

KRISTIN HANNAH

The Great Alone

A Novel from the
#1 *New York Times*
Bestselling Author of
The Nightingale

THE
GREAT
ALONE



Kristin Hannah



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To the women in my family. All of them are warriors. Sharon, Debbie, Laura, Julie, Mackenzie, Sara, Kaylee, Toni, Jacquie, Dana, Leslie, Katie, Joan, Jerrie, Liz, Courtney, and Stephanie.

And to Braden, our newest adventurer.

Nature never deceives us;
it is always we who deceive ourselves.

—JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

1974



ONE

That spring, rain fell in great sweeping gusts that rattled the rooftops. Water found its way into the smallest cracks and undermined the sturdiest foundations. Chunks of land that had been steady for generations fell like slag heaps on the roads below, taking houses and cars and swimming pools down with them. Trees fell over, crashed into power lines; electricity was lost. Rivers flooded their banks, washed across yards, ruined homes. People who loved each other snapped and fights erupted as the water rose and the rain continued.

Leni felt edgy, too. She was the new girl at school, just a face in the crowd; a girl with long hair, parted in the middle, who had no friends and walked to school alone.

Now she sat on her bed, with her skinny legs drawn up to her flat chest, a dog-eared paperback copy of *Watership Down* open beside her. Through the thin walls of the rambler, she heard her mother say, *Ernt, baby, please don't. Listen ...* and her father's angry *leave me the hell alone.*

They were at it again. Arguing. Shouting.

Soon there would be crying.

Weather like this brought out the darkness in her father.

Leni glanced at the clock by her bed. If she didn't leave right now, she was going to be late for school, and the only thing worse than being the new girl in junior high was drawing attention to yourself. She had learned this fact the hard way; in the last four years, she'd gone to five schools. Not once had she found a way to truly fit in, but she remained stubbornly hopeful. She took a

deep breath, unfolded, and slid off the twin bed. Moving cautiously through her bare room, she went down the hall, paused at the kitchen doorway.

“Damn it, Cora,” Dad said. “You know how hard it is on me.”

Mama took a step toward him, reached out. “You need help, baby. It’s not your fault. The nightmares—”

Leni cleared her throat to get their attention. “Hey,” she said.

Dad saw her and took a step back from Mama. Leni saw how tired he looked, how defeated.

“I—I have to go to school,” Leni said.

Mama reached into the breast pocket of her pink waitress uniform and pulled out her cigarettes. She looked tired; she’d worked the late shift last night and had the lunch shift today. “You go on, Leni. You don’t want to be late.” Her voice was calm and soft, as delicate as she was.

Leni was afraid to stay and afraid to leave. It was strange—stupid, even—but she often felt like the only adult in her family, as if she were the ballast that kept the creaky Allbright boat on an even keel. Mama was engaged in a continual quest to “find” herself. In the past few years, she’d tried EST and the human potential movement, spiritual training, Unitarianism. Even Buddhism. She’d cycled through them all, cherry-picked pieces and bits. Mostly, Leni thought, Mama had come away with T-shirts and sayings. Things like, *What is, is, and what isn’t, isn’t*. None of it seemed to amount to much.

“Go,” Dad said.

Leni grabbed her backpack from the chair by the kitchen table and headed for the front door. As it slammed shut behind her, she heard them start up again.

Damn it, Cora—

Please, Ernt, just listen—

It hadn’t always been this way. At least that’s what Mama said. Before the war, they’d been happy, back when they’d lived in a trailer park in Kent and Dad had had a good job as a mechanic and Mama had laughed all of the time and danced to “Piece of My Heart” while she made dinner. (Mama dancing was really all Leni remembered about those years.)

Then Dad went off to Vietnam and got shot down and captured. Without him, Mama fell apart; that was when Leni first understood her mother’s fragility. They drifted for a while, she and Mama, moved from job to job and town to town until they finally found a home in a commune in Oregon. There,

they tended beehives and made lavender sachets to sell at the farmers' market and protested the war. Mama changed her personality just enough to fit in.

When Dad had finally come home, Leni barely recognized him. The handsome, laughing man of her memory had become moody, quick to anger, and distant. He hated everything about the commune, it seemed, and so they moved. Then they moved again. And again. Nothing ever worked out the way he wanted.

He couldn't sleep and couldn't keep a job, even though Mama swore he was the best mechanic ever.

That was what he and Mama were fighting about this morning: Dad getting fired again.

Leni flipped up her hood. On her way to school, she walked through blocks of well-tended homes, bypassed a dark woods (stay away from there), passed the A&W where the high school kids hung out on weekends, and a gas station, where a line of cars waited to fill up for fifty-five cents a gallon. That was something everyone was angry about these days—gas prices.

As far as Leni could tell, adults were edgy in general, and no wonder. The war in Vietnam had divided the country. Newspapers blared bad news daily: bombings by Weatherman or the IRA; planes being hijacked; the kidnapping of Patty Hearst. The massacre at the Munich Olympics had stunned the whole world, as had the Watergate scandal. And recently, college girls in Washington State had begun to disappear without a trace. It was a dangerous world.

She would give anything for a real friend right now. It was all she really wanted: someone to talk to.

On the other hand, it didn't help to talk about her worries. What was the point of confession?

Sure, Dad lost his temper sometimes and he yelled and they never had enough money and they moved all the time to distance themselves from creditors, but that was their way, and they loved each other.

But sometimes, especially on days like today, Leni was afraid. It felt to her as if her family stood poised on the edge of a great precipice that could collapse at any second, crumble away like the houses that crashed down Seattle's unstable, waterlogged hillsides.

* * *

AFTER SCHOOL, Leni walked home in the rain, alone.

Her house sat in the middle of a cul-de-sac, on a yard less tended than the rest: a bark-brown rambler with empty flower boxes and clogged gutters and a garage door that didn't close. Weeds grew in clumps from the decaying gray roof shingles. An empty flagpole pointed accusingly upward, a statement about her father's hatred of where this country was headed. For a man whom Mama called a patriot, he sure hated his government.

She saw Dad in the garage, sitting on a slanted workbench beside Mama's dented-up Mustang with the duct-taped top. Cardboard boxes lined the interior walls, full of stuff they hadn't yet unpacked from the last move.

He was dressed—as usual—in his frayed military jacket and torn Levi's. He sat slouched forward, his elbows resting on his thighs. His long black hair was a tangled mess and his mustache needed trimming. His dirty feet were bare. Even slumped over and tired-looking, he was movie-star handsome. Everyone thought so.

He cocked his head, peered at her through his hair. The smile he gave her was a little worn around the edges, but it still lit up his face. That was the thing about her dad: he might be moody and sharp-tempered, even a little scary sometimes, but that was just because he felt things like love and loss and disappointment so keenly. Love most of all. "Lenora," he said in that scratchy, cigarette-smoker voice of his. "I was waiting for you. I'm sorry. I lost my temper. And my job. You must be disappointed as hell in me."

"No, Dad."

She knew how sorry he was. She could see it on his face. When she was younger, she'd sometimes wondered what good all those sorries were if nothing ever changed, but Mama had explained it to her. The war and captivity had snapped something in him. *It's like his back is broken*, Mama had said, *and you don't stop loving a person when they're hurt. You get stronger so they can lean on you. He needs me. Us.*

Leni sat down beside him. He put an arm around her, pulled her in close. "The world is being run by lunatics. It's not my America anymore. I want..." He didn't finish, and Leni didn't say anything. She was used to her dad's sadness, his frustration. He stopped sentences halfway through all the time, as if he were afraid of giving voice to scary or depressing thoughts. Leni knew about that reticence and understood it; lots of times it was better to stay silent.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a mostly crushed pack of cigarettes. He lit one up and she drew in the acrid, familiar scent.

She knew how much pain he was in. Sometimes she woke up to her dad crying and her mama trying to soothe him, saying stuff like, *Shhh, now, Ernt, it's over now, you're home safe.*

He shook his head, exhaled a stream of blue-gray smoke. "I just want ... more, I guess. Not a job. A life. I want to walk down the street and not have to worry about being called a baby-killer. I want..." He sighed. Smiled. "Don't worry. It'll all be okay. We'll be okay."

"You'll get another job, Dad," she said.

"Sure I will, Red. Tomorrow will be better."

That was what her parents always said.

* * *

ON A COLD, BLEAK MORNING in mid-April, Leni got up early and staked out her place on the ratty floral sofa in the living room and turned on the *Today* show. She adjusted the rabbit ears to get a decent picture. When it popped into focus, Barbara Walters was saying "... Patricia Hearst, now calling herself Tania, seen here in this photograph holding an M1 carbine at the recent bank robbery in San Francisco. Eyewitnesses report that the nineteen-year-old heiress, who was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army in February..."

Leni was spellbound. She still couldn't believe that an *army* could march in and take a teenager from her apartment. How could anyone be safe anywhere in a world like that? And how did a rich teenager become a revolutionary named Tania?

"Come on, Leni," Mama said from the kitchen. "Get ready for school."

The front door banged open.

Dad came into the house, smiling in a way that made it impossible not to smile back. He looked out of scale, larger than life in the low-ceilinged kitchen, vibrant against the water-marked gray walls. Water dripped from his hair.

Mama stood at the stove, frying bacon for breakfast.

Dad swept into the kitchen and cranked up the transistor radio that sat on the Formica counter. A scratchy rock 'n' roll song came through. Dad laughed and pulled Mama into his arms.

Leni heard his whispered “I’m sorry. Forgive me.”

“Always,” Mama said, holding him as if she were afraid he’d push her away.

Dad kept his arm around Mama’s waist and pulled her over to the kitchen table. He pulled out a chair, said, “Leni, come in here!”

Leni loved it when they included her. She left her spot on the sofa and took a seat beside her mother. Dad smiled down at Leni and handed her a paperback book. *The Call of the Wild*. “You’ll love this, Red.”

He sat down across from Mama, scooted in close to the table. He was wearing what Leni thought of as his Big Idea smile. She’d seen it before, whenever he had a plan to change their lives. And he’d had a lot of plans: Selling everything and camping for a year as they drove the Big Sur highway. Raising mink (what a horror *that* had been). Selling American Seed packets in Central California.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a folded-up piece of paper, slapped it triumphantly on the table. “You remember my friend Bo Harlan?”

Mama took a moment to answer. “From ’Nam?”

Dad nodded. To Leni, he said, “Bo Harlan was the crew chief and I was the door gunner. We looked out for each other. We were together when our bird went down and we got captured. We went through hell together.”

Leni noticed how he was shaking. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, so she could see the burn scars that ran from his wrist to his elbow in ridges of puckered, disfigured skin that never tanned. Leni didn’t know what had caused his scars—he never said and she never asked—but his captors had done it. She had figured out that much. The scars covered his back, too, pulled the skin into swirls and puckers.

“They made me watch him die,” he said.

Leni looked worriedly at Mama. Dad had never said this before. To hear the words now unsettled them.

He tapped his foot on the floor, played a beat on the table with fast-moving fingers. He unfolded the letter, smoothed it out, and turned it so they could read the words.

Sergeant Allbright—

You are a hard man to find. I am Earl Harlan.

My son, Bo, wrote many letters home about his friendship with you. I thank you for that.

In his last letter, he told me that if anything happened to him in that piece of shit place, he wanted you to have his land up here in Alaska.

It isn't much. Forty acres with a cabin that needs fixing. But a hardworking man can live off the land up here, away from the crazies and the hippies and the mess in the Lower Forty-eight.

I don't have no phone, but you can write me c/o the Homer Post Office. I'll get the letter sooner or later.

The land is at the end of the road, past the silver gate with a cow skull and just before the burnt tree, at mile marker 13.

Thanks again,

Earl

Mama looked up. She cocked her head, gave a little birdlike tilt as she studied Dad. “This man … Bo, has given us a house? A *house*?”

“Think of it,” Dad said, lifted out of his seat by enthusiasm. “A house that’s *ours*. That we *own*. In a place where we can be self-sufficient, grow our vegetables, hunt our meat, and be free. We’ve dreamed of it for years, Cora. Living a simpler life away from all the bullshit down here. We could be free. Think of it.”

“Wait,” Leni said. Even for Dad, this was big. “Alaska? You want to move again? We just moved here.”

Mama frowned. “But … there’s nothing up there, is there? Just bears and Eskimos.”

He pulled Mama to her feet with an eagerness that made her stumble, fall into him. Leni saw the desperate edge of his enthusiasm. “I need this, Cora. I need a place where I can breathe again. Sometimes I feel like I’m going to crawl out of my skin. Up there, the flashbacks and shit will stop. I know it. *We* need this. We can go back to the way things were before ‘Nam screwed me up.”

Mama lifted her face to Dad’s, her pallor a sharp contrast to his dark hair and tanned skin.

“Come on, baby,” Dad said. “Imagine it…”

Leni saw Mama softening, reshaping her needs to match his, imagining this new personality: Alaskan. Maybe she thought it was like EST or yoga or

Buddhism. The answer. Where or when or what didn't matter to Mama. All she cared about was him. "Our own house," she said. "But ... money ... you could apply for that military disability—"

"Not that discussion again," he said with a sigh. "I'm not doing that. A change is all I need. And I'll be more careful with money from now on, Cora. I swear. I still have a little of the bread I inherited from the old man. And I'll cut back on drinking. I'll go to that veterans' support-group thing you want me to."

Leni had seen all of this before. Ultimately, it didn't matter what she or Mama wanted.

Dad wanted a new beginning. Needed it. And Mama needed him to be happy.

So they would try again in a new place, hoping geography would be the answer. They would go to Alaska in search of this new dream. Leni would do as she was asked and do it with a good attitude. She would be the new girl in school *again*. Because that was what love was.