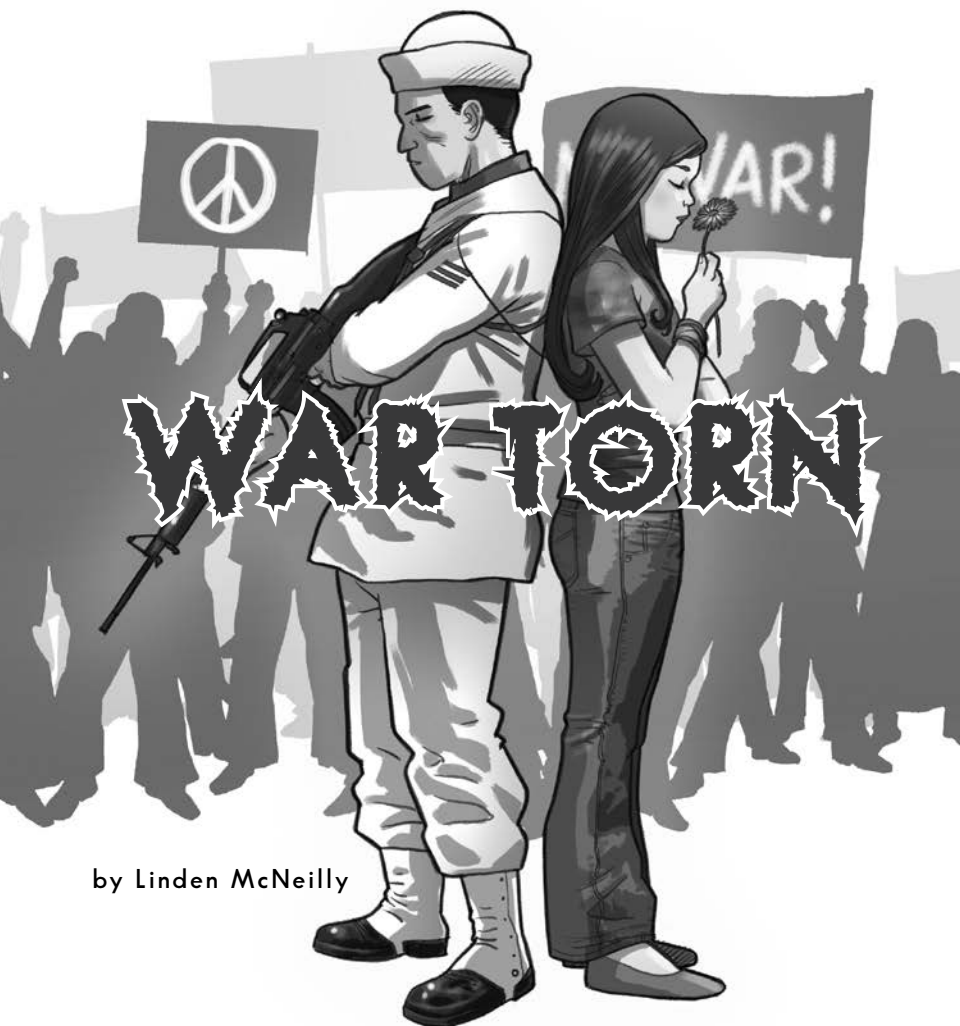


WAR TORN

by Linden McNeilly

HISTORY FILES: VIETNAM



by Linden McNeilly

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*Happy reading,
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CHAPTER ONE

Kelsey Charges Ahead



“Here’s another spot, Kelsey. Wanna come to our group?” Matt hopped his chair a little sideways to make room.

A little thrill ran up Kelsey’s spine. Matt wanted her to be in his group. Matt!

Already sitting oh-so-close on Matt’s other side, Bettina leveled her gaze at Kelsey. Kelsey tried not to get sucked into the black hole of Bettina’s stare.

Breathing through her mouth to slow down her crazy heart, Kelsey, said, all fake perky, “Sure! That would be cool!” She almost tipped her chair over in a rush to get on Matt’s other side before someone else moved in.

Kevin and Julie joined the misshapen circle Matt and Bettina had started. Once the circle was complete Bettina’s hand shot up.

“It looks like Team One is already formed,” said Mr. Cole, writing the names of Kelsey’s group on the chalkboard. “Nice job making it work. Everyone else, you have five more minutes to get into a group of four to six. I’ll be handing out job assignments as soon as you’re settled.”

When Mr. Cole passed out the project slips, Bettina grabbed it before anyone else could read it. “Newspaper crew!” she announced. “That’ll be easy. Matt and I’ll do the ads and Julie, you do sports. We can do a close up of Joe Namath—my cousin dated him, and—”

Kelsey was about to open her mouth when Matt said, “Whoa, Nellie! I wanted to do sports. Julie can do the ads with you.”

For an instant, Bettina looked like a bee stung her. But she recovered quickly. “Oh, you. Fine. I’ll help you with that, then. Julia doesn’t need me for ads. And Kevin, what do you want as your specialty? You’re good at comics, aren’t you? Or something with food? Isn’t your dad a chef or something?”

Kevin shrugged. He wasn't much of a talker, like Kelsey. But Kelsey couldn't afford to sit and get leftovers from Bettina. There was too much at stake.

"We need something serious," Kelsey said. "I can do a news piece on Vietnam. Like, interview a veteran about the war, and talk about peace protests and stuff." She sat back, pleased. It would be the real core of the paper, the most important part.

"Well, Miss Investigative Reporter," started Bettina, but Matt cut her off.

"That's great, Kelsey. We need something big to get an A. Which, gosh knows, I need."

I know, Kelsey wanted to say. *And that's exactly what I am doing here, Matt Locatelli. I am here to save you.* She knew Matt didn't excel at history, and she did. She'd been waiting for this chance all semester. She'd already imagined how it would be next year, when they were in the same honors track. Study buddies? Check. Heads together over the textbook? Yes!

“Well, if you can handle it, Kelsey, okay,” said Bettina. As if she were the editor. “But it’s going to have to be good to beat Deborah’s team.”

“It’s not a competition,” said Julie weakly.

“Mr. Cole grades on the bell curve and you know it, Julie,” said Bettina. “There’s only so many of us on the top.”

She doesn’t even know what a bell curve is, thought Kelsey. The highest part of the curve was the middle. They needed to be at the beginning, in the low part, where the few excellent students were.

The groups made plans and elected Julie secretary to keep track of everything. They made a date to meet after school the next day at Bettina’s house. After class, Kelsey packed up her binder and folders, tucking the notes she’d already started into the history section.

“That was cute, Kelsey, getting into our group like that. But don’t think I don’t know why. You should know that Matt’s hanging out with me after school today. We’ll probably

be going to the Fall Festival, too.”

Kelsey tried to appear indifferent. She shrugged and turned away. How could Bettina know her feelings for Matt?

But it stung. More than once, Kelsey had dreamed about going to the Fall Festival with Matt. She imagined sitting on a hay bale with him eating cotton candy or showing off her skill at popping balloons with darts. Last year, she’d gone with girlfriends. This year, she wanted to go with a boy. And not just any boy. Matt Locatelli, curly haired adorable boy.

There was no way Bettina was getting in the way of what she wanted.

Her mind was going full steam ahead as she went to the bus line after school. Her dad sometimes played cards with his Korean War buddies at the VFW Hall on Clay Street. She had been there a couple of times and knew the neighborhood.

Maybe some Vietnam Vets hang out there, too, she thought. She walked across the street

and took the city bus to the VFW Hall.

The Veterans of Foreign War Hall was a narrow storefront sandwiched between a laundromat and a print shop. She raised her hand to knock when a man walked up behind her, pulled the door open, and went in. She slipped in behind him.

It was narrow and dark, and took a minute to adjust her eyes. A bar with stools was on the right side, with a couple of men playing a loud dice game.

“Acey-Deucey!” said one of the men.

“Second time, Perez. Time to check the dice.”

“No, man, I’ve just got the touch. I call double sixes.”

“Hello?” Kelsey said.

She felt she’d just barged into a private party, for all conversation stopped.

“Excuse me?”

“For what, living? There’s no excuse for that,” said a man leaning on a cane. He smoked a cigarette with a long ash that chose

that particular moment to snap off and drift to the ground. He scuffed the pile of ash with his boot. “What do you want?”

“I’m Kelsey. I’m in eighth grade—”

“Too young for McBride, but Perez might be interested,” said one of the seated men.

“Shut up, Beyer. What do you want, girl?” said Perez.

“My dad sometimes comes here, and um, well, I have to find a Vietnam Veteran and get an interview for a school—”

Silence dropped into the room, like a chunk of melted snow sliding off a roof.

The man with the cane limped over to her. “No one here was in Vietnam, okay? No one. We’re just buddies, hanging around. Nothing about the war gets said. Get it?”

Kelsey stood still, not sure what to do. She must have made a mistake. The hats they wore had a slightly different insignia than her father’s had, and he was a war veteran from the Korean War. And they looked much younger than him.

“Um, are you sure? Is there anyone you know that you could ask?” She looked around the group, searching for a face that would meet hers. But all the eyes stayed on the dice, or the pretzels, or deeply regarded the beer glass.

“Nobody wants to talk with you, kid. So scram before we sic Perez on you.”

Perez cleared his throat.

Kelsey scrambled.

CHAPTER TWO

A Change of Plan



By the time she got home, she had made a new plan. Her story could be about war in general. Her father would talk about the Korean War—he never tired of telling stories about it. Then she'd weave in some anti-war stuff. Her mother had been making signs and going to demonstrations against U.S. involvement in the war. Kelsey could probably go with her to a meeting, or a gathering, and get some statements from the organizers. It would be a piece of cake. She could even include her brief visit to the Vet's Hall and say something reportly, like, "The veterans declined comment on the current political goings on in Vietnam."

When she got home, she tried the doorknob, hoping to avoid digging into her various pockets to locate the key. It opened.

Grunts and scraping sounds told her Jake, her older brother, was home and lifting weights. He'd gotten a steel bar from somewhere, and attached a milk carton full of cement on each end.

"Hi, He-man!" Kelsey said. She set her school supplies on the kitchen counter.

"...seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty." A loud clunk followed as the bar landed in the cradle. "He-man is right. That's a hundred fifty pounds right there!"

"Is Gigi impressed?" asked Kelsey, looking through the mail. The Sears catalog had arrived. She flipped to the fashion section and ran her finger along a page with bell bottoms and a little furry jacket. Cool. Her own pants were corduroy and worn down on the thighs.

"Gigi is no longer part of the equation," said Jake. He sat up abruptly. "She apparently likes the poindexter type. As in Willie Yerst. With whom she was holding hands during Civ."

“No!” said Kelsey. “I can’t believe it. She cheated?”

Jake went to the fridge, took out a pitcher and poured some milk. He drank the whole glass before replying. “Um, yep. I hate this powdered milk. They must do something special to make it so sour.”

“But it’s free at . . .”—Kelsey paused to give Jake a chance to chime in—“. . . Green Save!”

They both laughed.

“But you are a He-man, even if Gigi is too stupid to see it. I would throw up if I drank it like that,” said Kelsey. “I can barely stand it over corn flakes.”

Jake grinned, milk mustache dripping.

“I’m home!” Steps sounded on the outside stairs, followed by a kick. Jake leaned forward and pulled the door open.

Mom entered, her arms full of groceries. “The fruit was surplussed today, so we have melon and apples. And look at this: the freezer kicked off. We got a bunch of Sara Lee pies.

Even a box of brownies, Kelsey Mae.”

Kelsey looked at the food. Each item was either dinged or looked like it had been in the store for about five years. One of the labels on the no-longer-frozen desserts was actually faded. How does a label get faded inside a freezer? Kelsey didn’t want to know.

Her mother often brought home food from Green Value, the discount grocery store where she worked. Employees were allowed to bring home damaged or unsellable food each week.

Mom began unpacking the items. Kelsey picked up a melon, cracked at one end.

“Can I interview you, Mom? I have to do a current events project. Our group is making a newspaper about the Vietnam conflict.”

“Yes, but I am not part of Nixon’s so-called Silent Majority. He’s trying to make light of how many Americans are against the war. And it’s a war, not a conflict, and an undeclared one at that. Illegal. Wrong, vicious, and racially unfair!”

“How do you get race into it?” asked Jake, taking a bite into an apple and spitting it into the sink. “This one’s rotten. Yuck!”

Kelsey picked up an apple. Half of it was smashed flat and brown. She went through the rest of them, finding all of them in some state of decay. It would be applesauce tonight. They ate a lot of applesauce: it was the only way to save what little was good of the apple.

Mom didn’t seem to notice. She continued putting away the groceries. She handed the cereal box to Kelsey. Corn flakes. At least the cereal looked new, and unbroken.

“There are going to be huge demonstrations across the country,” Mom said. “All part of the National Moratorium against the war. But mainly Washington, D.C., and here. We’ll have a march to Golden Gate Park. It’s going to send a message.”

“Right, Mom. What message is that?” said Jake.

“Nixon pretends to be disinterested, but I know he’s actually afraid of the marches,

because it shows how unpopular the war is. How unpopular HE is.”

“What about the commies?” said Jake.

“What’s that?” asked Kelsey.

“Reds. Like the Soviets. Commies taking over. A bunch of students burned up their draft cards. They want us to stop fighting the communists in Vietnam. Just let it all turn red. Like Cuba. Like blood.” He bit into another apple, gagged, and let the whole thing fall into the kitchen sink.

“Yuck!” said Kelsey.

“I see you have your father’s war lust,” said Mom.

“Dad doesn’t have war lust. He just knows that the commies should be stopped. Flower power isn’t going to get us anywhere,” said Jake. “It’s just weak.”

“When’s Dad getting home?” asked Kelsey. She sorted the rest of the apples, throwing away the worst ones when her mother wasn’t looking. “I have to interview him, too.”

“There’s no chance of that. He’s gone off on a job. He won’t be back for a couple of weeks or more, depending on the weather,” said Mom.

“What?” said Kelsey. Her heart dropped.

“It was a great opportunity. He gets paid twice the mileage, but he had to leave this morning right after you went to school.

“When’s he going to call? I have to talk to him!”

“I don’t know. He’s in a convoy and doesn’t know where they’ll stop tonight, or when.”

“I don’t have two weeks!” Kelsey said, shoving the cereal into the cupboard and snapping the cupboard shut.

“Calm down, Kelsey,” said Mom. “You’re out of hand.”

“I’m the key writer of the newspaper. I have to interview someone about the war. This is the biggest project of the semester.” She stomped to her room.

“What’s with her?” said Jake.

Kelsey slammed the door.

Everything stinks, she thought.



The next day the group met after school at Bettina’s house. Kelsey had to take two buses, and still had to walk six long blocks from the bus stop to get up to Bettina’s house. It was a huge Victorian on the top of a hill so steep cars parked sideways so they wouldn’t roll away.

A gorgeous, sparkly view of the bay was visible behind the house. Kelsey pushed the iron gate open and headed past a rose garden and arched hedge. The house had a turret and an enormous knocker on the front door in the shape of a dolphin.

She’d knocked about a hundred times and was about to give up when the door finally opened. “Oh, you finally got here,” said

Bettina, turning and disappearing down a narrow hallway. The others were laughing around a table. Huge piles of food were piled in the middle: little pastries that looked like pies, a bowl of blueberries (Kelsey had tasted blueberries exactly once in her life), and fizzy drinks in tall glasses. There was a bowl of beautiful apples, shiny and red.

An apple that looks like an apple, thought Kelsey, reaching for one. “Hi,” she said to no one in particular. The apple was crisp and sweet.

“Hi,” said Matt. “Glad you made it. We were just talking about the interview. Did you get it done?”

“Working on that,” Kelsey said. “It’ll be a bit harder than I thought.”

“Oh, great,” said Bettina. “Here comes the bad news. We’re all going down the tubes. Captain Kelsey’s at the helm.”

All eyes turned on Kelsey.

“Um, no!” Kelsey said. “It’s not the easiest

thing to snag a vet who wants to talk. So be patient.”

“Right. We have a deadline in two days. So don’t wreck it, girl,” said Bettina.

Julia nodded, muttering, “Don’t wreck it.”

“What do the rest of you have? Let’s talk about that,” said Kelsey, trying not to sound defensive.

“Been there, done that,” said Julia. “You kind of missed it. Being so late. Maybe tomorrow you won’t be so late, since the meeting is at your house.”

“Oh, uh, my house? What?” Kelsey tried to keep her hands from gripping the underside of the table. It took all her energy to keep her face fixed. *No, no, no*, she wanted to scream.

“We thought if you had transportation issues it would be easier if we met where you live,” said Matt, breaking a chip in half and making fangs with it. “Count me in,” he said, in a fake Dracula voice.

“Oh, Matthew, you are to die for,” said Bettina, looking thrilled with her own pun. “Group dismissed!”

Kelsey packed up her belongings, a sick swirl taking up the place where the apple had just settled.

CHAPTER THREE

The Silent Vet



She waited to walk out with Matt, but he lingered, laughing, with Bettina.

Getting home was a nightmare.

The first bus was an express, so she had to wait half an hour for the next one that would transfer to her bus line. Once on, she couldn't find a seat, so she stood in the back, trying not to fall on anyone when the bus lurched. Finally a seat became vacant and she dropped into it, watching the city go by.

She thought and thought, but couldn't figure out how to solve the problem of the vet. Going back to the vet hall was out of the question. Her dad didn't often call when he was on the road, since long distance charges were so high at pay phones. So she couldn't count on him, either.

Then the bus stopped completely, but no

one got off.

Kelsey soon saw why. A mob was standing in front of the courthouse, shaking signs and shouting. Antiwar protestors were clogging up everything.

“We’re not going anywhere, folks, so get out your macramé and start weaving. Or get off,” said the bus driver, pulling open the door. “I have no idea when the cops are going to get this crowd back to Berkeley where they belong.”

A few folks stood up and craned necks. “Stupid rich jerks,” said a man. “Students! None of them has to work for a living. I’m going to miss my shift.” He grabbed his bag and headed out the rear exit, followed by a couple of grumbling women.

Just then, Kelsey caught sight of her mother. She was holding a huge sign that said, “Nixon, The People Order You To Get Our Sons Out!” Kelsey slunk down in her seat as low as she could. This day was about

as bad as it could get.



Finally, the crowd moved further down, the bus was able to roll, and she got home. Kelsey had thrown her school books down when Jake appeared. He was dirty and sweaty.

“Where were you?” she asked.

“I got a job. Construction. I’m the loading man.”

“Right. You’re the load of baloney man.”

“Listen, Missy. I’m getting three bucks an hour to fill their dumpster. You can’t get that at K-Mart or Woolworth.”

She had to agree with him. “Jake, do you know anyone who was in the war? I mean, besides Dad. I have to do this interview. Like, now.”

“The guys I work with are vets. You should just come over there and talk with them. They would love a girl on the project.”

“Um, gross?”

“They’re okay guys. In fact, let’s go right now. I just realized I left my jacket there and who knows if it’ll be there tomorrow.”

They walked the eight blocks together.

“Was Gigi up to her latest shenanigans?” asked Kelsey.

“And then some,” said Jake. He kicked a rock as hard as he could. It pinged off the side of a car.

“Great move,” she said. “That’s a Mustang.”

“I don’t care if it’s a Camaro. I’m sick of this place. I’m gonna go have adventures as soon as I graduate,” Jake said.

Kelsey looked at him. He was staring at the horizon as though some wonderful thing waited there. All Kelsey could see was the afternoon fog rolling in.

“It’s the Jakester!” called someone. “My man!”

The construction site was a house, or had been at one time. It was stripped down to a simple shape that suggested a two-story

house, with only sides and a roof left. Piles of old lumber, brick, glass, and strips of metal blocked the walkway to the place the front door should have been.

They stepped around it.

A pounding sound came from the roof.

“Hey, Cesar! Yazo!” Jake called. Two heads popped up.

“He’s back! Can’t get enough of our beautiful faces,” said one of them wearing an orange ball cap.

“I left my jacket here, Cesar. Gotta have it,” Jake said. “But also, meet my sister. Kelsey.”

Kelsey waved, not sure whom to address. Yazo waved but Cesar just nodded and began hammering again.

In a few minutes, the squeaking sound of a ladder came from the back of the house.

“You looking for a job too?” said Cesar, walking toward them.

“Um, not a job. Someone who could talk to me about, um.” She felt so awkward

interrupting his work. He looked about twenty, the age of one of her cousins. He was wearing a tank top and jeans, and hard leather boots. His very strong biceps were a tiny bit sweaty. He was very cute, in a too-old-for-her sort of way.

She tried not to stare.

He stood there, swinging the hammer at nothing, the tattoo on his left bicep moving as he did. He cocked his head at her. “Construction? Remodel?” He smiled a little. A nice, white smile surrounded by a generous, dark-stubbled face.

“The war.”

She might have slapped him, his face changed so much.

“No can do,” he said softly. “I’m done with that.” He spun around and heaved a stack of broken wood into the dumpster.

Kelsey looked for Jake, who had disappeared behind the house and was conversing with Yazo, still on the roof. Jake

had his jacket over his shoulder. She walked over.

“Yazo, right?” she said. “Did you go to Vietnam?”

“I was enlisted, but heck, no. I was stationed in Beeville, Texas, and then on Guam. Most boring way to save my own life. And this,” he said, tapping his right temple. “Not like Cesar.”

She thought quickly. Her assignment was to find a vet, not necessarily one who’d been in combat. “Well, would you talk to me anyway? I have to do this thing for school. It’s silly, I know. But still—”

“He’s really the one to talk to. He saw it all. But good luck on that. He’s been like a locked bank vault since he got back. I’ve known him forever, but I don’t know him now.”

“Can you ask him to talk to me?”

Yazo threw back his head and laughed.

Jake frowned. “Come on. I think this isn’t

gonna work out.”

“What happened there?” asked Kelsey as they walked away. “I wasn’t going to bite.”

“Kelsey, some day you’ll find out that Dad’s about the only vet in the world that tries to pretend that war isn’t complicated.”

Complicated or not, Kelsey had to have someone for her story, and she only had two days.

That night she straightened the living room, all too aware that the couch was splotted with grease stains—thanks, Jake, for eating popcorn there—and the rug worn down to the woven threads underneath. She wiped out the bathroom with a towel, and then threw it in the hamper, searching for another one. She started to hang the clean one, but thought better of it. She tucked it under the sink. If she put it out now Jake would wreck it. She’d wait until tomorrow, just before the group arrived.

“Mom, I’m having a history group here

tomorrow. Can you bring something from the store? Something nice?" She started wiping the kitchen counter.

"Hmm," Mom said.

"Is that a yes? Are you working tomorrow? Or protesting?"

"Excuse me?"

"I saw you at the courthouse. You made some people on the bus late to work."

"Late to work? Oh, my word. What a tragedy. Tell that to the thousands lying in a jungle right now, their bodies rotting for the wrong cause! They'd love to be late for work. Or late for anything at all. They were not much older than your brother."

"Mom. I know the issues. Please."

"If you knew them in your heart, you wouldn't compare the war with getting to work. You still have a lot to learn, Kelsey. Pay attention. There's a lot happening."

Kelsey finished wiping the counter, flicking the crumbs to the floor on purpose.

“I’ve got homework.”

Her mother took her arm as Kelsey walked by. “You should come to the protest in Golden Gate Park on Saturday. The Moratorium. Thousands of people are joining together. You’ll get a sense of the merits of my point of view. It’s different than you think. You could put that in your school project.”

“Right, Mom. I’ll try to come.” Kelsey twisted away. She was sure the “thousands of people” Mom expected on Saturday was a big fantasy, her mother’s crazy idea of the swelling opposition to the war. Sure there were a few protestors here and there, but the president wouldn’t care about those few voices.

When Kelsey sat down, she knew she didn’t even need to bother interviewing her mother. She’d been hearing her side for months. “A local citizen believes that the war is unjust, and that the majority is neither silent nor in favor of the war, despite what President Nixon says,” she wrote. Then she

paused. Now, why did her mother feel it was unjust? Kelsey couldn't quite remember.

"South Vietnam should fight its own battles," according to one protestor who joined a few dozen (*Was that a good estimate?* she wondered) others for a demonstration on the courthouse steps on a recent fall afternoon. "We've lost many of our young men for a war that doesn't concern us," this local activist went on, waving a sign blaming the president for the deaths.

Kelsey finished the pretend interview. She knew she could do the same thing with the vet, but that felt wrong. She knew the basics of her mother's position from listening to her rant for months. But she wasn't really sure what a vet might say. The ones at the vet hall were not talking, and Cesar looked practically wounded himself when she brought it up.

What was it? They didn't look physically ill, except that man with the cane at the VFW. Why wouldn't they say anything?

CHAPTER FOUR

Going Nowhere Fast



The next day Kelsey rushed off the bus and raced home. There was nothing on the counter from Mom's store.

She jerked open the cupboards. A lone box of saltine crackers stood there. It would have to do.

She spread the crackers on a plate, then cut some cheese slices and arranged them along the perimeter of the plate. She straightened the sofa pillows one more time, positioning one at an angle over the biggest grease stain, and took a big breath.

The phone rang.

She picked it up just as footsteps sounded on the front porch. "Hello?"

"Hi, honey!" said her dad.

The doorbell rang.

"Oh, Dad. I need to talk to you. Can you—?"

She tried to pull the phone toward the door but the cord, stretched taut, wouldn't reach. She covered the receiver. "Come on in!"

"I can't talk long, Kelsey. Where's Mom?"

Banging started on the door.

"She's not home yet. But I need—"

Another ring. Another.

"Honey, tell her my rig is down. I am in Kansas City. I'll try to call later."

"Please deposit one dollar and thirty cents for another three minutes," said the operator.

"Gotta go. I'll call—" There was a click followed by another. Then the dial tone.

Kelsey stood there with the phone pressed to her ear as the knocking got louder. She reluctantly hung up and made for the door.

But the door opened on its own. Her mother, clutching two Green's bags, led the pack, followed by the entire history group. *They must have all come in the same car,* thought Kelsey, glancing outside. Sure enough, outside, a long sedan pulled away from the curb. *Who has a car that huge?*

Kelsey thought. But she knew.

“Welcome, history buffs!” said her mother.
“Please come in our humble abode.”

A few hello’s followed. Julia plopped on the couch, dislodging the pillow. “Oh, is this a wet spot?”

“No, no, it’s fine,” said Kelsey, trying to reposition the pillow, but it flipped backward. Trying to draw attention away from that, she said, “Glad you could all come.”

“We’re just charmed. Aren’t we? Just charmed,” said Bettina. She sat on the edge of Dad’s recliner as if it might clamp down enormous jaws on her behind.

Kelsey started toward the kitchen for the crackers. But she ran into her mother holding a large box that said “donuts.” Mom pushed past her before she could say a word.

You couldn’t really call them donuts. They were mashed, oozing and looked like what would happen if ten cats walked around on top of them.

“Um, what is that?” said Kelsey.

“These are Green’s best donuts. Just a little mushed, but look, this one is almost perfect.” Mom plucked half a donut dripping lemon filling out of the box and offered it to Bettina, who simply stared.

“That looks great,” said Matt, holding out his hand.

Kelsey was flooded with relief. She watched him gulp the donut down, wincing like something in the donut was sour. But he didn’t say anything.

Bettina noticed it. She avoided the coffee table all together, taking out her notebook and placing it primly on her knees.

Kelsey forced herself to look away from the sad plate of Saltines and cheese, and the horrible donuts. *Ugly and spoiled*, she thought.

“Marcy wants to join our group,” said Bettina. “And she’s got twin brothers in the military! So you don’t need to get that

interview at all, Kelsey. In fact, you could join a different group if you wanted. So there are no duplications. I'm just saying."

Julia nodded. Kevin stared hard at his Pee Chee folder. Matt frowned a little, a few crumbs of the donut stuck in the corner of his mouth. Kelsey tried to catch his eye. Then Bettina's pinky shot out. With the lightest flick, she sent the crumb flying. "Thank me later, Matthew."

Oh, gosh, it's Matthew now, thought Kelsey. She felt the ground slip away, like an escalator's first jerk up an incline. "No need for the twins' story," she said. "I have a vet that wants to talk with me. I met him yesterday. He's just working on a big construction project. So I can outline the questions for tomorrow's deadline and then fill in the rest by the next day. I don't want to join a different group."

"Get a clue, Kelsey," said Bettina. "We had a chat on the way over."

“YOU had a chat on the way over,” said Matt. “Kelsey’s part of the group. And I’ll have another donut, Mrs. Whitney.”

I adore you, Matt Locatelli, Kelsey wanted to say.



The meeting went on, led by Bettina. Kevin had made two comics (and Julia said they were SO cute about a thousand times). Matt had to find another star for the sports section. It turned out Joe Namath was in New York getting ready for another game, and not available for the interview.

I see HE doesn't get blamed, thought Kelsey, but she kept her mouth shut. She didn't want to make him feel bad when he'd helped her.

The meeting wound down, with Kelsey promising she'd have the interview by the end of the week. The long car reappeared, the

whole group piled inside, and it sped away.

After the group left, Kelsey ran eight blocks to the construction site, holding on to slim hope that Jake was there. But when she rounded the corner the place looked empty. The dumpster was jammed with old wood. She opened the gate and made her way through the litter of nails, wood pieces, bits of metal and some piping. It was so quiet it felt somehow wrong. Just as she turned to go, she heard a voice in the back.

She rounded the corner to find Cesar sitting on a sawhorse with his back to her. He was talking to somebody, but there was no sign of Jake or Yazo. Kelsey inched forward, trying not to crunch on the broken glass littering the place. She couldn't get close enough to hear the words, but his voice was low and flat.

She got the distinct feeling she was eavesdropping. "Um, hello?"

Cesar snapped his head around. For a moment, he looked at her like he'd never met her, his eyes narrowed and confused. Then he

relaxed and a flicker of that beautiful smile appeared.

“You. Your brother isn’t here. He went with Yazo to get some more nails.” He blinked a couple of times, and his eyes returned to normal.

“Can’t you use all those?” Kelsey said, walking to him and pointing to the nails strewn about.

“Can’t use a nail twice, kid. They get bent.”

“Bent,” Kelsey said, wishing she was clever and could find a way to segue to her questions about the war. Bettina would know. *She would have already smoothed his hair down or something*, Kelsey thought. She would have this guy talking a mile a minute.

Kelsey took a breath. “I know you don’t want to talk about Vietnam. But could I ask you a different question?”

“Fire away,” said Cesar. “But rules is rules.”

“Do you think those guys on TV should

be tearing up their draft cards?”

“I think they’re all jerks, but they’re smart jerks. If you can avoid getting drafted, you should. Just don’t be so all public relations about it.”

“How should they do it?” she asked. She had no idea where this was going, but at least he was talking.

“I enlisted. If I had waited for the draft, I might not have gotten to choose which line of service. So sitting around waiting to get drafted is just crazy. If you want to serve, enlist. Better yet, get the heck away!”

“So you’re not in favor of the war?” She couldn’t help it.

“It’s not that simple,” he said. And stopped. “Hey. You push too much. I said I wouldn’t talk about it. You can’t know what it’s like. My buddies on the ship—” He turned away.

“I’m sorry! No, I didn’t mean to ask. I just wanted to know what you thought, like in a

legal sense.”

But she had lost him. He went to the ladder and climbed up, and soon the place was filled with the sound of hammering so loud that she was sure he didn't even hear her say goodbye.

I am such a jerk, she thought.

She went home, empty handed again.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Price of Protest



She tried to write up the brief things Cesar had said at the beginning of an interview, but everything she wrote sounded stupid. “A local veteran thinks protestors shouldn’t tear up draft cards,” she wrote. She crumpled the paper and threw it away.

She heard the door open and close. “Jake?” she called.

“It’s me,” her mom answered.

Kelsey went out and gasped.

Her mother’s shirt was dirty and torn, and was that blood smeared across her arm? Her pants were ripped at the knee. She carried pieces of a stick and some bits of poster board.

“What happened to you?”

Mom shook her head, leaning on the kitchen counter. She was winded. “They act

like I'm an anarchist or something. I'm just trying to save lives here."

"Who? What?"

"A couple of us went back to the courthouse. We got in a tussle with some guys in fatigues. Camo stuff, you know?"

Kelsey nodded. Some of the vets had worn those kind of pants, like they were still crawling around in the jungle and had to stay hidden.

"They took my sign and broke it. Then tore up the poster. I couldn't take it. That poster cost me two dollars! I have to get more cardboard now, and repaint it."

"So you—?"

"Maybe I tried to smack him. Or maybe he tried to smack me. Anyway, down we went in all our glory. I don't think he tore his pants, though."

"Mom, I can't believe you did this. What would Dad say?"

"Dad is in his own world, Kelsey. He just wants to stay there, happy about the good

he thinks he did. But we all know the war took its toll on him, too. I can't be part of that happening to others. I have to fight this."

"Why does it matter so much to you?"

"This war is just plain wrong. We acted like we could just win it in a snap. Nobody's paying attention to the tens of thousands of deaths."

Kelsey took the sign. "Maybe you could tape this?"

Her mother shook her head, barely taking a breath before starting up again. "The Tet Offensive should have told us how hard the North will fight. They aren't a bunch of primitive jungle rats, easy to kill. They hide and plant bombs and our boys...our boys..."

Mom put her face in her hands.

"Kelsey, try to imagine that it was Jake out there. Does that help you understand?"

"Maybe it will be me, Mom," said a voice from the carport. "But it's my choice."

Jake came in, dirty from the construction job.

“You wouldn’t!” said Mom. “No!”

“I might, if I feel it’s going to speed things up. They need strong people to win this thing. And then get out.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this. I raised you to be compassionate, and smart. What’s gotten into you?”

“Oh, Mom, you don’t get it! Some of us want the world to be safe for democracy. We want freedom for all. Like you say you do.”

Mom stood there and looked at him.

Kelsey looked too.

Jake’s form filled the doorway. When had he gotten that tall? He’d always been bigger than she, being four years older, but she’d never felt that he was so different from her. Now, his shoulders were wider, and muscular in a way that looked foreign to Kelsey. His mouth was a straight, unhappy line. He crossed his arms and regarded the two of them.

Kelsey backed into her room, her stomach churning. Jake? He’d been the funniest,

nicest big brother. Always joking, helping her with her schoolwork and giving her advice about boys. Lately they'd been able to talk about deeper things: who they liked and why, and the fact that their parents were so different. She used to think of him as her best friend in the whole world. He alone knew the way their family was always pulled tight, a spring ready to snap.

She listened carefully behind the door, but the conversation had stopped. Kelsey did her homework and went to sleep, troubled.



The next day at lunch Kelsey wrote up a list of questions she intended to ask the phantom veteran she couldn't find. She printed neatly, and when it was time to turn them in during history, she handed them to Mr. Cole himself, ignoring Bettina's outstretched hand. *Like I'm going to let her see these*, Kelsey thought.

“I’m still in process, Mr. Cole, but I am hot on the trail of some real personal statements,” she said, smiling sweetly.

“Okay. It looks like you’ve been working, so you have partial credit. But you need to stay on schedule. Your team will lose points if you don’t have it by Monday. So keep at it. These ads look good, Julia.”

Kelsey rolled her eyes. Bettina had sidled up to Matt, giggling and being all cutie pie. Julia and Kevin had their heads together over Kevin’s new comics.

She was the odd duck, the one on the outside. What had she been thinking, joining this group? She glanced across at Deborah’s group. She liked Deborah okay, even though she was really pushy. Deborah wasn’t trying to control everyone all the time, just make them work harder. Her group all had their heads down, like they were in a competition to get the most words written on a page before the bell rang. Which it did, to Kelsey’s relief.

On the way out, Bettina glided by. “If

you don't deliver, you're out. You really get that, right? No faking it. Like those repulsive things your mother tried to call donuts. I want the real thing. Do it, or get out."

Kelsey didn't reply. She just looked at Bettina and shrugged. Behind Bettina, Matt glanced at her and then glanced away.

Even Matt wasn't coming to her rescue today.

She was really alone in this.

After school she stopped by the house to see if Jake was home. He wasn't. Mom had left a note—a nod to the worry they'd had the day before when she didn't come home on time—saying she wasn't going to be home until late. She'd left dinner instructions, but Kelsey ignored them. She didn't have time to make dinner or do anything except the only thing on her mind. She got a grocery bag and put a couple of items in it and took off running down the street.

At the construction site, Jake was holding

a large sheet of wood while Cesar cut it with a table saw. She waited until they were through. Jake hoisted it up and carried it to Yazo, who was waiting on the side of the house. Jake held it while Yazo nailed it in place. Cesar waited while they nailed the whole, large board.

“Can I help?” Kelsey asked Cesar.

He shrugged, not looking at her. But when he lifted the next sheet, he didn’t tell her to stop when she held it like Jake had, guiding it slowly into the saw.

“Have you done this before?” he asked after the third sheet of wood.

Kelsey shook her head. She sensed Jake waiting, and glanced over at him. He gave her the thumbs up. “I just like to learn new things. It’s cool to rebuild a house.”

With the two teams working, they were able to cut enough sheets for Jake and Yazo to complete the whole side.

“That went faster than I thought. I’m going

to get more wood, and we can do around this window,” Yazo said.

Cesar nodded.

Yazo and Jake left in Yazo’s truck.

An older couple walked by. “This house is finally getting fixed up,” the woman said.

“Yes, ma’am. It’ll be nice like yours,” Cesar said.

“We’ve been watching from our window.” The man pointed to a neat little house across the street. “It’s great to see so much progress.” The couple continued on.

“Do you like donuts?” said Kelsey. “I have some. They’re a little crazy looking, but the glazed ones are okay.”

“Love them.” Cesar took one and sat on a sawhorse, gesturing to the other sawhorse for her to sit. “It’ll take a few minutes for Yaz to get back. Might as well have a break.”

“Is he your boss?”

“Naw. We got the job together. From the VFW. They like to keep us busy so we don’t

get too messed up. Not that *he* would be, but it's good to earn money."

"What are you going to do with the money?"

"I want to get my own truck, with tools. So I can do jobs on my own. But a truck like Yazo's will take a long time to save up for. So it's not anytime soon."

"Are you married?"

"Naw. I had a girlfriend when I left, but she moved to Chicago with her aunt. I'm not the writing kind, but I tried a couple of letters. It's just too hard to—too hard to—"

Kelsey waited, a bit of donut in her mouth, not looking at him. She forced it down, reaching into the sack for a soda in a bent can, which she offered him.

"Thanks," he said.

"I want to apologize for trying to make you talk before," Kelsey said. "I wasn't being very nice."

"You're being nice now," said Cesar.

“That counts for something.”

Yeah, but it doesn't get my story written, she thought. But she still held back.

“Could you tell me why you don't want to talk about it? I mean, not the story itself, but why you won't tell it?”

Cesar sat for a long time. A bird whooshed by and sat on a hedge, bobbing its head and puffing its wings every so often. A plane made that long, low sound in the distance, taking off.

Kelsey waited.

Her eye caught a line of ants traveling across a pipe, like the pipe wasn't a huge mountain to them. Just up, over and continue on.

She kept waiting. *Please, please. Say something.*

“Every time I try to talk about it, I feel all wrong. Like the words are too small. I was the reason something really bad happened. And afterward, in my last few months, I was

on a ship again, and I had too much time on my hands. Too much time to think. It's better if you just don't think."

Kelsey nodded. "Navy?"

"Yep. How did you know?"

"My dad's a Korean vet. He's always talking about the branches of service. I can even hum the different official songs for each one."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Here's 'Anchors Aweigh.'" She started to hum, then found herself in the wrong key. She started again, caught up in making it just right.

A choking sound interrupted her.

Cesar's shoulders were shaking.

He kept his head down. He waved at her wildly. "Get out of here. Just go."

She ran, the hum now a dead thing in her throat.

CHAPTER SIX

The Long March



On Saturday morning, Kelsey awoke with her lips dry and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She pulled it away. “Ouch!” she said, her hand on her mouth.

Her head hurt. She was nowhere on her job of getting a vet to talk, despite the questions she’d submitted to Mr. Cole. She would have to throw herself on his mercy, what little he had. He was known for being a tough teacher. At the rate she was going, she’d never get in the honors classes next year. And she could forget about the Fall Festival. Matt was probably not interested, anyway.

The house was strangely quiet. A note written on an envelope told her that her mother had gone to the protest. “Be there for Peace!” her mother had scribbled, followed by a peace

sign. “Everyone makes a difference!”

Right, Kelsey thought. But she was stuck, truly, and she had no other options. She could head over to the little gathering and perhaps find some enthusiastic friend of her mother’s to interview. Activists like that loved to talk. She’d just have to explain to Mr. Cole that things changed. Kelsey avoided thinking about her group. She’d just have to deal with them later.

There was no sign of Jake. *He’s probably at the construction site*, she thought, a hot ball of shame filling her belly, thinking of Cesar’s shaking shoulders.

She walked out and headed toward the mission. About five blocks from the mission square, she heard something—the freeway, perhaps, or a machine’s engine.

No. It was voices. Many, many of them chanting, talking and singing.

As she came into sight of the park adjacent to the mission, she was shocked. It was wall-to-wall people, and they were filing

in twos and threes along 18th Street. She got in line with a group of people in white coats, stethoscopes draped across their shoulders or poking out of pockets. “Doctors Against the War,” proclaimed one sign. “Healers For Peace,” said another. She turned backwards. The doctor group went as far as she could see. There were hundreds of them. She hurried to keep up.

As they moved, Kelsey felt like she was in a river, being rushed along like it or not. Chanting drifted up from behind her. “No More War! No More War!”

As they marched they passed people on the street. Some simply stared. Others raised a peace sign. Others gestured rudely.

But many fell into line with the marchers.

They turned on Steiner and marched until Kelsey saw they’d reached a large park or square where hundreds more people were waiting. A cheer came up, and Kelsey could hear behind her repeated waves of cheering.

The doctors joined another group of doctors against the war. Now Kelsey was with a group of men holding signs that said, “Muni Drivers Against the War.”

“Fight Racism, not the Viet Cong!” said another banner. The carriers held it above their heads for a time. Someone carried a long stick with an American flag waving. Above the flag, a peace symbol was stuck on the spike.

Someone behind her stepped on the back of her shoe and pulled it partly off. “Dang,” Kelsey said, hopping to one side to get out of the moving tide of humanity. She leaned against a stone building to untie and re-lace her shoe. She rested for a moment, watching the marchers go by. The line was endless. There were many groups with banners, posters and wearing shirts proclaiming Catholics for Peace. Then a group wearing fatigues carrying a long banner came by, and the onlookers grew silent. “Vietnam Vets

Against the War,” it said.

Kelsey jumped in behind them.

She followed the group for the rest of the march. They walked for what felt like hours. Kelsey’s legs soon felt rubbery; still, she walked. The road warmed. Personal items littered the route: baby bottles, tiny socks, papers, food wrappers, apple cores, and a broken pair of sunglasses.

She tried to get into conversations with the men and women she walked near, but they were singing something in a call and response. She had to listen a while before she understood.

“War!” shouted one group.

“What is it good for?” called the next.

“Absolutely nothing. Listen to me,” said another group.

“War!” said the first group again.

And the song repeated and repeated until Kelsey joined in without thinking.

They walked through intersections, police officers standing to the side. Once they

reached Geary, they turned left as police officers held back traffic. A few people in cars waved angry fists or shouted rude things but most honked and waved, and showed the peace sign. A group looked down from a window, and when others in the march pointed, Kelsey looked up to see a large German Shepherd watching the parade with an eager expression. At one point the whole group slowed to funnel into a pedestrian bridge, and Kelsey had to fall back. When she got out the other side, she saw she'd lost the Vietnam Vets group. She tried to push her way forward but the marchers had increased to so many across she felt lucky to have a place to swing her arms.

“Lovely, isn’t it?” said a lady carrying a baby. “I can’t believe it. I heard someone say it’s in the thousands, and more waiting at the park.”

“Wow!” said Kelsey. She hurried on, looking for the vet group, but it was slow going. Her feet hurt, and a blister had long

since formed on her heel, making each step a stab of pain.

Now they had turned left and were heading down toward Golden Gate Park. The marchers slowed at the entrance tunnel, about five blocks away. The smell of eucalyptus was everywhere. They went through a tunnel and opened out to the greatest mass of people Kelsey had ever seen in one place.

There weren't hundreds or thousands. This was tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands. It was a mass of humanity as far as she could see, and still more piled into the polo grounds behind her. She quickly felt crowded, with more entering the park behind her. She saw an elderly man wearing suspenders and a bow tie. There were dogs with bandanas tied to their collars. People sat on the grass, leaned on fences and waved banners and signs.

There were police, too. One near her was mounted on a horse, but looked unperturbed.

Kelsey stood on the edge of the crowd on a raised bank, scanning for the Vietnam Vets Against the War. She finally saw what looked like the banner she'd seen before. She moved in that direction and was quickly swallowed by the crowd and disoriented. She needed to get back to higher ground where she would have a better view.

She reversed course and climbed up the bank again. When she found the Vietnam Vet group again she saw a familiar sight: Cesar, with his orange ball cap. Kelsey watched him as he talked with one of the other vets. He was gesturing as the other man stood listening.

From her vantage point, she could see new marchers arriving into the grounds. Library workers against the war. Forty-Niner fans for peace. There was no end to the different groups that funneled through the entrance.

A group in white and red shirts came in to the sound of a drum pounding. A marching band! There were some fifty members, and

each was playing an instrument, but Kelsey couldn't pick out an actual song.

Kelsey moved down from the bank, closer to Cesar. She felt wary, but he was the only familiar face in the crowd. If he knew someone there, well, maybe he'd introduce her.

Kelsey had just made it to Cesar and was about to tap him on the shoulder when something sliced across her arm.

"Hey!" She whipped around.

"Oh. Sorry!" said a boy carrying a French horn.

Kelsey rubbed her arm. It stung but wasn't badly hurt.

"Toward the vets!" said a boy carrying a trumpet. "Play on!"

A cymbal-carrying girl led the way. Crash! The girl clanged the cymbals. Crash! She did it again.

Cesar jerked and jumped backward, bumping into Kelsey, who was knocked to

the ground. Cesar teetered backward, trying to get his balance.

He stepped down directly on Kelsey's leg.

"Ow!" she said.

Cesar fell, twisting away from her so the bulk of his body hit the grass beside her, which, miraculously, people had cleared in that split second.

Her leg crackled with pain.

He lay on one hip.

"I'm sorry," Cesar said. "Oh, dang. It's you, Kelsey!"

"Yeah. Hi." She bit her lip to keep from crying, holding the leg where he'd stepped on it.

"What are you doing here?"

As she started to answer, the band struck up a loud and clattering song, with banging drums and the cymbals clanging away.

Cesar threw himself to his stomach.

Kelsey tried to pull up, but her leg hurt horribly. She sat clutching her leg as people

closed around her like a wall.

The band moved away, the thumping and clanging receding into the distance.

Kelsey wiggled her toes. They worked. Her leg, while throbbing, was not seriously damaged.

Cesar sat up. He shook his head. "This was a bad idea."

"Yeah. Can you help me? I'd like to get out of the middle of things."

He pulled her up. For a moment, she wobbled, but then was able to walk stiffly.

"Let's go over there. It looks quieter." Cesar started toward the edge, where trees and a fence were atop a small hill, near where Kelsey had perched before.

They made their way slowly up the bank and sat and listened to the crowd, chanting, "Draft beer, not boys!" Kelsey's leg pain settled into a deep throb.

"I'm glad it's not too loud. I have a hard time with that," she said.

“Yeah. Me too. I kind of reacted without thinking.”

“Cause of the war?”

“Yep.”

Kelsey swallowed. This was the moment. She could either find a way to get him to trust her, or lose it forever.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Telling the Truth



Kelsey chose her words carefully. “My dad has something like that. He was in Korea. He was part of a transport team for injured guys. He never talks about the bad part of it—he always says he’s glad he served, and he wears his hat with pins on Veteran’s Day. But he cries in his sleep sometimes. He just doesn’t realize it. My mom doesn’t tell him. But I can hear him.”

The silence between them filled with singing from the field. “All we are saying . . . is give peace a chance.”

“My ship blew up. Loud noises make me jumpy.”

Kelsey felt like a sudden beam of light had found a hole in a cloudy sky and now shined down on them. She held in her breath, not wanting to do anything to ruin the moment.

“Scared the crap out of me. So whenever that happens I just react. I’m sorry I jumped on you and hurt your leg.”

Way more of you is hurt than me, thought Kelsey. But she forced a grin. “It’s okay. Maybe I’ll get extra credit for my project. I’ll tell about my trials and tribulations. But I’ve lost those Vets Against the War. I won’t get my story about a vet.”

“You can hear mine,” Cesar said softly. “I think I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me. I feel like an idiot about it. I did it for all the wrong reasons, and I guess I was selfish, too.”

She felt different here, in this mass of people, at once small and meaningful.

She shifted to a more comfortable position. In some ways, Cesar reminded her of Jake. She held onto that thought as she told him about Matt, and wanting to impress him. “I thought it would be so easy. I went to the VFW but they weren’t exactly friendly. Then I thought I’d just get my dad to talk about the

war, but he's gone out of state, and can't call. So I'm stuck. That's why I kept bugging you. But I'm done now. I'm going to change my focus to this protest. Mr. Cole will just have to let me."

Cesar was silent for a long time. He looked around. The crowd was swaying to something but the words were tumbling over each other, unintelligible. He ran his hand across his lips and said, "No, let me talk."

But he didn't. Kelsey waited, watching the crowd below move, as more and more people continued to stream in from the tunnel.

"I've never seen this many people in one place in my life. There must be a hundred thousand, or more."

Kelsey nodded.

"About a year ago, I was stationed in Vietnam on the USS Westchester County, an LST. It's a ship designed to carry troops, weapons, and helicopters. We carried several hundred tons of ammo for the grunts—

Riverines, and a small crew of other soldiers. We were anchored in on the My Tho river, about forty miles upstream.

“I had midwatch duty. I was tired because we’d had a little Halloween party that night, but what the heck. You can always keep yourself awake with cigarettes and walking around the deck. Security was high because we had a lot of ammo, I mean hundreds of tons of it, three pontoon barges loaded with it, along with five helicopters and weapons. We knew we were like a sitting duck in that river, but we were surrounded by five other boats. Circled in like covered wagons, you know? So we thought we were ready. Sometimes you could hear little bangs of grenades dropped in the river to scare off enemy swimmers, but it was mostly Mortars and small arms fire we were prepared for. But not a dang frogman blowing us up from below. He—or they—attached a couple of bombs to the hull.

“It was a little after zero three hundred

hours. The blast knocked me off my feet. When I got up, the smoke was killer. Diesel smoke is terrible—too thick to breathe and makes your mouth taste like oil. Plus, they blew up the wood camel, so there were splinters and chunks of wood flying along with metal like shrapnel. I puked over the side, then the boat started tipping. People were screaming, running, slipping on the deck, which was coated in oil and water. One of my shipmates, Harry Kenny, slipped. I never saw him again.

“I thought the ship was under fire. But it was so hard to see where the damage was. It took awhile to see that the holes were underneath—we were taking on water. It was night, and the place was full of smoke. I tried to head down to the berthing space but it was crushed, and a tangle of personal gear, floating with ammo and twisted chunks of metal and wood. It was horrible. I could see that the bunks had been punched upward

from below. My buddies had been asleep in there.”

He took out his wallet and unfolded a photo with a shaky hand. It showed two rows of men, the front row squatting, the men in the back standing. They were on the deck of a ship: Kelsey could see metal masts and rigging behind them. Most wearing buttoned or blue long sleeved shirts or T-shirts. They looked happy, tanned and boyish, holding bottles and smoking cigarettes. Cesar’s hand shook. “These are some of them. Seventeen of my own shipmates died. Twenty-five in total.”

Cesar pointed to one young man in the middle with a wide smile wearing a white sailor cap. “He was my best friend. David Frye. We were going to go into business together when we got out.”

“I’m sorry. This is really sad. I don’t know what—” Kelsey started to say.

“No, you don’t get it. Yeah, you’re sorry.

Everybody is so darn sorry. But the war is still going on. And if all these people get what they want—” He gestured at the crowd in front of them— “And we just walk away, does that mean they died for NO REASON AT ALL? What does it mean? I think the war might be wrong, but if we stop...if we stop and don’t keep trying to win, then it’s just thousands of people who went and died far away from home. That’s what I was trying to talk to those Vets Against the War about.”

Kelsey sat still. Everything seemed to weigh more, like gravity had suddenly increased. She looked out at the crowd. For the first time she saw it as one giant being. The young people, the old ones, the animals and the babies all blended in to a single, enormous living thing.

A group leaning on the fence nearby started singing. “How many years must the cannonballs fly before they’re forever banned?”

She hummed along. Cesar looked at her. He silently raised a fist. Others nearby raised hands in the peace sign. Kelsey did, too. Soon as far as Kelsey could see, people were singing and raising their arms in the peace sign.

Cesar's fist stayed.



The sun had begun to move down toward the treetops when the crowd started to thin. In the time Kesley had been there, she'd not been able to find anyone else she recognized. Her mother must have been up at the front, or somewhere else important. People ebbed away a few at a time, like a spider web pulled apart in the wind.

Now Kelsey wasn't sure how to get home. She'd been so swept up in the march she hadn't paid attention to the route. Besides, it had taken hours to walk here from the mission

where she'd started. There was no way her sore leg, which throbbed with renewed pain, could go for hours.

"Do you know the way to a bus?" she asked Cesar.

"Yeah. Come on. Let's cut through here and go around the end of the field."

They took a curving road that Kelsey remembered from a Fourth of July festival she'd attended with her family. Finally, they came out to Lincoln Way, a big, busy street. They joined a stream of people crossing the street, then continued on in a direction that Kelsey sensed, from the position of the sun, was right. They walked past houses, shops, apartment buildings, and bums on the street until she couldn't walk another step. They rested against a pink concrete wall for a time. At first, each bus stop was jammed with people waiting. Finally, after they'd walked for what seemed like hours, they came to a bus stop with only four people waiting.

"I want to get this one—I think it connects

to my line,” she said.

He nodded. When the bus came, he helped her up the stairs.

“Cesar, can I ask something?” She scooted into one of the few empty seats.

“Shoot.”

“Have you ever talked with Jake about Vietnam? I’m worried about him. I mean, he hasn’t said it right out yet, but I’m just afraid about what he’s going to do. He wants to go have an adventure, and I think he’s planning on enlisting. If something happened to him...”

“He’s been asking questions,” Cesar said, moving his legs for a woman pushing a stroller. “I haven’t told him much, just that it’s not what they say when you go in to the recruiting office.”

“Will you talk to him? Could you tell him the truth?”

He nodded. “But Kelsey, he’ll find his own way in this. He has to.”

She nodded. She thought of Jake lifting

those silly milk cartons filled with cement. She lowered the window part way and leaned her forehead against the glass. In the distance a siren began, rising above the cars and buses and the rumble of cable cars.

The street stretched ahead of her, steep and impossibly long, and still, she was far from home. She had to find her own way, too.

When she got to her stop, she pulled the chain. Cesar got up and slapped her on the back. “Keep up the good work, Kelsey.”

“You, too. Thanks for everything.”

No one was home. She ate a bowl of cereal and lay on her bed, too tired to get into pajamas. She hardly heard her mother return well after dark, and she never did hear Jake, who came in even later. Her dreams were of cracked ship decks, smoke, and men screaming.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Friendship



On Monday, Kelsey held out her paper to her history group. “Here’s the interview. It’s a first person account of the attack on the USS Westchester County on November first, last year. But it’s not going in the paper. I’ll turn it in to Mr. Cole, but we’re not publishing it.”

“So it was bait and switch all along, wasn’t it, Kelsey? Get in the best group, sabotage it, and laugh at the wreckage? Well guess what? We don’t need your interview. We’ve already got what we need, don’t we, Matt?”

Matt shrugged. “I guess. Whatever. Just calm down and move on.”

“I will not calm down,” said Bettina. “You are not the boss! You’re not going to tell me, the manager of this group, how to behave. Kelsey has tried to ruin us and I’m not standing for it.”

“I actually didn’t try to ruin anybody, Bettina,” said Kelsey. “Stop the drama queen stuff. Here’s the interview for the paper. It’s about the protest—you know, national news and all? Between 100,000 and 300,000 protestors? Well, I was there, and it makes a great story. I am just not going to share my vet’s story. It’s his.”

“What’s that mean?” said Julia, but Mr. Cole interrupted before Kelsey could continue.

“Everyone take your seats, please. I have an announcement to make,” said Mr. Cole.

Amid grumbling and squeaking of chairs, everyone eventually settled down.

“We are going to shift some of the expectations of the current events unit. I’ve been listening in on your groups and I hear good discussion, vigorous debate and a good political understanding of what the issues of today are. So that’s what I wanted. But Kelsey has come up with a great idea, and we’re going to do it as a class.” Mr. Cole

went on to explain.

Kelsey didn't bother to look over at Bettina. She could feel her glare, aimed and deadly. But that didn't matter anymore.

Two days later, Kelsey sat on the stage of the school auditorium. On one side sat her mother. On the other sat Cesar. He wore a blue shirt and dungarees. Three other speakers sat on her mother's other side.

Kelsey went to the microphone. "Today, we will hear from multiple people who care about this country, and care about the war. This is not a political presentation. It's a personal one. It's really about how important each person is." She paused, then went on, "I'd like to start by introducing my mother, Jane."

Her mother went to the microphone. "I'm Jane Whitney and I'm an anti-war organizer. I've been to dozens of protests and arrested three times. It can get ugly. I've been injured and my property stolen and broken. But I haven't stopped."

“I’m here to tell you not to stop, either. Put yourself into your passion, because everyone can make a difference. If you believe in something, follow it. Learn everything you can, and stand up for what you think is right. But never stop listening for new information. I’ve just met someone who has helped me understand the war in a new way. Listen closely to him. His name is Cesar Cruz.”

Cesar made his way to the front. “Hey.” He stood looking at the crowd, scanning the back of the room.

It was quiet save the occasional scrape of chair legs on linoleum. Kelsey was thankful there weren’t any loud noises. She kept her eyes on Cesar until motion at the back caught her attention.

A door had opened in the back. Jake and Yazo slipped in and stood, leaning against the back wall.

“I was honorably discharged from the Navy a few months ago. I was stationed on a ship in a river in Vietnam. I am not going to

tell you war stories. You can hear those from someone else. I don't know what I believe about this war. But I know what I believe about my friend and fellow sailor, David Frye. We all called him 'Boats' because he was a Boatswain's Mate. Here is his photo."

Kelsey pulled a poster from behind her seat and stood up.

"Boats was funny. He was hard working. He cheated at cards and didn't like the taste of coffee so he always drank milk. We made fun of him for that. He talked in his sleep. In the middle of the night he would tell the other guys in the berthing space crazy stuff to do. He'd wake us up yelling orders in his sleep.

'Heave around!

Turn to!'

We'd have to sock him to get him to stop giving us those orders. Then he'd be mad at us for socking him."

The audience laughed.

"Friends are what make military service okay. Because one of the strange things

about being on a ship is that it can be really, really boring. You have to do these watches, where you walk around the deck and make sure nothing's happening that shouldn't. You stand around a lot. You try not to fall asleep. You're really tired. So on your watch you might not pay the same amount of attention you should. And so some swimmers—we called them frogmen—come underwater and attach explosives to the bottom of your ship, and they blow ten-foot wide holes in the hull of the ship, and twenty-five people die. One of them is your best friend. Because you didn't see something.”

He stopped. The audience was totally silent. He moistened his lips.

“So pay attention. Look at what matters. Look at the details and also at the big picture. Put yourself in the right place, and do the right thing. Fight for what's right, like Jane here, but also, fight against doing the wrong thing. I believe that Boats—David—would stand with me now, telling you to think

carefully, and be smart. But he's not here, so I am telling you for him."

There was a long silence. Then, from the back, Yazo and Jake began loud, slow clapping.

Soon it was a roar in the auditorium.

Kelsey watched Cesar for signs that it was too loud, too overwhelming, too much.

But Cesar didn't move. He stood, gripping the podium and listened to the sound of applause.



That night Jake came home late. He strode in, breathless, after Kelsey and Mom had finished dinner and were cleaning up.

"Hungry?" asked Mom, holding up a bowl of pasta.

Jake waved it away. "I talked to a recruiter."

The two at the table stared.

"I'm not doing it right now, Mom. I'm

just thinking, getting information. I don't want to get drafted, I know that. So either I'll go to school or I'll enlist so I can choose the branch of service. But I am going in eyes open, okay?"

Mom nodded.

Kelsey asked, "Did you talk with Cesar?"

"Yeah, I walked home with him. He told me more. He's doing okay all of a sudden. Yazo says it's the first time he heard the story of what happened to his buddy David. Cesar wouldn't say anything for all these months."

Kelsey raised her eyebrows.

"Yep, you did it, girl. You broke the log jam."

"How exactly did all this happen?" asked Mom.

"It's a long story," started Kelsey. "Most of it isn't mine. I sort of had to figure that out."

The phone rang. It was Dad, calling to tell them his rig was fixed and he'd be home in a week. They each got to talk with him for

a minute. “What did you have to ask me, Kelsey?” he said.

“Oh, Dad. Never mind. I got it done. Just drive, and come home.” She passed the phone to Jake, and went back to cleaning up the kitchen.

After Jake was done, the phone rang again. He answered, and then called Kelsey over with a grin.

“Hello?” she said.

“Hi, Kelsey, it’s Matt Locatelli.”

“Oh! Hi. What’s happening with you?”

“I just wanted to say that it was cool today. That guy, Cesar, was great. And I didn’t know your mom was a protestor. My sister is, too. You can’t believe how many signs are in our backyard.”

“Wow,” said Kelsey. “I had no idea.”

“Um, anyway, are you going to the Fall Festival this weekend?”

“Um, I forgot all about it. I guess I might go.” The festival seemed so silly now, like something a child would do.

“Well, I have to work at the cake walk. My mom always volunteers me. I guess she thinks since it has to do with food, I’ll do it. Which I will. But you don’t actually get cake for free, I mean unless you win it. By standing on the right numbers.” He was chattering.

He’s nervous, thought Kelsey. The thought amazed her.

“I know what a cake walk is. But do they take donuts? Like, smashed, horrible ones?”

He was silent a moment. Then he started laughing.

“Thank you for eating that donut, Matt. Or should I call you Matthew?” She couldn’t resist.

“No, please. It’s bad enough that Bettina does that. I really hate it. I keep thinking someone’s talking about my uncle, the one I was named after. But who can tell Bettina what to do?”

“Me,” Kelsey wanted to say more, but didn’t. None of that seemed to matter anymore.

“I’ll meet you at the cake walk, Matt. But I also want to challenge you to a game of darts.”

“It’s a deal,” said Matt.

Kelsey hung up. She gave a thumbs up to Jake, who grinned and gave it back.

The Vietnam Era

Though the Vietnam War was never officially declared, from 1959 to 1974 the American government supported it and nearly 60,000 Americans and millions of Vietnamese died fighting in it. Communist North Vietnamese wanted to conquer South Vietnam, a democratic country. The United States got involved fearing the spread of communism.

In January 1968, the Tet Offensive showed the force of the North Vietnamese fighters. Americans grew afraid the war would never end. Anti-war protest groups sprang up, some from college campuses. Rallies and marches started. Some included publicly burning draft cards.

While returning vets from other wars were greeted as heroes, some honorably discharged vets from the Vietnam War were spurned or abused upon return. Many vets refused to speak of the war or acknowledge their part in it.

On November 1, 1968, the largest loss of life in a single Navy incident during the Vietnam War occurred when the *USS Westchester County* was damaged by two bombs attached to the hull. Twenty-five service personnel died and twenty-seven were wounded. Engineman 3rd Class Harry J. Kenny was a real sailor whose body was the only one not recovered.

President Nixon used the phrase “Silent Majority” in a speech on November 3, 1969 to admonish the American public to stop undermining the war efforts. In response, a

worldwide “Moratorium On the War” was staged for November 15, 1969. London, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco had the largest marches, with estimates of up to 300,000 marchers in San Francisco.

The United States withdrew all troops by March of 1974.

Q & A

with Linden McNeilly



1. How did you research this era?

I found historical sites, old photos and personal accounts in books and on the Internet. These showed me how people dressed, and what the setting looked like.

2. Is Kelsey someone you know?

No, she is made up of parts of various people I know, and partly an invention. I tried to make her a determined person.

3. What makes this era interesting?

Everything! There was so much talk, protest, and involvement of ordinary people trying to make a difference. It was an important time in this country.

About the Author

Linden K. McNeilly is a writer who taught public school for many years. She loves to make handmade books and write stories. She co-wrote *Map Art Lab*, a book about maps and art. She lives in the redwoods in the Central Coast of California with her family. Find her at www.lindenmcneilly.com.

Websites to Visit

www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/

[vietnam-war-protests](http://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war-protests)

<https://kidskonnnect.com/history/>

[vietnam-war/](https://kidskonnnect.com/history/vietnam-war/)

[www.historynet.com/uss-westchester-county-
attacked-during-the-vietnam-war.htm](http://www.historynet.com/uss-westchester-county-attacked-during-the-vietnam-war.htm)

Writing Prompt

Write the conversation between Cesar and Jake in which Cesar shares the realities of the war and Jake discusses his desire to enlist in the military. Research the points of view each one has, and what has influenced that point of view. Think about both sides and their unique perspectives, and what they would say to each other.



PEACE
NOT
WAR

WAR NEVER REALLY ENDS FOR THOSE WHO'VE LIVED IT.

It's 1969, and America is in the middle of an unpopular war. Cesar Cruz has just returned from Vietnam and wants to disappear into real life. Fourteen-year-old Kelsey's family is at a boiling point. Her older brother is approaching draft age, and her mom is leading anti-war protests in San Francisco—angering her father, a proud Korean War vet. At school, things are just as crazy. Kelsey's history group must ace the big project, but her archrival is working hard to see Kelsey crash and burn. When Kelsey sets out to find a recent vet to interview for the project, her life suddenly intersects with Cesar's. What she learns could change everything she believes in.

Includes historical background information, websites to visit, author interview, and extended online home/classroom/maker space activities.

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