

Winter Garden
KRISTIN HANNAH

The Poacher's Son
PAUL DOIRON

A Thread So Thin
MARIE BOSTWICK

Half Broke Horses
JEANNETTE WALLS

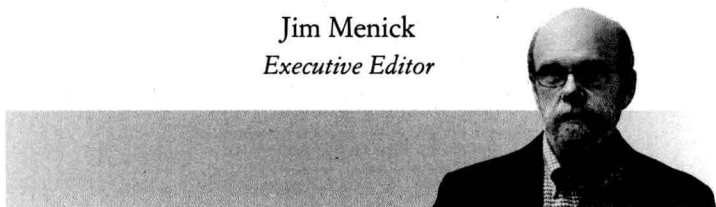
Family

I was looking at the titles in this volume, and I was struck by the fact that all the stories are about families. We don't choose our books for thematic reasons, so this is completely coincidental, but it does provide a measure of curiosity that is fun to contemplate. Four books about families, but four books that couldn't be more different from one another.

In *Winter Garden*, two daughters come to terms with a distant mother they have never understood in a story that is almost epic in its scope. In *The Poacher's Son*, a young man struggles to protect a father who has been on the wrong side of the law all his life. *A Thousand Thin* is about love and marriage, but also very much about a missing mother and the bonds we form when a parent is lost to us. And *Half Broke Horses* brings us the real grandmother of its author in a tale that mixes fiction and nonfiction to paint the portrait of a very feisty ancestor. In all of these books the past informs the present, and the parents define the children, even when the children are completely different from those parents.

Four different books, one unifying theme: How do we deal with the families with which fate has provided us? The answers are diverse and worth exploring. Enjoy the journey!

Jim Menick
Executive Editor



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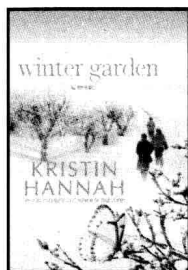
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Inside

SELECT EDITIONS



page 6

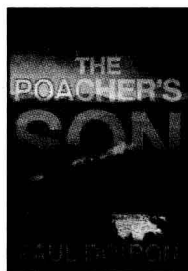
WINTER GARDEN

Kristin Hannah

A haunting secret is uncovered in a tale that moves from present-day America to the darkest hours of war-torn Russia during World War II.



AFTERWORDS: *The writing life of Kristin Hannah.*



page 170

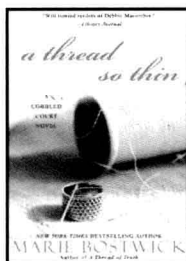
THE POACHER'S SON

Paul Doiron

Mike Bowditch is a Maine game warden with a problem: His dad is in hiding, wanted for murder in a cop killing, and it's up to Mike to clear him.



AFTERWORDS: *A conversation with Paul Doiron.*



page 316

A THREAD SO THIN

Marie Bostwick

A young woman finds herself rushing headlong into what might be the wedding to end all weddings. An engaging story full of charm.



AFTERWORDS: *Characters + plot = some assembly required.*



page 450

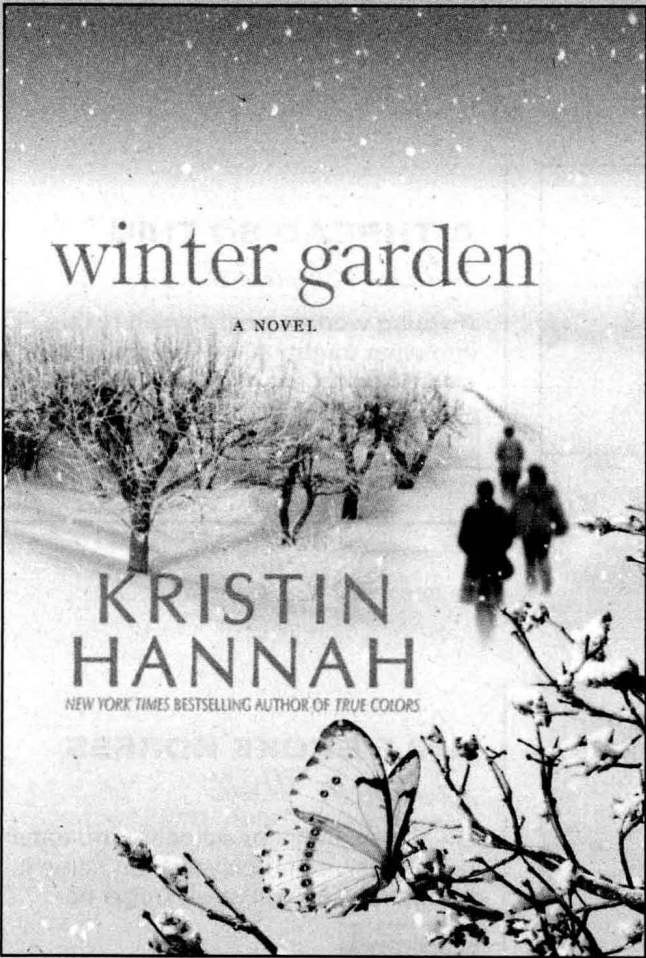
HALF BROKE HORSES

Jeannette Walls

Lily Casey: amateur schoolmarm, rodeo rider, bootlegger, poker player—you name it, she did it. And readers will never forget her.



AFTERWORDS: *Mining the past with Jeannette Walls.*



winter garden

A NOVEL

KRISTIN
HANNAH

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF TRUE COLORS

* Prologue *

1972

ON THE banks of the mighty Columbia River, in this icy season when every breath became visible, the orchard called Belye Nochi was quiet. Dormant apple trees stretched as far as the eye could see, their sturdy roots coiled deep in the cold soil. As temperatures plummeted and color drained from land and sky, the whitened landscape caused a kind of winter blindness; one day became

indistinguishable from the next. Everything froze, turned fragile.

Nowhere was the cold and quiet more noticeable than in Meredith Whitson's own house. At twelve, she had already discovered the empty spaces that gathered between people. She longed for her family to be like those she saw on television, where everything looked perfect and everyone got along. No one, not even her beloved father, understood how alone she felt within these four walls.

But tomorrow night all of that would change.

She had come up with a brilliant plan. She had written a play based on one of her mother's fairy tales, and she would present it at the annual company Christmas party.

"How come I can't be the star?" Nina whined. It was at least the tenth time she'd asked this since Meredith had finished the script.

Meredith turned in her chair and looked down at her nine-year-old sister, who was on their bedroom floor painting a mint-green castle on an old bedsheet. Meredith bit her lip. The castle was all wrong. Too bright, too messy. It would have to be fixed. Script in hand, she knelt beside her sister. "We've talked about this, Nina."

"But *why* can't I be the peasant girl who marries the prince?"

"Jeff is playing the prince, and he's thirteen. You'd look silly next to him. Besides, your part is important, Neens. Without the younger sister, the prince and the peasant girl would never meet."

"I guess." Nina sat back on her heels. With her short, tangled black hair, bright green eyes, and pale skin, she looked like a perfect little pixie. "Can I be the peasant girl next year?"

Meredith put an arm across Nina's narrow bony back. "Of course." She loved the idea that she might be creating a family tradition. All her friends had traditions, but not the Whitsons. There was no stream of relatives who came to their house on holidays, no turkey on Thanksgiving or ham on Easter, no prayers that were always said. Heck, they didn't even know how old their mom was.

It was because Mom was Russian and alone in this country, Dad said. Mom didn't say much of anything about herself.

A knock at the door surprised Meredith. She looked up just as Jeff Cooper and her father came into the room.

"Jeff," she said, her voice catching only the smallest amount. Her cheeks grew hot at the obviousness of his effect on her. They'd been best friends since fourth grade, but lately it felt different to be around him. "You're right on time for rehearsal."

He gave her one of his heart-stopping smiles. "Just don't tell Joey and the guys. They'd give me a ton of crap for this."

"About rehearsal," her dad said, holding out the script. He'd just come home from work. His curly black hair reached the collar of his brown leisure suit, and his bushy mustache made it hard to tell if he was smiling. "This is the play you're doing?"

Meredith got slowly to her feet. "Do you think she'll like it?"

Nina stood up. Her heart-shaped face was solemn. "Will she?" The three of them looked at each other over the expanse of mint-green castle. The truth they passed between themselves, in looks alone, was that Anya Whitson was a cold woman; any warmth she had was directed at her husband. Precious little of it reached her daughters. When they were younger, Dad had tried to pretend it was otherwise, to redirect their attention like a magician, mesmerizing them with the brightness of his affection, but like all illusions, the truth ultimately appeared behind it.

"I don't know, Meredoodle," Dad said, reaching into his pocket for his cigarettes. "Your mother's stories—"

"I love it when she tells them to us," Meredith said.

"It's the only time she really talks to us," Nina added.

Dad lit a cigarette. His brown eyes narrowed through a swirl of gray smoke. "Yeah," he said, exhaling. "It's just . . ."

Meredith understood; none of them ever really knew what would set Mom off. But if there was one thing her mother loved, it was this fairy tale. "It takes ten minutes, Dad. Everyone will love it."

He hesitated, almost as if he wanted to tell her it was a mistake, but she knew he loved her too much to say no. "Okay," he said.

She felt a swell of pride. It would work. For once, she'd be the center of her mother's attention. This play would prove that Meredith had listened to every precious word Mom had said to her, even those few that were spoken softly in the dark, at story time.

For the next hour, Meredith directed her actors through rehearsal, although only Jeff needed help. She and Nina had heard this fairy tale for years. And what a story it was! Meredith had added some bits and pieces, like a magical wishing well and an enchanted mirror. But even without extras, it was as good as any movie.

When the rehearsal was over, Meredith made a sign: ONE NIGHT ONLY: A GRAND PLAY FOR THE HOLIDAY. She touched up the painted backdrop. When the set was ready, she added sequins to the ballet skirt turned princess gown she would wear at the end. By the time she went to bed, she was so excited it took a long time to fall asleep.

The next day seemed to pass slowly, but finally, at six o'clock, the guests began to arrive. It was not a big crowd, just the men and women who worked for the orchard and their families, a few neighbors, and Dad's only living relative, his sister, Dora.

Meredith sat at the top of the stairs wondering when to make her move. Just as she was about to stand up, she heard Nina in the kitchen banging a pot with a spoon and yelling, "Showtime!"

No one knew how to steal the limelight like Nina.

There was a smattering of laughter as the guests made their way to the living room, where the painting of the green castle hung from an aluminum movie screen set up beside the massive fireplace. To the right was a large Christmas tree. In front of the painting was their "stage": a small wooden bridge that rested on the hardwood floor and a cardboard street lamp made with a flashlight.

Nina and Jeff were already there in their costumes. Meredith dimmed the lights and turned on the fake street lamp, then slipped behind the backdrop and began the narration: "Her name is Vera, and she is a poor peasant girl, a nobody. She lives in a magical realm called the Snow Kingdom, but her beloved world is dying."

She heard a sound, like a sharp intake of breath. Leaning sideways, she peered around the screen. Everyone was smiling, nodding. Meredith went on: "An evil has come to this land; it rolls across the cobblestone streets in black carriages sent by a dark, evil knight who wants to destroy it all."

The audience clapped enthusiastically. Someone whistled.

Meredith made her entrance, taking care not to trip over her long, layered skirts. She looked out over the gathering and saw her mother in the back of the room, her beautiful face blurred by cigarette smoke. For once she was looking directly at Meredith. *Finally.*

"It is so cold this winter," Meredith said loudly, pacing in front of the faux castle. She clapped her mittened hands together.

At the sound, Nina made her entrance. Dressed in a ratty nightgown with a kerchief covering her hair, she wrung her hands together. "Is it the Black Knight?" she practically yelled, drawing a laugh from the crowd. "Is his bad magic making it so cold?"

"No. I am chilled at the loss of our father. I am so worried. When will he return?" Meredith pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. "The carriages are everywhere. The Black Knight gains more and more power. People turn to smoke before our eyes . . ."

"Look," Nina said, pointing toward a picture taped to the fireplace. "It is a white carriage with gold. The Prince . . ."

Jeff came out from behind the tree. In his sport coat and jeans, with a cheap gold crown on his blond hair, he looked so handsome that for a moment, Meredith could hardly breathe. And he was smiling as if she really were a princess.

He held out a pair of silk roses. "I have two roses for you."

Meredith touched his hand, but before she could say her line, there was a crash and a sound like a cry.

Her mother stood in the crowd, her face pale, her blue eyes blazing. Blood dripped from her hand. She'd broken her cocktail glass. "Enough," she said sharply. "This is hardly entertainment."

The guests seemed to freeze; the room went quiet. Dad made his way to her and tried to pull her close.

"I'm sorry." Meredith didn't know what she'd done wrong.

"I never should have told you those ridiculous fairy tales," Mom said, her Russian accent sharp with anger. "I forgot how romantic and empty-headed girls can be."

Meredith was so humiliated she couldn't move.

She saw her father guide her mother into the kitchen, where he probably began cleaning up her hand. The guests left as if this

were the *Titanic*, rushing for lifeboats stationed beyond the front door.

Only Jeff looked at her. The pity in his eyes made her feel sick. He started toward her, still holding the two roses. “Meredith—”

She pushed past him and ran out. At the end of the hall, she skidded to a stop, her eyes burning with tears. As if from faraway, she could hear her dad’s voice as he tried to soothe his angry wife.

“What did you do?” Nina asked quietly, coming up beside her.

“Who knows?” Meredith wiped her eyes. “She’s such a bitch.”

“That’s a bad word. Should we say we’re sorry?”

Meredith reached down for her hand. “She won’t care; trust me.”

“So what do we do?”

Meredith knew what would happen: Dad would calm Mom down, and then he’d come up to their room and make them laugh and tell them Mom really loved them. By the time he was done, Meredith would want to believe it. Again. “I know what I’m going to do.” Staring through to the kitchen, she could see Mom’s slim, black velvet dress and her white, white hair. “I’m never going to listen to one of her stupid fairy tales again.”

✱ Chapter One ✱

2000

WAS this what forty looked like? Really? In the past year, Meredith had gone from miss to ma’am. Just like that, with no transition. Even worse, her skin had begun to lose its elasticity. Her neck was fuller. She hadn’t gone gray yet; her chestnut-colored hair, cut in a shoulder-length bob, was still full and shiny. But her eyes gave her away. She looked tired. And not only at six in the morning.

She turned away from the bathroom mirror and stripped out of her old T-shirt and into a pair of sweats and a shirt. Pulling her hair into a ponytail, she walked into her dark bedroom, where her husband’s soft snoring made her want to crawl back into bed. In the old days, she would have done just that—snuggled up against him.

Leaving the room, she headed down the hall, passing the doors of her children's bedrooms. Not that they were children anymore. Jillian was nineteen, a sophomore at UCLA who dreamed of being a doctor, and Maddy was eighteen and a freshman at Vanderbilt. Without them, this house felt emptier than she'd expected.

She kept moving. Lately that seemed to be the best way to handle things. Downstairs, in the mudroom, the dogs leaped up at her, yapping and wagging their tails.

"Luke, Leia, no jumping," she scolded the huskies, scratching their ears as she led them to the door. When she opened it, cold air hit her face like a slap. Snow had fallen again, and though it was still dark on this mid-December morning, she could make out the pale pearlescence of road and field. By the time they were on their way, it was six ten and the sky was a purplish gray. Right on time.

Meredith ran slowly at first, acclimating herself to the cold. As she did every weekday morning, she ran along the gravel road down past her parents' house, out to the old single lane that ended a mile up the hill. From there, she followed the loop out to the golf course and back. Four miles exactly.

It was a routine she rarely missed; she had no choice, really. Everything about her was big by nature. Only exercise and diet could keep her looking good. She was tall, with broad shoulders, curvy hips. Even her Julia Roberts-type mouth and her huge brown eyes seemed just a little too much for her oval face.

As she turned back onto her road, the rising sun turned the mountains pink. On either side of her, thousands of bare, spindly apple trees showed through the snow. She came to a stop at her own front porch just as the valley filled with bright golden light.

She fed the dogs and hurried upstairs. She was just going into the bathroom as Jeff was coming out. Wearing only a towel, with his graying blond hair still dripping wet, he turned sideways to let her pass, and she did the same. Neither one of them spoke.

By seven thirty she was dressed for work in a pair of black jeans and a green blouse. A little eyeliner, mascara, and a coat of lipstick and she was ready to go.

Downstairs, she found Jeff at the kitchen table reading the *New York Times*. The dogs were asleep at his feet. She went to the coffee pot, pouring herself a cup. "You need a refill?"

"I'm good," he said without looking up.

She stirred milk into her coffee. It occurred to her that they only talked about work or the kids lately. She tried to remember the last time they'd made love, but she couldn't. When you'd been married as long as they had, there were bound to be quiet times. Still, it saddened her to remember how passionate they used to be.

They'd married early, and she'd followed him to college in Seattle. She'd been happy in their cramped, tiny U District apartment. Then, when they were seniors, she'd gotten pregnant. It had terrified her at first. She'd worried that she was like her mother, that parenthood wouldn't be a good thing. But nothing could have been further from the truth. And perhaps her youth had helped. God knew Mom had not been young when she first gave birth.

Jeff shook his head. It was a minute gesture, but she saw it. "What's the matter?" she said.

"I just asked you something."

"I didn't hear you. Ask me again."

"It doesn't matter."

"Fine. Will you be home for dinner at seven?"

"By all means," he said, turning the page.

MEREDITH was at her desk by eight o'clock. As usual, she was the first to arrive and went around the cubicle-divided space on the warehouse's second floor flipping on lights. She passed by her dad's office, pausing only long enough to glimpse the plaques on his door. Thirteen times he'd been voted "Grower of the Year." It didn't matter that he'd been semiretired for a decade; he was still the face of the Belye Nochi orchard. His designs for cold-storage had revolutionized world apple markets.

She had had a part to play in the company's growth, to be sure. Under her leadership, the cold-storage warehouse had been expanded and a big part of their business was now storing fruit for

other growers. She'd turned the old roadside apple stand into a gift shop that sold hundreds of craft items and specialty foods.

For the next three hours, Meredith threw herself into work. She was rereading the latest crop report when her intercom buzzed.

"Meredith? Your dad is on line one."

"Thanks, Daisy." She picked up the call. "Hi, Dad."

"Mom and I were wondering if you could come for lunch today."

"Okay. But I have to be back by one."

"Excellent," he said. Meredith could hear the smile in his voice.

She hung up and went back to work. Lately, with demand down and transportation costs skyrocketing, she often spent her days putting out one fire after another, and today was no exception. By noon, a low-grade stress headache had crawled into the base of her neck. Still, she smiled at her employees as she left her office. In less than ten minutes, she pulled up in front of her parent's garage.

Surrounded by poplars on a gentle rise, the house was something out of a Russian fairy tale, with its turretlike two-story veranda and elaborate fretwork trim. The hammered copper roof was dull today in gray weather, but on a bright day, it shone like gold. The house was so famous that tourists often stopped to photograph it.

Leave it to her mother to build something so absurdly out of place. A Russian dacha, or summer house, in western Washington State. Even the orchard's name was absurd. Belye Nochi. Nights here were dark as new asphalt. White nights indeed. But whatever Anya Whitson wanted, her husband gave her.

Meredith knocked and went inside. The kitchen was empty; a big pot of soup simmered on the stove. In the living room, light spilled through the windows of the two-story rounded north wall. Wood floors gleamed with beeswax. Richly upholstered antique sofas and chairs clustered around a huge stone fireplace. Above it hung an oil painting of a Russian troika—a romantic-looking carriage drawn by matching horses sailing through a field of snow. Pure Dr. Zhivago. To her left were dozens of pictures of Russian churches, and below them her mother's "holy corner," where a table held antique icons and a single candle burned year-round.

She found her father in the back of the room alongside the Christmas tree, stretched out on the ottoman reading. His hair, what he had left of it at eighty-five, stuck out in white tufts. Too many decades in the sun had pleated his skin, and he had a basset-hound look that fooled no one. Everyone loved Evan Whitson.

At her entrance, his face lit up. He reached out and squeezed her hand tightly. "Your mom will be so glad to see you."

Meredith smiled. It was the game they'd played for years. "Great. Is she upstairs?"

"I couldn't keep her out of the garden this morning."

Meredith wasn't surprised. "I'll get her."

She left her father and walked through the kitchen to the formal dining room. Through the French doors, she saw an expanse of snow-covered ground, with acres of dormant apple trees in the distance. Closer, beneath the icicle-draped branches of a fifty-year-old magnolia tree, was a small rectangular garden defined by antique wrought-iron fencing. Its ornate gate glittered with frost.

And there she was: her eightysomething-year-old mother, bundled up in blankets, sitting on the black bench in her so-called winter garden. She sat motionless, her hands clasped in her lap.

As a child, it had scared Meredith—all that solitude in her mother—but later it irritated her. A woman of her mother's age had no business sitting alone in the cold. She claimed it was because of her ruined vision—she saw only white and black and gray—but that never struck Meredith as a reason for staring at nothing.

She opened the door and went out into the ankle-deep snow. "You shouldn't be out here, Mom. You'll catch pneumonia."

"It takes more cold than this to give me pneumonia."

It was the sort of ridiculous comment she always made. "I've only got an hour, so you'd better come in." Meredith's voice sounded sharp, and she winced. What was it about her mother that brought out the worst in her? "Did you know he invited me for lunch?"

"Of course," her mother said, but Meredith heard the lie in it.

Her mother rose from the bench. Her face was remarkably smooth, her skin flawless and almost translucent. She had the kind