



# TRUE COLORS

by Kristin Hannah

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An Original Essay by Kristin Hannah

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### **A Conversation with the Author**

*Last year, my novel Firefly Lane was published in trade paperback, and book clubs around the country embraced it. Fortunately for me, many of those clubs requested a phone book club visit through my Web site, and I have spoken to literally hundreds of women in the past year. We have fun, informative, casual conversations about books, life, family, friends, and what it means to be a woman today. As always, with each new conversation, I am reminded of how connected we women are, how closely our lives align, regardless of where in the world we live. These are some of the questions I am asked most often about True Colors. . . .*

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**What was the seed that started this story? What made you want to write it in the first place?**

This story came from a most unexpected place: my love of the law. It's been years since I was a practicing attorney and, to be honest, I was glad to leave that career in my rearview mirror when I began writing. In the twenty years that I've been writing novels, I have touched on the justice system only rarely. I didn't think I had anything of real importance to say about it. And then the DNA testing revolution began. Like so many people, I watched the news and was fascinated—and horrified—to learn about the innocent people who had been wrongly convicted, and I cheered when those convictions were overturned due to DNA testing. With a little more research into the topic, I began to realize how difficult the system makes it for convicts to have these tests run. Obviously, no one wants to set guilty people free, but the idea that innocent people are sitting behind bars, having lost all hope, is intolerable.

That was all it took and I was hooked. Instantly I was at the “what if” stage of writing. What if a man was convicted based on eyewitness testimony in a small town—a place where the witness was trusted and the



man on trial was not? What if he was your husband? How long would you wait for him? How long could you? What would your life like look like while he was in prison? What if you couldn't afford the very best defense team to help you navigate through the criminal justice system? And lastly, what would you say to your child about his father?

Once those pieces were in place—the backbone of the plot—I looked to populate my story, and I knew immediately that I wanted the book to be about much more than a fractured legal system. I wanted it to be about a family.

Sisters and the law. That's how this story came together for me, became a novel about sisters and small-town injustice and the price we all pay for prejudice.

**Your books all seem to be intensely personal. Where are “you” in *True Colors*?**

My books are often personal. I tend to derive inspiration from my own life, as well as the lives of my friends and family. In *True Colors* the element that is most personal is the setting. First, there's the physical landscape. This novel is set in a secret, practically unknown corner of Washington State. Honestly, a lot of the locals don't even know about it. The warm waters of Hood Canal really form the foundation of the novel. It's a majestic, astounding vista—the blue water, the gray sandbanks, the snowcapped peaks on the opposite shore. It's one of the very rare places in the state where you can swim in seawater. It really is commonplace to see a pod of orca whales swimming past on their way back out to sea.

In my opinion, this is a story that is very firmly rooted in time and place. In addition to the physical location, there's the “horsey” setting. As I talk about in another section of this reader guide, I was a horse girl as a kid. You know the kind—dressed in faded Levi jeans, with a pair of ragged braids, a dusty white cowboy hat. I spent

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most of my free time trail riding or training my horse or working to buy a new bridle. Now, there are "horse people" all over the world, and each of these locations has its own special culture. For the cowboys and cowgirls in western Washington, it's not about sprawling ranches or tricked-out barns or expensive horses. It's about a sense of community and a love of rodeos. It's about 4-H and Independence Day parades and barn dances. I hope this novel gives readers a glimpse into this unique world.

**How would you describe *True Colors*? Is it a family drama first and a love story second? A legal thriller? All of the above?**

That's a really great question. There were times, in the writing of this novel, when I asked myself that question. Sometimes it felt as if it were all about the love story, but then I'd turn a corner and it would be a searing family drama, and then suddenly I'd be writing a courtroom drama/legal thriller. It would be easy to say that this novel is all of the above, but at its very heart, this is a story about the way in which families—especially sisters—can break apart and come back together. In the end, what mattered to me was the family and how it changed in the face of tragedy.

**What is your favorite moment in the book?**

Hmmm . . . favorite moment in the book. That's a tough one. Certainly one of my favorite scenes in the book is when Winona makes Noah use duct tape for a belt. Maybe that's because I remember those years with my son. We were constantly fighting the "pull your pants up and wear a belt" duel. So that scene on the dock never fails to make me smile. My other favorite scene in the book is when Dallas gets out of prison and he rides Renegade in the moonlight. Something about that image—the broken-down old horse who has been waiting ten years for his rider to return, and the broken-



hearted man who has dreamed of being free again—always touches my heart. And then to have Vivi standing there, seeing her husband again after so many lost and lonely years. I really loved that. I guess I’m a romantic at heart.

**Which sister is most like you?**

I am all of these women, to a greater or lesser extent. Like Winona, I am seriously analytical and tend to see the world in black and white. I am sometimes judgmental and often intense. Like Vivi, I am profoundly optimistic, deeply romantic, and fiercely connected to my family. Like Aurora, I am constantly trying to bring peace into any setting. I think that’s the lawyer in me—or maybe the Libra. I like harmony.

One of the things that I love best about this book is that each sister’s strengths and weaknesses are relevant to the outcome of the story. Winona was definitely hard-edged and judgmental and obsessive. These “dark” traits led her to betray her sister. But it was exactly these character traits that set her on the trail of justice. Without that same pigheaded desire to be right, she never would have accomplished Dallas’s release from prison.

**In the Grey family, Vivi is considered “the beautiful one,” Aurora “the peacemaker,” and Winona “the smart one.” How do perceived roles contribute to the hostilities that lie beneath the surface of the family? Is this dynamic at work in most families?**

Actually, that’s one of the things that most fascinates me about families. They’re like high school—reputations are made early and they have a tendency to stick. Clearly Winona was much more romantic and easily wounded than anyone thought, and Vivi Ann was more rebellious than anyone gave her credit for, and Aurora

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hid a world of hurt behind every smile. Perhaps if these girls—women—had taken the time to reassess their girlhood perceptions of one another, they might have had less trouble when hard times hit. But as it was, old jealousies came out at some very bad times.

One of the aspects of the novel that I think is most true concerns the father-daughter relationships. I find it amazing that children who grow up under the same roof, in the same family, can have such opposing views of their parents. Oftentimes, our view of our parents is really about how we see ourselves, how we imagine our family to be. Vivi Ann decided to love her father; therefore, she imagined a depth of emotion in him that couldn't actually be seen. Winona pined for her father's attention; therefore every slight was personal, given to her alone. She didn't notice that he treated each of his daughters with the same disdain. Of the three daughters, Aurora demanded the least of her father and saw him the most clearly.

### **Can you tell us about the Innocence Project?**

With pleasure. The Innocence Project was founded in 1992 by Barry C. Scheck and Peter J. Neufeld at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law. The organization is dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted people through the use of DNA testing. There are now Innocence Projects all across the country, including one at the University of Washington. All of the attorneys and law students at the Innocence Project are dedicated to freeing the staggering number of innocent inmates in our prisons. Additionally, they are committed to reforming the criminal justice system. It is an absolute tragedy that so many convictions are based on eyewitness misidentification, poor forensic science, bias, or false confessions. As of this writing, 242 prisoners have been proven innocent and freed—including 17 who served time on death row.



### Can you tell us about your next book?

I don't think it will come as a surprise to anyone to discover that *Winter Garden* is another novel that explores female relationships (Turn to page 507 for an exclusive sneak peek!). It's about two estranged sisters who discover unexpectedly that their mother had a stunning secret life. It asks a fundamental question: How can a woman know herself if she doesn't know her mother?

Meredith and Nina Whitson are as different as sisters can be. One stayed at home to raise her children and manage the family apple orchard; the other followed a dream and traveled the world to become a famous photojournalist. But when their beloved father falls ill, Meredith and Nina find themselves together again, standing alongside their cold, disapproving mother, Anya, who even now offers no comfort to her daughters. As children, the only connection between them was the Russian fairy tale Anya sometimes told the girls at night. On his deathbed, their father extracts a promise from the women in his life: the fairy tale will be told one last time—and all the way to the end. Alternating between the past and present, Meredith and Nina listen to a singular, harrowing story that shakes the very foundation of their family and changes who they believe they are.

For the first time in my career, I have written two parallel stories that make up a single novel. Much of *Winter Garden* takes place in a beautiful, faraway city during World War II and focuses on the shocking things people—especially women—sometimes have to do to survive. It is also a contemporary look at how one's past must be reassessed in the light of new revelations, and how sisters sometimes have to fight to stay close. It's about loss and love and tragedy and hope. Ultimately, I think it is a story for any woman who has ever wondered what she would do to hold her family together.

*In Her  
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*"I know now  
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## "Lead Changes"

### An Original Essay by the Author

In many ways, *True Colors* is a valentine to the women and girls who love horses. When I was a young girl, I lived to ride. My first pony, Silver Birch, and I were inseparable. Weekends, after school, and all summer, I spent long hours on horseback, riding through the trails near my house. And then there were the horse shows. At first it was 4-H, and later, the breed shows. Like so many other thirteen-year-old girls, I worked all summer to buy a new bridle or a blue Stetson hat or a piece of sterling silver to decorate my saddle.

Many of my favorite childhood memories are tangled up with horses. My mom and I spent countless weekends together, driving from one arena to another. She was always there, standing at the rail, wishing me luck. She clapped when the ribbons were handed out (of course, I was mortified then by her exuberance), and at the end of each class, she walked back to the barn with me. I handed her too many things—lead ropes, bridles, saddle pads, empty Coke cans—but she never said a word, just quietly stood there beside me and helped. . . .

I lost my mom too early in life, so early that I didn't understand for many years how truly special those years we spent together in dusty barns were, how much her encouragement would ultimately mean to me. She would say quietly that I was improving, that I was doing well, and then she'd give me a tip on how to change leads better or how to soften my touch on the reins.

Now I look back on those days and I smile. I'm a mother myself, so I know how willingly she went along with what I wanted to do. And a phrase from those years comes





back to me often: Lead changes. I know now how quickly we can change direction and find ourselves in unexpected places, and I know how life can circle back on itself and lead you back to where you began. Decades later, when I signed my son up for riding lessons, I found myself standing at one of those arena rails, watching him move past me, and I could feel her beside me, whispering, “Yeah, this is what it was like; this is why I did it . . .”

For a while, like so many girls, I gave up on riding. I moved on, went to college, started my career, and there was no time—and no acreage—for horses. Then I married a cowboy—not his career, but his passion just the same—and suddenly I found myself back where I’d begun, in a world filled with barns and arenas and week-end rodeos.

*True Colors* is set in that world, and it’s a place I know well. The novel is about other things, too—a crime that shocks a small town, a terrible flaw in our legal system, sisters who have lost their way, a boy who doesn’t know how to become a man until he meets his father—but behind all of that, I hope you’ll enjoy your visit to a world you might not have seen before, a special corner of Washington State where girls still join 4-H and look forward to the County Fair and sleep in a dusty old stall every now and then.

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## *Ideas for Book Groups*

I have to admit that I came late to the whole Internet party. I was dragged kicking and screaming into the new millennium. With great reluctance (and more than a bit of whining), I updated my Web site and set about the task of blogging.

Who would have thought I'd enjoy it? You could have knocked me over with a feather.

In the past year, I've been able to "talk" to book groups via speakerphone during their meetings. It has been an absolute blast. I have met great women from all over the country. We talk about anything and everything—my books, other books, best friends, kids, sisters. You name it, we'll discuss it. So if you belong to a book group and you've chosen *True Colors* as your pick, please come on over to the Web site and set up a conversation with me. I can't promise to fulfill all the requests, but I will certainly do my best. And don't forget to join the blog conversation.

Thanks!



### TO ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB MEETING:

Check out [InnocenceProject.org](http://InnocenceProject.org). Look at the statistics about wrongful imprisonment, DNA testing, and the problems with evidence. Use this information to enhance your discussion of *True Colors*.

Jazz up your meeting with a *True Colors* theme night—cowboy hats, country music, margaritas (leaded or unleaded), and ice cream. Discuss each person's favorite ice cream and what that says about his or her personality.

To learn more about *True Colors*—and to find more special features—go to [KristinHannah.com](http://KristinHannah.com).

Go to [ExploreHoodCanal.com](http://ExploreHoodCanal.com) and see pictures of this very special part of the state.



## Reading Group Questions

1. In the novel's opening scene, Henry pits one daughter against the other by simply handing one a lead rope. Winona realizes the impact of his action and knows that from then on, something in their family is changed. Does her realization change the outcome or solidify it? How does this scene reflect the central conflict in the novel? How do Henry's choices set in motion the difficulties that lie ahead?
2. Winona, Aurora, and Vivi Ann have similar and idealized perceptions of their mother. How has her absence affected them, separately and collectively? Conversely, each sister has a radically different perception of Henry. Who is the real Henry? Which sister has the most accurate understanding of who he is? Is Henry's antipathy toward his daughters subject to interpretation or is he as cold and uncaring as he appears?
3. There is obviously a symbiotic relationship between person and place in this novel. What part does the small-town setting play in the novel? Could this story have taken place in a big city? What would have played out differently, in your opinion? What would have remained the same? How does the setting reflect the differences between Vivi Ann and Winona? Certainly it appears at first glance that Vivi Ann is more rooted at Water's Edge and in Oyster Shores than Winona. Is this really true?
4. The Grey sisters would have said that they were happy before Dallas came to town. Is that true? Or was Winona right at fifteen when she observed that "from then on, jealousy had become an undercurrent, swirling beneath their lives"? Was Dallas actually the cause of their troubles? Was Luke? Or was the disintegration of the family inevitable? Who is most to blame for the bad things that happen to the Grey family?

Reading  
Group  
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5. For a long time, Vivi has been “the beautiful one,” Aurora “the peacemaker,” and Winona “the smart one.” How do perceived roles contribute to the hostilities that lie beneath the surface of the family? Is this dynamic at work in most families?
6. How do Winona’s weaknesses and vulnerabilities play into the story? How do her strengths? Do you see her as a likable character? A good sister?
7. How about Vivi Ann? In what way is she really the architect of her own life? How do her strengths and weaknesses allow for all of the good and bad things in the novel to happen? How would this story have been changed by honesty between the sisters from the beginning?
8. There are several moments in the story when Winona makes difficult choices. Was she right to tell Luke about Vivi Ann’s affair? Should she have represented Dallas at his first trial? Did she deny the case for personal or professional reasons?
9. Noah becomes the first true catalyst for change in the Grey family. Like Vivi Ann, Aurora, and Winona, he has grown up in the shadow of loss. He is a fatherless boy; they are motherless girls. How has Vivi Ann’s parenting hurt Noah and set him on his self-destructive path? Is Vivi Ann’s downfall understandable? Regrettable? Unacceptable? If she had been your sister, what would you have done to help her deal with Dallas’s imprisonment?
10. Do you understand Dallas? Or did he remain enigmatic throughout the story? Did your belief in his guilt or innocence change throughout the course of the novel? How much did he contribute to his own legal problems? How did Vivi Ann contribute to them? When did he fall in love with Vivi Ann, and why?



11. Prejudice is an important component of the story. In small, close-knit communities like Oyster Shores, it can often be difficult to be perceived as an outsider. How much of Dallas's arrest depends upon prejudice? Would he have been arrested as quickly if he'd been "one of them"? What if he had been white? How much did his own bad reputation in town work against him?
12. Eyewitness testimony is often unreliable. This is especially true for minorities and people of color. Why do you think this is? What should we, as a society, do about it? Was Myrtle mistaken in her testimony? Did she simply see what she expected to see?
13. Was Vivi Ann wrong to give up on Dallas? Was Dallas right to ask it of her?
14. Discuss Henry. Does he change over the course of the story? Does he love his daughters? How did the loss of his wife contribute to the father he has become? Would he change if he could?
15. Think about the future. How is the Grey family changed by all that they have endured? Where do they go from here? Do Vivi, Noah, and Dallas stay at Water's Edge? What about Winona? How has she been changed by the journey she has undertaken? Is she still jealous of her sister? Desperate for her father's love? Will she stay in Oyster Shores? Should she? Will she and Luke make a future together? And what about Noah? For most of his life he's been able to blame his bad behavior on someone else. What will his life be like now that his father is home?

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