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Lawyer-turned-writer Kristin Hannah is the bestselling author of more than 20 books, some of which are being produced as movies.

Inspired by Alaska

Author Kristin Hannah channels Alaska in *The Great Alone*

In Kristin Hannah's latest novel, Alaska takes center stage as a formidable antagonist, as fleshed out and complex as her other characters who walk on two legs. Though Hannah never lived in Alaska full time, she gleaned ice-chests full of inspiration from visits to her family's adventure lodge (greatalaska.com) overlooking Kenai and Moose rivers and from the fire-pit tales of the independent women who homesteaded on the Kenai Peninsula. We caught up with Hannah as *The Great Alone* continued its tenure on the New York Times bestseller list.

~as told to and edited
by Michelle Theall

I love that this book explores all the different ways Alaska can kill a person, without it being a “climbing Denali book” or “Into the Wild.” You’ve chosen to focus on a family, with characters that could be any of us. And I also like that it lets romantics know that there is a big difference between visiting Alaska and living in Alaska, especially the remote areas—a fact that Alaskans will appreciate. I know you did extensive research, as you always do with your books, but this one seems closer to home...is it, and in what ways?

This was my chance to write a love letter to Alaska even though the book has dark themes. In 1968, our dad loaded us up—three kids, two dogs—into a VW bus looking for a new place to live in the Pacific Northwest. In the early 80s, he got the feeling again that he wanted to search for adventure, and my parents headed north to Alaska where they became friends with a homesteading family there and eventually created the lodge with them. Three generations of my family have worked at the lodge now, including my brother, sister, and son.

How did those experiences at the lodge and in Alaska inform your writing? Did you base the fictional setting of Kaneq and Otter Cove on specific locations there?

In my mind, I've learned it's always easier to create a fictional location, that way you don't get letters [laughs]. Kaneq is a cross between the beautiful isolation of Tutka Bay and an imagined version of Seldovia from 50 years ago. All of this beauty, its proximity to civilization, and its inherent difficulties make it seem more isolated than it appears on a map. At my family's lodge on the Kenai, I listened to Alaskan women sharing their life stories, and their lives were so different than friends back home in Seattle. I learned how they came to Alaska and why they stayed. They're so self-reliant and fierce. It was important for me to show that in the novel.



In *The Great Alone*, survival takes on many forms for the Allbright family: surviving domestic violence, the elements, wildlife, isolation, winters, unexpected loss. In what ways does “daily survival as a norm” while homesteading in remote Alaska amplify Leni's and her family's connections with the other people in Kaneq?

Anyone will tell you that Alaska is larger than life: creator, destroyer, and seducer. Although the novel is set in the 1970s, in a way it speaks to the American pioneering spirit, the decision to go toward a dream and seek a new way of living. When you live in the middle of nowhere, you have to have a certain strength of your own, but you also have to connect in order to survive. Leni is longing for community but is forced to live remote and off the grid. Ironically, in that small isolated place, she finds the people she's been searching for all of her life. Community grows from hardship, kindred spirit, and necessity.

In the book, Leni as a woman in her 40s recalls hearing that “Alaska didn't create character; it revealed it.” Do you think that's accurate? Doesn't it create some character?

We are who we are but great adversity reveals the clearest and greatest sense of that. At those moments of great adversity, do you rise or do you fall? Leni, and even her mother, rise to the challenge. You have to be deep down tough in Alaska to survive emotionally and physically and spiritually.

Where did the title, *The Great Alone*, come from?

When I was a kid and we camped for weeks and took the VW bus north, we'd sit around the campfire at night, and my dad would recite Robert Service from memory. The whole family can still do it. It primed us all to fall in love with Alaska long before we had ever seen it. The title brings together my love of Robert Service, my family, and the theme of survival. 🐾