regards."

"I'll be sure and do that," Kate said as she opened the car door.

Dan smiled. "Can I walk you to the door?"

"Nope. That won't be necessary."

He leaned toward her, and as he did he reached for her hand, taking it and kissing it gently. "You've been absolutely wonderful company tonight. *Buona notte*, sweet Katherine. I'll be in touch soon."

In Washington, D.C., Tom Flanagan's sister, Kate, with whom he has persistent differences about the political landscape in general, and the war specifically, decides to join the staff of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy as RFK's campaign for the presidency begins to formulate.

Shall Never See So Much

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