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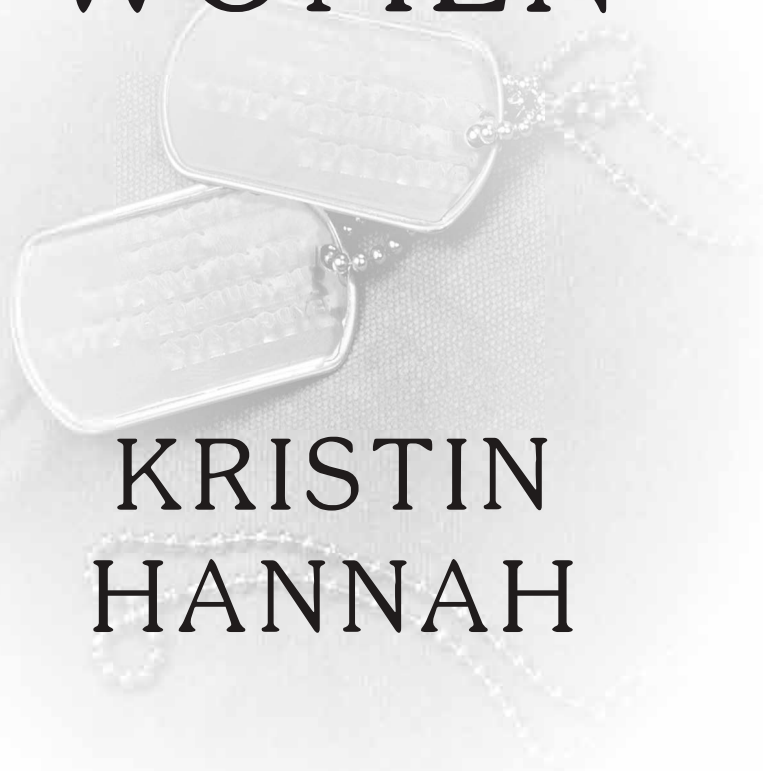
KRISTIN
HANNAH

THE
WOMEN

A Novel



THE WOMEN



KRISTIN
HANNAH



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This novel is dedicated to the courageous women who served in Vietnam. These women, most of them nurses and many of them raised on proudly told family stories of World War II heroism, heeded their country's call to arms and went to war. In too many instances, they came home to a country that didn't care about their service and a world that didn't want to hear about their experiences; their postwar struggles and their stories were too often forgotten or marginalized. I am proud to have this opportunity to shine a light on their strength, resilience, and grit.

And to all veterans and POW/MIA and their families, who have sacrificed so much.

And finally, to the medical personnel who fought the pandemic and gave so much of themselves to help others.

Thank you.

PART ONE

*This war has ... stretched the generation gap so wide that
it threatens to pull the country apart.*

—FRANK CHURCH

One

CORONADO ISLAND, CALIFORNIA
MAY 1966

The walled and gated McGrath estate was a world unto itself, protected and private. On this twilit evening, the Tudor-style home's mullioned windows glowed jewel-like amid the lush, landscaped grounds. Palm fronds swayed overhead; candles floated on the surface of the pool and golden lanterns hung from the branches of a large California live oak. Black-clad servers moved among the well-dressed crowd, carrying silver trays full of champagne, while a jazz trio played softly in the corner.

Twenty-year-old Frances Grace McGrath knew what was expected of her tonight. She was to be the very portrait of a well-bred young lady, smiling and serene; any untoward emotions were to be contained and concealed, borne in silence. The lessons Frankie had been taught at home and at church and at St. Bernadette's Academy for Girls had instilled in her a rigorous sense of propriety. The unrest going on across the country these days, erupting on city streets and college campuses, was a distant and alien world to her, as incomprehensible as the conflict in faraway Vietnam.

She circulated among the guests, sipping an ice-cold Coca-Cola, trying to smile, stopping now and then to make small talk with her parents' friends, hoping her worry didn't show. All the while, her gaze searched the crowd for her brother, who was late to his own party.

Frankie idolized her older brother, Finley. They'd always been inseparable, a pair of black-haired, blue-eyed kids, less than two years apart in age, who'd spent the long California summers unsupervised by adults,

riding their bikes from one end of sleepy Coronado Island to the other, rarely coming home before nightfall.

But now he was going where she couldn't follow.

The roar of a car engine disturbed the quiet party; car horns honked loudly, in succession.

Frankie saw how her mother flinched at the noise. Bette McGrath hated anything showy or vulgar, and she certainly didn't believe in announcing one's presence by honking a horn.

Moments later, Finley banged through the back gate, his handsome face flushed, a lock of curly black hair fallen across his forehead. His best friend, Rye Walsh, had an arm around him, but neither looked too steady on his feet. They laughed drunkenly, held each other up, as more of their friends stumbled into the party behind them.

Dressed impeccably in a black sheath, with her hair in a regal updo, Mom moved toward the group of laughing young men and women. She wore the pearls her grandmother had bequeathed her, a subtle reminder that Bette McGrath had once been Bette Alexander, of the Newport Beach Alexanders. "Boys," she said in her modulated charm-school voice. "How nice that you are finally here."

Finley stumbled away from Rye, tried to straighten.

Dad motioned to the band and the music stopped. Suddenly the sounds of Coronado Island on a late spring night—the throaty purr of the ocean, the whisper of the palm fronds overhead, a dog barking down the street or on the beach—took over. Dad strode forward in his custom-made black suit, crisp white shirt, and black tie, holding a cigarette in one hand and a Manhattan in his other. With his close-cropped black hair and square jaw, he looked a little like an ex-boxer who'd hit the big time and learned how to dress well, which wasn't too far off. Even among this handsome, well-dressed crowd, he and Mom stood out, radiated success. She was old money and had always been at the top of the social ladder; he had climbed his way up to stand confidently beside her.

"Friends, family, recent academy graduates," Dad said in his booming voice. When Frankie was young, he'd still had a hint of an Irish accent, which he'd worked hard to eliminate. He often touted his own immigrant mythology, a story of bootstrapping and hard work. He rarely mentioned the good fortune and opportunity that had come with marrying the boss's

daughter, but everyone knew. They also knew that after the death of Mom's parents, Dad had more than tripled their wealth with his zeal for developing California real estate.

He put an arm around his slender wife, drew her as close as she would allow in public. "We are grateful that you have come to help us say bon voyage to our son, Finley." Dad smiled. "No more bailing him out of the Coronado police station at two A.M. after some ridiculous drag race."

There was a smattering of laughter. Everyone at this party knew the circuitous track Finley had taken to adulthood. From earliest memory, he had been a golden boy, a wild child who could make the hardest heart soften. People laughed at his jokes; girls followed him everywhere. Everyone loved Finley, but most agreed that he was a handful. He had been held back in fourth grade, more for constant mischievousness than anything else. He was sometimes disrespectful in church, and he liked the kind of girl who wore short skirts and carried cigarettes in her purse.

When the laughter ended, Dad went on: "A toast to Finley and his grand adventure. We are proud of you, son!"

Servers appeared with bottles of Dom Pérignon and poured more champagne; the tinkling sound of glass on glass filled the air. Guests surrounded Finley; men clapped him on the back in congratulations. Young women pressed forward, vying for his attention.

Dad motioned to the band, and music started up again.

Feeling left out, Frankie headed into the house, past the large kitchen, where the caterers were busily putting canapés on trays.

She ducked into her father's office. It had been her favorite place as a child. Big tufted leather chairs, footstools, two walls of books, a massive desk. She flicked on the light. The room smelled of old leather and cigars, with a hint of expensive aftershave. Neatly organized stacks of building permits and architectural plans lay atop the desk.

One entire wall of the office was devoted to their family history. Framed photographs Mom had inherited from her parents and even a few Dad had brought with him from Ireland. There was a photo of Great-Grandfather McGrath, in his soldier's uniform, saluting the camera. Alongside that photograph was a framed war medal that her Grandpa Francis had been awarded in the First World War. The photograph of her parents' wedding was positioned between her grandfather Alexander's framed Purple Heart

and a newspaper clipping with a photo of the ship he'd served on coming into harbor at the end of the war. There were no photographs of her father in uniform. To his great shame, he had been labeled 4-F and disqualified for military service. It was something he lamented in private, only to family, and only when he'd been drinking. After the war, he'd convinced Grandpa Alexander to begin building affordable housing in San Diego for returning veterans. Dad called it his contribution to the war effort, and it had been spectacularly successful. In conversation, he was always so "military-proud" that, in time, everyone on Coronado seemed to forget he hadn't served. There were no photographs of his children, not yet. Her father believed that one had to earn their way onto this wall.

Frankie heard the door open quietly behind her, and someone said, "Oh. I'm sorry. I don't mean to intrude."

She turned and saw Rye Walsh standing in the doorway. He held a cocktail in one hand and a pack of Old Gold cigarettes in the other. No doubt he'd been looking for a quiet place to smoke.

"I'm hiding from the party," she said. "I don't feel much like celebrating, it seems."

He left the door open behind him. "I was doing the same thing, I guess. You probably don't remember me—"

"Joseph Ryerson Walsh; goes by Rye. Like the whiskey," Frankie said, trying to smile. It was how he'd introduced himself to her last summer. "Why are you hiding out? You and Fin are thick as thieves. You both love a good party."

As he neared, her heart did a queer little stutter. He'd had that effect on her from their first meeting, but they'd never really spoken. She didn't know what to say to him now, when she felt a little bereft. Lonely.

"I'm going to miss him," he said quietly.

She felt the sting of tears and turned quickly away, faced the wall of memorabilia; he moved in beside her. They stared up at the family photos and mementos. Men in uniforms, women in wedding dresses, medals for valor and injury, a triangle-folded and framed American flag that had been given to her paternal grandmother.

"How come there are no pictures of women up here, except for the wedding pictures?" Rye asked.

“It’s a heroes’ wall. To honor the sacrifices our family has made in service of the country.”

He lit a cigarette. “Women can be heroes.”

Frankie laughed.

“What’s funny about that?”

She turned to him, wiped the tears from her eyes. “I ... well ... you don’t mean...”

“Yeah,” he said, looking down at her. She couldn’t remember a man ever looking at her in such a way, so intensely. It made her catch her breath. “I mean it, Frankie. It’s 1966. The whole world is changing.”

★ ★ ★

Hours later, when the guests had begun to make their polite exits, Frankie found herself still thinking about Rye, and what he’d said.

Women can be heroes.

No one had ever said such a thing to her. Not her teachers at St. Bernadette’s, not her parents. Not even Finley. Why had it never occurred to Frankie that a girl, a woman, could have a place on her father’s office wall for doing something heroic or important, that a woman could invent something or discover something or be a nurse on the battlefield, could literally save lives?

The idea of it was like an earthquake, an upending of her sheltered view of the world, of herself. She’d been told for years, by the nuns, by her teachers, by her mother, that nursing was an excellent profession for a woman.

Teacher. Nurse. Secretary. These were acceptable futures for a girl like her. Only last week her mother had listened to Frankie talk about her struggles in upper-level biology and said gently, *Who cares about frogs, Frances? You’re only going to be a nurse until you get married. And by the way, it’s time you start thinking about that. Quit rushing through your classes and slow down. Who cares if you graduate early? You need to date more.* Frankie had been taught to believe that her job was to be a good housewife, to raise well-mannered children and keep a lovely home. In her Catholic high school, they’d spent days learning how to iron buttonholes to perfection, how to precisely fold a napkin, how to set an elegant table. At

the San Diego College for Women, there wasn't much rebellion among her classmates and friends. Girls laughed about working for their MRS degree. Even her own choice of nursing as a degree hadn't required much introspection; all she'd really focused on was getting good grades and making her parents proud.

As the musicians packed up their instruments and the waiters began clearing away the empty glasses, Frankie flipped off her sandals and left the yard and wandered across empty Ocean Boulevard, the wide, paved street that separated her parents' house from the beach.

The golden sand of Coronado Beach stretched out in front of her. Off to the left was the famous Hotel del Coronado and to the right was the large Naval Air Station North Island, which had recently been recognized as the Birthplace of Naval Aviation.

A cool night breeze plucked at her bouffant chin-length bob, but it was no match for the layer of Aqua Net that kept every strand in place.

She sat down in the cool sand, looped her arms around her bent knees, and stared out at the waves. A full moon hung overhead. Not far away, a beach bonfire glowed orange; the smell of smoke drifted on the night air.

How did a woman go about opening up her world? How did one begin a journey when no invitation had been issued? It was easy for Finley; the path had been laid out for him. He was to do what all the McGrath and Alexander men did: serve his country with honor and then take over the family real estate business. No one had ever suggested any future for Frankie beyond marriage and motherhood.

She heard laughter behind her, the sound of running feet. A young blond woman took off her shoes at the water's edge and splashed into the surf. Rye followed her, laughing, not even bothering to take off his shoes. Someone sang "Walk Like a Man" off-key.

Finley plopped down beside Frankie, fell drunkenly into her. "Where have you been all night, doll? I missed you."

"Hey, Fin," she said quietly. Leaning into him, she remembered their lives on this beach; as children, they'd built elaborate sandcastles and bought Creamsicles from the jangling ice-cream truck that drove up and down Ocean Boulevard in the summer. They'd spent long hours on their surfboards, feet dangling over the sides, talking beneath the hot sun as they waited for the right wave, sharing their deepest secrets.

Together, always. Best friends.

She knew what he needed from her now; she should tell Fin she was proud of him and send him off with a smile, but she couldn't do it. They'd never lied to each other. It didn't seem like the time to start. "Fin, are you sure you should go to Vietnam?"

"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Frankie sighed. She and Finley had idolized President Kennedy. His words meant something to them, so how could she argue? "I know, but—"

"It isn't dangerous, Frankie. Trust me. I'm a Naval Academy graduate, an officer with a cushy assignment on a ship. I'll be back in no time. You'll hardly have time to miss me."

Everyone said the same thing: Communism was an evil that had to be stopped; these were the Cold War years. Dangerous times. If a great man like President Kennedy could be shot in broad daylight by a Red in Dallas, how could any American feel safe? Everyone agreed that communism couldn't be allowed to flourish in Asia, and Vietnam was the place to stop it.

The nightly news showed smiling soldiers marching in packs through the Vietnamese jungle and giving newsmen the thumbs-up. No bloodshed.

Finley put an arm around her.

"I'll miss you, Peanut," he said. She heard the catch in his voice and knew he was scared to go.

Had he been hiding it from her all along, or hiding it from himself?

And there it was, the fear and worry she'd been trying to suppress all night, to ignore. Suddenly it was too big to bear. No looking away now.

Her brother was going to war.

Two

For the next six months, Frankie wrote to her brother every Sunday after church. In return, she received funny letters about his life on board the ship and the antics of his fellow sailors. He sent postcard pictures of lush green jungles and aqua seas and beaches with sand the color of salt. He told her about parties at the O Club and rooftop bars in Saigon and celebrities who came to entertain the troops.

In his absence, Frankie increased her course load and graduated early, with honors. As a newly registered nurse, she landed her first-ever job, working the night shift at a small hospital in nearby San Diego. She had recently begun to think about moving out of her parents' home and getting an apartment of her own, a dream she'd shared with Finley in a letter only last week. *Think of it, Fin. Us living in a little place near the beach. Maybe in Santa Monica. What fun we could have ...*

Now, on this cool night in the last week of November, the corridors of the hospital were quiet. Dressed in her starched white uniform, with a nurse cap pinned on her sprayed, bouffant bob, Frankie walked behind the night charge nurse, who led the way into a private room devoid of flowers or visitors, where a young woman lay sleeping. Frankie was being told—yet again—how to do her job.

“High school girl from St. Anne’s,” the night charge nurse said, then mouthed, *Baby*, as if the word itself were a sin. Frankie knew that St. Anne’s was the local home for unwed mothers, but it was a thing no one

ever talked about: the girls who left school suddenly and came back months later, quieter and lonely looking.

“Her IV is low. I could—”

“For goodness’ sake, Miss McGrath, you know you’re not ready for that. How long have you been here? A week?”

“Two, ma’am. And I’m a registered nurse. My grades—”

“Don’t matter. It’s clinical skills I care about, and you have little of those. You are to check bedpans, refill water pitchers, help patients to the toilet. When you’re ready to do more, I’ll let you know.”

Frankie sighed quietly. She hadn’t put in all those long, exhausting hours in study carrels, getting her nursing degree early, so that she could change bedpans and fluff pillows. How was she going to acquire the clinical skills she needed to land a job at a first-rate hospital?

“So please record and monitor all IV meds. I’ll need the information promptly. Go.”

Frankie nodded and began her nightly rounds, going from room to room.

It was almost three in the morning when she came to Room 107.

She opened the door gently, hating to waken the patient if she could help it.

“Have you come to see the freak show?”

Frankie paused, uncertain of what to do. “I could come back...”

“Stay. Please.”

Frankie closed the door behind her and moved toward the bed. The patient was a young man, with long, shaggy blond hair and a pale, narrow face. A weedy patch of blond and brown hair tufted above his upper lip. He looked like a kid you’d find surfing the break at Trestles, except for the wheelchair in the corner.

She could see the outline of his legs, or his one leg, beneath the white blanket.

“You can look,” he said. “It’s impossible not to. Who wouldn’t look at a car wreck?”

“I’m bothering you,” she said, taking a step back, starting to turn.

“Don’t go. They’re sending me to a psych ward for trying to kill myself. Involuntary hold, or some bullshit. Like they would know what I was thinking. Anyway, you might be the last sane person I see for a while.”

Frankie moved forward cautiously, checked his IV, made a notation on his chart.

“I should have used my gun,” he said.

Frankie didn’t know how to respond. She had never met anyone who had tried to commit suicide. It seemed impolite to ask why, but equally impolite to remain silent.

“I made it three hundred and forty days in-country. Thought I was home free. That ain’t good. Bein’ a short-timer.”

At Frankie’s obvious confusion, he said: “Vietnam.” He sighed. “My girl—Jilly—she hung with me, wrote me love letters, right up until I stepped on that damn Bouncing Betty and lost a leg.” He looked down. “She told me I’d adjust and to give it time. I’m trying...”

“Your girl told you that?”

“Hardly. A nurse at the Twelfth Evac Hospital. She got me through, man. Sat with me while I lost my shit.” He looked at Frankie, reached out for her hand. “Will you stay till I fall asleep, ma’am? I have these nightmares...”

“Sure, soldier. I won’t go anywhere.”

Frankie was still holding his hand when he fell asleep. She couldn’t help thinking of Finley, and the letters he wrote to her each week, full of funny stories and the beauty of the countryside. *You should see the silk and gems over here, doll. Mom would never stop shopping. And boy, do sailors know how to party.* He told her repeatedly that the war was coming to an end. Walter Cronkite said the same thing on the nightly news.

But it was still going on.

And men were dying. Losing their legs, apparently.

A nurse at the Twelfth Evac Hospital. She got me through, man.

Frankie had never thought about nurses in Vietnam; the newspapers never mentioned any women. Certainly no one talked about any women at war.

Women can be heroes.

At that, Frankie felt a kind of reawakening, the emergence of a bold new ambition.

“I could serve my country,” she said to the man whose hand she held. It was a revolutionary, frightening, exhilarating thought.

But could she? Really?

How did you know if you had the strength and courage for a thing like that? Especially as a woman, raised to be a lady, whose courage had been untested.

She let the idea soar, closed her eyes, imagined telling her parents that she'd joined the Navy and would be going to Vietnam, writing a letter to Finley: *Drumroll, please, I've joined the Navy and will be shipping out to Vietnam! See you soon!*

If she did it now, they could be over there together. In-country.

She could earn her place on the heroes' wall, and not for marrying well. For saving lives in wartime.

Her parents would be so proud of her, as proud as they'd been of Finley. All her life she'd been taught that military service was a family duty.

Wait.

Think about it, Frankie. It could be dangerous.

But the danger didn't resonate. She'd be on a hospital ship, far from the fighting.

By the time she let go of the soldier's hand, she had decided.

★ ★ ★

In the past week, Frankie had planned her day off obsessively, saying nothing to anyone about her intentions, seeking no counsel. She'd repeatedly told herself to slow down, think it through, and she'd tried to do it, but the truth was that she knew what she wanted to do and she didn't want anyone to dissuade her.

After a quick shower, she returned to her bedroom, which had been designed for a young girl years ago, with its frilly canopy bed and shag rug and striped, cabbage-rose-print wallpaper. She chose one of the conservative dresses her mother so often purchased for her. *Quality pieces, Frances; that's how a woman distinguishes herself at first glance.*

As expected, this time of day, the house was empty. Mom was playing bridge at the country club and Dad was at work.

At 1:25, Frankie drove to the nearest Navy recruitment office, where a small clot of war protesters stood outside, yelling slogans and holding up signs that read WAR IS NOT HEALTHY FOR CHILDREN AND OTHER LIVING THINGS and BOMBING FOR PEACE IS LIKE SCREWING FOR VIRGINITY.

Two men with long hair were burning their draft cards—which was illegal—while the crowd cheered them on. Frankie had never understood these protests. Did they really think that a few posters would convince LBJ to stop the war? Did they not understand that if Vietnam fell to communism, so would all of Southeast Asia? Did they not read about how vicious such regimes could be?

Frankie felt acutely conspicuous as she got out of her car. She clutched her expensive navy calfskin purse close to her side as she approached the crowd, who chanted, “Hell, no, we won’t go.”

The crowd turned toward her, stilled for a moment.

“It’s a damn Young Republican!” someone shouted.

Frankie forced herself to keep walking.

“Oh man,” someone else said. “This chick is crazy.”

“Don’t go in there, man!”

Frankie opened the recruiting station’s doors. Inside she saw a desk beneath a sign that read: BE A PATRIOT. JOIN THE NAVY. A sailor in uniform stood at the end of the table.

Frankie closed the door behind her and went to the recruiting desk.

Protesters banged on the window. Frankie tried not to flinch or appear nervous or afraid.

“I’m a nurse,” she said, ignoring the sounds coming from outside. “I’d like to join the Navy and volunteer for Vietnam.”

The sailor glanced nervously at the crowd outside. “How old are you?”

“Twenty, sir. Twenty-one next week.”

“The Navy requires two years of service before they send you to Vietnam, ma’am. You’ll need to do two years stateside, in a hospital, before you ship out.”

Two years. The war would be over by then. “You don’t need nurses in Vietnam?”

“Oh, we need them.”

“My brother is in Vietnam. I . . . want to help.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. Rules are rules. It’s for your own safety, believe me.”

Dispirited but not discouraged, Frankie left the recruiting office—hurried past the protesters, who yelled obscenities at her—and found a

nearby phone booth, where she consulted the Los Angeles yellow pages and found the address for the nearest Air Force recruiting station.

Once there, she was told the same thing, that she needed more stateside experience before shipping out to Vietnam.

At the Army recruiting station, she finally heard what she wanted to hear: *Sure, ma'am. The Army Nurse Corps needs nurses. We could ship you right out after Basic.*

Frankie signed her name on the dotted line, and just like that, she was Second Lieutenant Frances McGrath.