Dean Nelson: Welcome to the 32nd annual Writers Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. I'm Dean Nelson on the journalism faculty in the School of Humanities, Arts and Public Engagement, and it's our privilege tonight to be talking to Kristin Hannah, an author of about 30 books. They've sold 35 million copies around the world. They've been translated into 45 languages. Kristin Hannah, welcome to the Writers Symposium. [Applause]

Kristin Hannah: It's amazing.

Dean Nelson: Obviously, we're glad you're here.

Kristin Hannah: It's amazing. I feel like I should break into a song. This is great.

Dean Nelson: We could. Let's start talking about this book, The Women that is so important for so many reasons. But it starts out in Coronado. Love the local references in here. There were so many things in that book where I could picture exactly where Frankie was driving or the beach that she was on, so much fun. I know you have friends and all. How much time did you spend down here preparing some of that scene building?

Kristin Hannah: The thing that was interesting was I actually started this book during COVID at the very beginning. Really, the reason Coronado came into it was I needed to set it someplace that I knew already in my mind and that I was comfortable with and that I loved. Then, of course the naval base is right there. I also try very hard in my books to set them places that I want to visit. I'll never forget when I said to my husband at one point when I was writing The Nightingale I just think we have to go to Paris. [Laughter] Thank you.

Dean Nelson: Paris.

Kristin Hannah: Yes.

Dean Nelson: I got to go to Paris.

Kristin Hannah: I had to go to Paris. I tried not to, so I had to.

Dean Nelson: The price that we pay as writers. You were born not too far from here, Garden Grove.

Kristin Hannah: I was Garden Grove, California.

Dean Nelson: Here's one of the things I find so fascinating about this book. You said you started this book or started thinking about this book 20 years ago. What I want to know is what had to happen in you as a writer for you to be ready to write it now, why couldn't you write it back then?

Kristin Hannah: Well, there's an easy answer to that. I guess in 1997, I finished my first hardcover novel. It was called On Mystic Lake. Gosh, thank you. I had a very powerful editor at the time. When you're a novelist, you will tell your editor, Here's my next idea. They will hopefully say, yes, that's wonderful. I can't wait. Here's a check. But I gave her, I want to write about the Vietnam War. I did not have the nurses. I didn't know what exactly the story was. I pitched, I think, a big love story. My editor called me and she said, Kristin, you're not old enough and you're not good enough.

Dean Nelson: Really? Did she say that way or?

Kristin Hannah: Word for word. [Laughter] This is the thing one remembers. [Applause] If I had a diary, it would be in it. I trusted her opinion and I respected her opinion and so I said, okay. Then, over the course of this many careers and all the books I've written, every couple of years when I needed a new idea, I would go to my girlfriend, Megan, who I talked to a lot about these things, and I would say, "Do you think I'm old enough? Do you think I'm good enough?". The reason was, I think ultimately, was what my editor was saying to me was, hey, obviously, I wasn't good enough, but that nobody cared

and nobody wanted to read about the Vietnam War.

That if I was going to try to take on a book like this, I needed to stick the landing. I needed to really have everything in place. Years and years went by, and then COVID hit. I was sitting at home. I live on a small island off of Washington State. Thanks. We were in lockdown. We were one of the first states. I was watching the news. We were so divided. There was so much chaos going on. My thought was, This feels like my youth. This feels like the Vietnam era again. Then I was watching the nurses and the doctors and the medical personnel not getting the support that they needed, in my opinion.

That's when I just woke up one day and said, it's time. It's time for me to write, and the nurses are the story. I had gotten to a point at an age where I no longer cared what anyone thought. I was okay to just write. [Laughter] This is the best part about aging. You just don't care anymore. I just did it. The difficult part, again, was I couldn't go there. I couldn't interview people. I was locked down. But it also gave me this bubble where there was nobody around to tell me, don't do it.

Dean Nelson: The takeaway, I think, for me as a writer is you can have a really good idea, but it may take a while to germinate, and you have to mature maybe as an individual or as a writer and get maybe a little bit of distance from the enthusiasm of this idea. Then it's time. That's one of the things I so appreciate about the process that you took and how long it took for you to finally get there. But a lot has been written about Vietnam over the years. Not much from the perspective of women.

Kristin Hannah: Not about the women.

Dean Nelson: Not much from women. On the one hand, this is about Vietnam, but on the other hand, it's about so much more, which is, in my opinion, what all of your books are. There's a letter in particular toward the beginning from Frankie's mother, where she wrote that this is after Frankie is already in Vietnam. The mother writes to Frankie, "It is a strange world we are all in, volatile and uncertain. We, Americans, I mean, can't seem to talk to each other anymore. Our disagreements seem insurmountable." I stopped right there and just thought, you're talking about more than the Vietnam War. There's another layer in there.

But then she continues, and this is the part that moved me the most about that letter. "I imagine it would feel wonderful to be good at something that mattered. That is something that too many of the women of my generation didn't consider." There is so much in that letter, and the reason it really reached me because I just thought you have just defined a generational divide from that era from one generation of women to Frankie's generation. I assume you're doing this intentionally.

Kristin Hannah: Of course. That was the thing that was so interesting. I guess it goes back to, again, me getting older, me getting comfortable in my own skin and realizing, I think 15 years ago when I started writing Nightingale, because that's the book that leads to this one. The through line of these books and this part of my life is marginalization of women and our lost histories and this realization that we had so many remarkable women doing remarkable things over hundreds of years, and it just wasn't written about.

One of the things that's been so amazing about The Women, the book, in fact, the first event I did for the women, I believe, was here in Southern California, and I did to a crowd like this, and they opened the floor for questions at the end. A woman stood up and she said I was a nurse in Vietnam, and I cannot tell you what this means to me. The entire audience gave her a standing ovation. It was so powerful to just see how much books can make a difference, how much history can make a difference. Exactly.

Dean Nelson: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you. But I just think the power of a well-told story is going to do that to people. That's obviously what you've done with this book in particular and obviously your other ones. But I want to go back to the mom in this story. I want to go back to her.

Here's why I felt just a little bit of sympathy for her in that letter because she's acknowledging this thing that Frankie has opportunities that she never had, that it never dawned on her to have. I had a little sympathy for her, but I wasn't very sympathetic to her parents until the end. My sense is they evolved a little bit in how they could finally engage her.

This is one of the theories that I have about your book. You tell me if I'm wrong. It seems to me that Frankie is the embodiment of how the nation itself was going. She has this experience in Vietnam. She comes back, she drinks too much, she takes too many drugs, she sleeps with too many people. She has no impulse control, and she just feels out of control. I felt like that's how the country felt at that time. I grew up in that era, too and just thought, you're using this character, but she's also really symbolizing the entire nation. Is there any validity to that, or are you thinking to yourself, no, it was just a love story?

Kristin Hannah: [Laughter] No. Absolutely. The thing, what I'm trying to do in most of my novels, and you and I were talking about this a little bit backstage is I feel like my job is to create empathy and understanding and to make you feel like you have lived a time or lived a life or stood in the shoes of someone who is very different. The thing about Frankie is you talk about the mom being one generation. Frankie, to me, you're talking about the Gloria Steinem generation, the bridge, the women who were out there protesting or trying, fighting for women to have more opportunities.

But even so, these women, we forget the price they paid personally and how difficult it was for them. I've met a lot of nurses who talked a lot about how unaccepting, at least initially their parents were that women were not to serve. Frankie is very much supposed to be this new generation of women who are out there fighting for herself and others and pays a price for that.

Dean Nelson: She's got this inner dialogue or inner monologue that goes on early also at the very beginning. She's at the Coronado Beach. She wonders, how did a woman open up her world? How did one begin a journey when no invitation has been issued? Here's what I'm wondering, do you think that is a phenomenon that we've finally gotten past? That was what I was afraid of. [Laughter] I can see the thought bubble in your head. Only a man would ask that question. [Laughter]

Kristin Hannah: Did I say that? No.

Dean Nelson: I know what you're thinking. No?

Kristin Hannah: That's a hard no. I don't know that it's specific just to women, I think it's a question of opportunity. Sometimes in a lot of situations, people have to fight for opportunity that others take for granted.

Dean Nelson: You capture so much of the chaos that was in the confusion and the fatigue of being in Vietnam. I assume you read a lot of memoirs, talked to a lot of people, did a lot of interviewing. Was that the dominant vibe you were getting from them, chaos and confusion and fatigue?

Kristin Hannah: Oh, you mean the war scenes, the war hospital scenes? Yes. That was obviously the most difficult. Well, maybe not, but because I do like horror.

Dean Nelson: We're going to talk about that.

Kristin Hannah: It was really difficult to imagine that because in a lot of my situations and a lot of my books, I've been in similar situations where I can empathize with someone is sick or someone's lost their job or whatever it is. But when you're talking about being essentially a green nurse coming into the theater of war, it's disorienting, it's chaotic, it's frightening all of those things. To write factually correct scenes that are also emotionally resonant, that also move the arc of the story and the character forward, it's a lot of pressure. Yes, this book, I think I finished the first draft. I did a year of

research and then a year of writing the first draft. That's when I realized, again, I'm on lockdown, somebody needs to read this book. Somebody needs to tell me if I've just imagined the whole thing or if I've hit the marks that I need to because I felt so profoundly that I wanted to honor these women and the vets who had been treated so poorly, and I really wanted to do well on that part of it.

I did what we all do nowadays. I went on the Internet and I stalked people to try to find someone. There was this woman, Diane Carlson Evans, who has written a book called Healing Wounds, which I think is a remarkable book. I reached out to her in all the different ways that I could. I was lucky that she had read the Nightingale, so she answered me. I said, would you help me with this? She did. She opened her world to me. She's the founder of the Women's Vietnam Memorial, and her funeral was yesterday.

Dean Nelson: Oh, my God.

Kristin Hannah: It's just such this tragic loss because not only did she teach me about the book and the experience and how to get it right, but she taught me so much about compassion, courage, the power of going your own way and fighting for what you believe in. She was just remarkable.

Dean Nelson: I'm so glad you talk about her, and you've been so generous in giving other people credit throughout your career. I'm so glad she had that voice in your book. But this book also really captures in the middle of all this chaos and confusion and fatigue, human longing, longing for friendship, clearly, women's friendships, but also longing for approval from their parents. You really got that, in my opinion, actually I see that in many of your books that longing gets articulated so well. What are you doing there?

Kristin Hannah: [Laughter] Well, you know what? It's a foundational human emotion, the need for connection, the need for approval, the importance of our parents' approval, and the importance of their disapproval. I think part of growing up is also realizing that ultimately you need your own approval. I think that is a big part of Frankie's arc. In terms of the writerly part of this, the writer symposium part, again, I can take on whatever historical canvas I want, and I can talk about the biggest issues of the day or whatever. But if you don't deeply care about my characters, nobody's going to get to the end. I think the most important thing that I can do is really create fully three dimensional people.

In fact, one of the things I hear about my books a lot is that they're slow in the beginning. Y'all say it all the time [Laughter] It's true. The reason that it's true is that that's the basis for the payoff at the end, because I am putting in the time to make sure that you know Frankie as well as I know Frankie better than I know her because I get questions all the time that I can't remember the answer to. But I think that's really the important part is to make my characters so fundamentally human.

Dean Nelson: She's looking for a response to that longing in so many places, which, again, I think is just universally.

Kristin Hannah: Yes. One of the things I love most about this book and Frankie, which is very unusual for me, Frankie begins as a powerfully moral woman with a really strong idea of her core and what matters to her and what she cares about. The devastation for Frankie ultimately is not what happened to her in the war. The devastation for Frankie is that she broke her own moral code, whether at a certain point. That was a human issue that I had not dealt with before, and I really enjoyed that.

Dean Nelson: You could really sense that tension in her for that very complication. There was an interesting tension that you bring up, again, early in the book among the branches of service. She tries to be a nurse in the navy. They say no, but the army says, "Sure, we'll take you."

Kristin Hannah: That's absolutely true.

Dean Nelson: Well, I know she comes from a navy family. But on the one hand, that was funny because I hear that distinction between the branches a lot. But it was also her way, even though that was a navy family of saying, I'm not you. That's part of a maturing process on her part as well. I just thought it was funny, but it was also subtle. Here's one of the things that I was really interested in when I was reading this. You didn't make this a blindly pro American story. Frankie treats civilians who were bombed by American bombs and by Napalm. She has her own experience with Agent Orange. She wonders, is this any way to solve a problem? She points out how the government is lying to the public about what is happening over there. How difficult was it to balance that reality without sounding like you're just being hypercritical of the country, if that was a difficult balance at all?

Kristin Hannah: That was actually a very conscious thought, and it's one of the reasons that I did this entire book through one character's viewpoint, which is not something I do normally. This is basically I took on the Vietnam War and era through one woman's eyes. I try through letters and Barb and through other characters to open that up a little bit. But I really did not want to take on the full spectrum. But it was very clear through the research and in talking to people that Frankie's arc mirrored both the arc of the country, understanding they'd been lied to. There's the famous moment where Walter Cronkite says, what in the is going on over there and this realization of those lies and how important they were to Frankie and to the country. It was important that they do that. But I really also wanted to say, let us not forget that these people went over there as patriots to serve their country. That's what was forgotten. I really wanted that to be remembered.

Dean Nelson: They were doing great things for the country while the country was doing harmful things. That's what I thought you captured so well in there with her specifically. Then she comes back to this country. The country is clueless about what is going on in Vietnam. They're saying you've got people saying there were no women in Vietnam. That was a little galling. But the worst was her conversation with the VA doctor. After Frankie tells him she was there and was a mess and she needed help, what did he ask her?

Kristin Hannah: Good Lord, I don't know. Wait a minute, didd you hold a gun?

Dean Nelson: That was one [Laughter] He asked if she was menstruating. There was that. That was just, again, so emblematic of this person is asking for help.

Kristin Hannah: That was the problem, too with the Vietnam vets in general. The men were having trouble getting help. You add the layer on top of that of a woman. One of the things that was interesting and it's in the book, of course this line where they kept hearing there were no women in Vietnam. I remember when I was talking to Diane, one of the first things I said to her was all of the memoirs, the women keep saying that they heard this. I said to Diane, "How can that be true?" She said, "It's absolutely true." She said, what we used to say was, if you never saw a woman, you were lucky, you weren't in a hospital. She heard it all the way through her career and after this absolute forgetting that women had served.

Dean Nelson: It's just mind blowing. Did they not watch MASH?

Kristin Hannah: That's what I said. I think that's in the book. It should be if it's not.

Dean Nelson: There are some beautiful parallels also between the book, The Women and the Nightingale. If we could talk about that for a minute. Where one of the lines in the Nightingale, I think it is, no one expects a woman to be brave. That's why that Isabelle character could do what she did, because nobody expected her to be brave. But that's true in all of your books. You've got these women who are doing very difficult, complicated things, and one of the reasons that they're able to do it is that nobody expects them to.

Kristin Hannah: We have to be, we're mothers. We're brave from the get go [Applause] I think it's less

that they don't think we're brave. Not that I would edit that sentence now or anything, but it's that we're discounted. The reason that Isabelle could be brave and do all these things was that no one thought a 19-year-old girl posed a threat. But one of the reasons I wrote Nightingale, actually, was because I was writing another book called Winter Garden, which was sent in. It's one of my favorites, too, actually, set in World War II, Russia.

As I was researching this, I came across the story of a young woman named Andree De Jongh, a Belgian 19-year-old woman who with her father started one of the first escape routes out of Nazi occupied France for downed airmen. Here's this young woman who is doing what Isabelle does in the book. She's meeting these airmen, she's hiding them, she's getting them across the country. She's walking them across the Pyrenees in her wedge sandals or whatever. I thought to myself, how do I not know this story? I read a lot of fiction.

Kristin Hannah: History. I read a lot of, fiction and the more I read about it and then read other books that followed that, the angry I became. I thought, how did I not learn this in college? How do I not know this? I remember thinking, this is a great idea for a book, I can't wait for someone else to write it. Because I was like, I'm not taking this on, I'm not a historian and this was a very big undertaking. I think I waited like two years, and no one did ad so I finally thought, okay, this is my idea I'm going to run with it. Sorry.

Dean Nelson: No, please.

Kristin Hannah: That's about as brave as I get, is what I was going to say.

Dean Nelson: I thought it was a powerful book. I saw a couple of parallels between that book and the women, that being one of them. Another one being, I mentioned it before fathers, in particular, all the main characters in those two books have this idea of their fathers and their fathers are behaving badly. Then at the end, the fathers actually do something really restorative. I just thought, there's a really interesting parallel, I'm just wondering, where's that coming from?

Kristin Hannah: Well, first of all, of course, the power of redemption is throughout all of my work, and it's very important to me. There's a lot of it in that, this idea that as parents, and I'm an older parent now, obviously, and I'm much more understanding about mistakes that we make that we didn't mean to and things that we could have done better and this hopeful idea that both we will learn and do better and that our children will understand and give us some grace. Then, of course, they become parents, and you're like, okay, you were right all along. Yes, I was, thank you very much. There's nothing more powerful to me, I don't think than your parent going, I'm proud of you. I love you.

Dean Nelson: Sacrifice for you. You touched on this a little bit just now. In my view, I haven't read all your books, but I have read some of them and in the ones that I have read, there are some spirituality themes that I think are really strong. There's the theme of redemption and restoration and forgiveness and the transforming power of love, second chances. Where's that coming from?

Kristin Hannah: Isn't that what we all want? Seriously.

Dean Nelson: But not everybody writes about it and says, this is actually a fundamental human value, and all of your books that I have read say that.

Kristin Hannah: That's really interesting. I know rebirth, second chances, believing in yourself. I guess in the great scheme of things, if I look at all of this, which I don't do very often, I am trying to put forth into the world an idea of hope and optimism and the importance of surviving bad things and remaining a good person and learning to love yourself and care for the people around you.

Dean Nelson: But in your books it's more than that.

Kristin Hannah: It is. Well, I want to make sure you get it.

Dean Nelson: For instance, in the Nightingale, you've got the Mother Superior character saying to Vianne who is overwhelmed by her circumstances and her impossible choices. Even the Mother Superior, the representation of God to her, saying, you're not alone, and you're not the one in charge. Ask for help when you need it and give help when you can, that is how we serve God and each other and ourselves in times as dark as these. Is that what you believe?

Kristin Hannah: Well, absolutely. I think that service and hope and faith and belief in ourselves and belief in each other and belief in whatever power you believe in is how we survive really difficult times. You and I were talking earlier, we have lost, I think, at the moment, a baseline compassion for each other. I know it exists in us, and I know it will come back. We've seen it get lost before. But I think the important thing is that we do it one person at a time, one choice at a time. It's just about the choices that you make and how you deal with and respect and care for the people around you.

Dean Nelson: One other reference that really caught my eye was in your book, Home Again.

Kristin Hannah: Oh, my gosh.

Dean Nelson: I'm going back.

Kristin Hannah: You are.

Dean Nelson: Where you've got a main character who's a priest and his ne'er-do-well brother, who's a celebrity, is named Angel.

Kristin Hannah: I don't want you to miss it, lets's be serious.

Dean Nelson: I was going to say, could you have been a little more subtle with some of this? No. But I will tell you my favorite line from the Nightingale. We'll go back to that for a second. My favorite line from the Nightingale. It's toward the end. The son is asking his mother why he hadn't known this story. Do you know what line I'm leading toward? Have you read any of your books? Basically, I could be saying anything.

Kristin Hannah: I just hope it sounds good.

Dean Nelson: This could be Danielle Steel that I'm talking to right now.

Kristin Hannah: I might.

Dean Nelson: Here's my favorite line, though, after he says to his mother, "Why didn't I know all this?" She says, "Men tell stories."

Kristin Hannah: Like women get on with it, something like that. That's right. Yes. Thank you. That's true.

Dean Nelson: That was awesome. I know it's part of the Kristin Hannah role that you started out as a lawyer. Your mom, just before she passed away, said, "You're a writer." You're in bed during a difficult pregnancy, watching what show?

Kristin Hannah: All my kids and The Price is Right.

Dean Nelson: There it is. You are thinking about writing a novel, and you wonder.

Kristin Hannah: How hard can it be?

Dean Nelson: There it is.

Kristin Hannah: That I remember.

Dean Nelson: That you remembered. This is what I think is just one of the things so amazing about you. So, you write a novel, Handful of Heaven, I believe, is the one.

Kristin Hannah: No, actually, there was one worse than that. It was my first novel. Yes, I was bedridden, pregnant, learning how to use a computer for the first time, dot matrix and MS-DOS or whatever, it was horrible. I had six and a half months to write it. How hard can it be? Turned out, I was so talented that I didn't have to edit.

Dean Nelson: Wow.

Kristin Hannah: It was awesome.

Dean Nelson: You are that good.

Kristin Hannah: I just sat down and wrote the novel beginning to end, turned it in, and thought, gosh, what lucky editor should I send this book to?

Dean Nelson: Lucky editor, that's good.

Kristin Hannah: I did. I sent it off, and then I started trying to figure out how I would juggle new motherhood and book touring at the same time.

Dean Nelson: You've gotten ahead of yourself a little bit.

Kristin Hannah: I'm all on, and then I get the letter from the editor that says and I quote, "You might have talent, it's impossible to tell." [LAUGHS]

Dean Nelson: That's another one of those lines, you don't forget.

Kristin Hannah: That was the moment because when you take on a creative endeavor like writing, there's this moment where you realize you have just embraced a desire or a goal that there is every chance in the world you will never succeed at. I had to accept, I may never become a writer, but I knew absolutely like with everything in life, I would certainly not become a writer if I didn't try. I'm a big believer in whatever it is you want to do, whatever it is you believe you have in you that's special to begin, because the beginning is absolutely the hardest part and then you just take it day by day. If you just don't give up, you stand a really good chance.

Dean Nelson: But I do think it's remarkable that you start with the question, how hard can this be and you just start writing. You turn it in, then you turn in another one and for a while there, you were doing a book a year.

Kristin Hannah: No one told me I didn't have to do that, I just went, okay, and those were the years that I was writing in the carpool lane.

Dean Nelson: Is that the title of a book?

Kristin Hannah: It could be. I wrote my first published novel pretty much with my son in a backpack hitting me in the head most of the time and that's the thing about people say to me all the time, I really want to be a writer, but I don't have time. My first response is, if you care about something enough, you make time. There were years where I had 90 minutes a day nap time. I'd put him in bed, race to the computer and write. What it taught me was that, I don't need a muse, I don't need a candle, I don't need the right album, I need to get to work because writing is a job.

Dean Nelson: You really approach it that way, don't you?

Kristin Hannah: I do.

Dean Nelson: But I'm thinking in the early days, and I've still got this question in my mind. How hard can it be?

Kristin Hannah: Pretty hard, actually, turns out.

Dean Nelson: That's what I was going to say. Almost 30 books later, how hard is it?

Kristin Hannah: It's better than a real job. [Laughter] Seriously.

Dean Nelson: Because you know, you were a lawyer and you hated that.

Kristin Hannah: That's way better than being a lawyer. But that was fun too. The thing that's interesting, so I do, I've written all these books, I've been doing this so long and yet every time I begin, I wonder if I can write a novel. I wonder if I've still got it in me.

Dean Nelson: After all these books, after all these years?

Kristin Hannah: Yeah, because it's magic. There's this part of it where it's all this hard work and it's putting the time in, and it's sitting there, day after day after day, whether it's going well or going poorly. Again, it's this belief. It's my belief in myself, my belief in the story, my ability, I think to continually move forward and let go of what I've done, which is why I can't remember any of my own work.

Dean Nelson: No, that's fair.

Kristin Hannah: I do have to read the Nightingale again, this movies coming out.

Dean Nelson: Yes.

Kristin Hannah: I'm going to have to be able to answer questions at some point.

Dean Nelson: We're going to talk about that in just a second. But before we get there, I want to talk about your early love of literature was horror.

Kristin Hannah: Well, earliest was the geek girl fantasy sci-fi, that was the earliest. Lord of the Rings, it's probably still the most important book I've ever read for me from a writer's perspective. Because it's good versus evil, it's an ordinary person or people doing extraordinary things to save the world. I love this.

Dean Nelson: But why haven't you written a horror novel yet?

Kristin Hannah: Well, when my mom and I first talked about this back when I was young and in law school, and my mom said, you're going to be a writer, it was this shocking moment, and I thought, well, there's no chance of that. She said, "Well, let's write a novel together."

Kristin Hannah: Being mother and daughter, we immediately started arguing about what book we were going to write. She wanted to write historical romance and I wanted to write horror. Then you flash forward to the point where I was actually going to become a writer, this pregnancy moment, and I realized that I did not want to open my mind to that world. I did not want to live in a world where children were in danger, where bad things happened and inhabit it the way I need to to write a novel.

Dean Nelson: That's fair enough. I have a horror novel idea for you.

Kristin Hannah: Do you? What is it?

Dean Nelson: I do. when some friends heard that I was going to be interviewing you, one in particular said she had just been at a spa and she was going around different parts of the spa, every single person there was reading a Kristin Hannah novel.

Kristin Hannah: Is that the horror?

Dean Nelson: No. [Laughter]. I thought you'd actually be gratified to hear that, [Laughter] but I misread you. I'm thinking the spa women. I think there's a horror novel to be written about spa women. [Laughter]. I'll help you if you want.

Kristin Hannah: You better develop this a bit, before you-

Dean Nelson: No. Some people just can't recognize great ideas. [Laughter]. We've talked a couple of different ways about your mom. You said you sensed her presence when you were writing Firefly Lane.

Kristin Hannah: I did.

Dean Nelson: How did that manifest?

Kristin Hannah: I can't remember when I wrote Firefly Lane.

Dean Nelson: Do you remember writing Firefly Lane?

Kristin Hannah: I do remember writing it. Actually, I remember why I wrote Firefly Lane. Because that was the book I had reached a certain age, and when you've lost your mother early like I did, you know that it comes and goes in waves. There's a lot of times that it reasserts itself when you get married, when you have a baby, all of these things. There was something about this age where I was suddenly desperate to know who she was. My father, who is a super cool guy, was not the best at keeping these memories. My mom had thrown away all the pictures of her that were not good, so we had no pictures of her. I went in search of her in the only way I know how to do anything, which is to create her. I finally took on breast cancer and not only the death of your mother, but the death from the daughter's point of view so that I could learn about her.

Dean Nelson: Learn about you.

Kristin Hannah: Learn about me, as well. I did not realize this, but it turned out that I started the book at exactly the same age she was when she was diagnosed, and I finished it at the age she was when she died. I just felt her presence all the way through.

Dean Nelson: Yes that's powerful. That was made into a Netflix series of Nightingale coming out next year. The Fanning Sisters, are the sisters in this? Unbelievable.

Kristin Hannah: Pretty amazing.

Dean Nelson: Congratulations. Did I hear that there's a movie in the works about the women?

Kristin Hannah: Yes, there's a movie in the works about the women. [Applause]. Yes.

Dean Nelson: Congratulations. I was talking to one writer who had a movie made out of one of his books, and he said, actually, the people in Hollywood say they really want your input, but what they really want is for you to die so that you'll just butt out. Has it been a good experience so far?

Kristin Hannah: I will say, the team behind The Nightingale and The Women are very supportive. If there's one thing that's been, I think, a really important change in the last five or six years, is Hollywood seems to understand now that readers matter and that books matter. This is huge. It really

is huge because they understand, especially when it comes to women, because women tend to be discounted, I think, in film. This idea that, yes, there are 10 million people that could be waiting to see The Nightingale, this actually persuades them. The Fanning sisters have been just rock solid, they have been supporting this endeavor forever.

Dean Nelson: How cool to have sisters playing sisters? That's just awesome.

Kristin Hannah: Yes, for the first time, too.

Dean Nelson: I'm still amazed that you write longhand.

Kristin Hannah: I do.

Dean Nelson: Still?

Kristin Hannah: I do still write longhand. I do. It's a couple of reasons.

Dean Nelson: Why? There's stuff. There's things you can type.

Kristin Hannah: I know. They have these technology now where I could actually use a laptop. I can't sit at a desk that long, A. You know what? You can't use a laptop on the beach. I write a lot in a beach chair sitting on the beach. I wrote Winter Garden, my World War II Russian novel, Sitting on the Beach in Hawaii. [Laughter].

Dean Nelson: The things we do.

Kristin Hannah: Yes. The weather was terrible.

Dean Nelson: But my observation of writing longhand, and there are certain times when I will as well, it just slows my brain down and it makes me more intentional about the words I'm choosing. Does that happen with you?

Kristin Hannah: I think it's the lack of a delete key. Because it's trouble to cross it out. When I write on a laptop, oh, that's terrible, delete, delete, delete, and so you spend all day and you got a paragraph.

Dean Nelson: Also, you don't mind the editing process.

Kristin Hannah: I love it.

Dean Nelson: The slash and burn, you like?

Kristin Hannah: I love it.

Dean Nelson: Why?

Kristin Hannah: I will let a crossing guard edit me.

Dean Nelson: You created this. It's got to be painful to do that.

Kristin Hannah: No, painful is writing a bad book. Honestly. I think I like reimagining. I like getting it better, I like changing things and I will throw away. For example, with The Four Winds, I did my year of research. [Applause]. Thank you. I did my year of research, and then I wrote the first draft of the book for a year. For those of you who have read it, the main character is a woman named Elsa and her, I don't know, 13-year-old daughter, I think. The entire first draft, Elsa was not in it. It wasn't until I got to Page 500 that she walked on, and I went, "I've made a mistake", and threw away 500 pages and started over. It was better the second time, it really was.

Dean Nelson: I believe you. You have spoken often about the importance of your relationship with Megan Chance. Does every writer, in your opinion, need someone like her in their life, a Tolkien, C.S. Lewis thing? Why is she important to you?

Kristin Hannah: I'm just very lucky. We met when we were, gosh, 26-years-old. She had already written five unpublished novels. We have become best friends, not collaborators, because she has her own career, she writes her own books. But what I find is so important is, what is it about your best girlfriend? Do they always tell you the truth whether you want to hear it or not? That's what it is. We just love each other enough to say, "Man, that book blows. You need to fix this, you need to start over." Then when you get to that point where you need to fix it or start over, you have somebody to talk it through who knows what's in your head, what's in your heart, what your capabilities are, and is constantly pushing you to be better. Then there's the wine. [Laughter].

Dean Nelson: Does everybody need that or?

Kristin Hannah: Actually, most people don't want it.

Dean Nelson: That's what I was wondering.

Kristin Hannah: Most people don't want it. It really depends on I think, your personality. Obviously, I'm not the person who can sit in a room by myself over ten years and pull out the Great American novel. There are people like that, that don't get edited at all. I think there's as many roads to do this as there are people who want to do it.

Dean Nelson: You've also said that you were glad success didn't come to you early in your career. Whatever we mean by success.

Kristin Hannah: I didn't feel that at the time, I'd like to point that out.

Dean Nelson: Why is that? Because I think that's a really important point.

Kristin Hannah: Oh, gosh. If The Nightingale had been my first book, I just think that's crushing. You look at books like I don't know, Where the Craw Dads Sing, fabulous, Bonnie Garmus' Lessons in Chemistry, Amy Tan. It is incredibly difficult to follow up success like this because your bar is here. I had an awful lot of years where nobody cared what I was doing, and that was lovely. [Laughter].

Dean Nelson: We're going to go into the lightning round here.

Kristin Hannah: No.

Dean Nelson: No, It doesn't have to be one word answer.

Kristin Hannah: Have you got good questions?

Dean Nelson: This is what I do. [Laughter]. Come on. You agreed to come to this, by the way.

Kristin Hannah: I don't know that I was told what it was about. I just have to be clear.

Dean Nelson: The importance of libraries.

Kristin Hannah: Oh, my gosh. Obviously, in the beginning, when I started this career, there was no Internet. It was going to the libraries, it was doing all the research. But even before that, I've said repeatedly, my dad was an adventurer and we moved around a lot. I went to four high schools and three junior highs, and when you're always the new girl, many things are true. Your haircut is always wrong, your jeans are always wrong, you don't know who to make friends with, and so whenever we went to a new town, the first place I went was the library. Again, Sam and Frodo, Lord of the Rings,

these were my boys. I always had a friend in the library.

Dean Nelson: Beautiful. What about artificial intelligence?

Kristin Hannah: 08:06 is when you ask about artificial intelligence?

Dean Nelson: May I remind you, this is the Lightning Round. [Laughter]

Kristin Hannah: No comment. Move on.

Dean Nelson: Seriously? You got nothing? You don't want to say anything about that?

Kristin Hannah: No. It's too big a topic to be believe about.

Dean Nelson: Advice to writers. You've given us some already.

Kristin Hannah: Start, believe in yourself, and don't quit.

Dean Nelson: That's great advice. [Applause]. Final question. Let's talk about your new book.

Kristin Hannah: This is a contemporary novel. It is not historical. It is about, not surprisingly, I guess, female friendship and the transformative power of a woman finding her voice and standing up and standing with her friends and speaking out.

Dean Nelson: Look forward to it. Kristin Hannah, thank you for being at our Writers Symposium. [Applause]. Look at that. That's good.