

## **FALSE TRUST Book Club Questionnaire**

Welcome, everyone, to our book club meeting! Tonight, we're diving into Steve Shipton's ***FALSE TRUST (Blake Willis Thriller Series Book 1)***. This novel plunges us into the world of cybersecurity, high-stakes corporate espionage, and deep personal betrayal. As a crime thriller, it promises a fast-paced narrative, intricate plots, and moral dilemmas that keep us on the edge of our seats.

### **Book Synopsis: FALSE TRUST**

*FALSE TRUST* introduces us to Blake Willis, a successful middle-aged cybersecurity consultant with a seemingly perfect life: a beautiful, super-smart wife, Rebecca, and two sons. His world is irrevocably shattered when he decides to sell his grandfather's "million-dollar moonshine," a valuable, sixty-year-old family whisky. To maximize its sale, Blake reluctantly seeks the help of his estranged best friend and Rebecca's ex-fiancé, Justin Coulter, a tech billionaire with a history of treachery.

However, what begins as a potential business venture quickly spirals into a nightmare. Upon returning home, Blake discovers his caretaker, Holden, murdered and the precious whisky stolen. The situation escalates when Rebecca is kidnapped, leaving Blake in a desperate race against time. As lines of trust blur, Blake realizes that his friends, enemies, and even his wife, may not be who he thought they were. The investigation, led by Detective Emma Thompson, reveals layers of corporate espionage, advanced computer technology, and involvement from disreputable foreign powers. Blake finds himself navigating a complex web of deceit, where his past choices and relationships come back to haunt him, forcing him to confront uncomfortable truths about loyalty, power, and the true cost of success.

Now, let's open the floor for discussion!

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### **Book Club Discussion Questions**

Here are ten questions to kick off our discussion, designed to encourage a deep dive into the novel's themes and characters. We'll aim to spend about five to ten minutes on each question. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers!

1. **First Impressions and Genre Fit:** What were your initial reactions to *FALSE TRUST*? Did it meet your expectations for a crime thriller, and how did it compare to other books you've read in the genre? The overview for the Blake Willis series mentions it aligns with authors like Dan Silva and David Baldacci. Do you agree with this comparison?

2. **Blake's Character Arc:** Blake Willis is described as an “Everyman Turned Hero”. How did you perceive Blake at the beginning of the novel, and how did your perception change as he faced increasingly dire circumstances, including Holden’s murder and Rebecca’s kidnapping? What significant moments contributed to his “Character Arc of Increasing Competence?”
3. **Justin Coulter as the Antagonist:** Justin Coulter embodies the “Evil Billionaire” trope. What were his primary motivations for his actions against Blake and Rebecca? Did his transformation from Blake’s childhood friend to the novel’s antagonist feel believable, and what aspects of his personality made him so effective as a villain?
4. **The Central Theme of *FALSE TRUST*:** The novel’s title, *FALSE TRUST*, is clearly a major theme. Where did you see instances of misplaced trust throughout the story, beyond just Blake’s relationship with Justin? How does the concept of “Loyalty vs. Betrayal” drive the narrative and impact the characters’ choices?
5. **Technology and Its Ethical Implications:** The book heavily features “advanced use of computer technology” and “cybersecurity,” including “Digital Forensics” and the “dark web.” How integral was technology to both the crimes committed and their investigation? What ethical questions did the use of technologies like surveillance systems, payment masking, and even DNA-altering serums raise for you?
6. **Rebecca’s Agency and Justin’s Obsession:** Rebecca is portrayed as a “super-smart wife” and a “Strong Female Character.” How did her past, particularly her background in Shanghai and her previous relationship with Justin, shape her character? What did you make of Justin’s disturbing obsession with **transforming Rebecca Willis into Emerald Jade**, and how did Rebecca resist this psychological and physical manipulation?
7. **The Role of Secondary Characters:** The novel features a diverse cast of supporting characters, including Daniel Zhu, Carla Rossini, Holden Holden, and Detective Emma Thompson. Which secondary characters did you find most compelling, and how did they contribute to the plot and Blake’s journey? Were there any characters whose true loyalties remained uncertain for you, fitting the “Hidden Identity / Double Agents” trope?
8. **Pacing and Suspense:** *FALSE TRUST* is described as a “fast-paced, intense, and thrilling page turner.” Which moments or plot developments particularly heightened the suspense or tension for you? Were there any “Twists and Double Twists” that genuinely surprised you?
9. **Justice and Retribution:** The pursuit of justice for Holden’s murder and Rebecca’s kidnapping drives much of the narrative. How satisfying was the resolution to these crimes? Did Blake’s resort to vigilante justice feel justified given the circumstances, and what are your thoughts on the final sentences for Justin and Nikolai?

10. **Anticipating the Series:** Given that *FALSE TRUST* is Book 1 of 3 (with two more planned), what unresolved questions or lingering tensions do you think might carry over into *FALSE START* and subsequent books? Are there any characters or plotlines you are particularly eager to see explored further in the series?

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### **Optional Questions (if time permits)**

- **The Whisky's Symbolic Significance:** The “million-dollar moonshine” serves as the initial catalyst for the events. Beyond its monetary value, what symbolic significance did the whisky hold for Blake and the larger plot? How did its journey reflect themes of inheritance, loss, and restoration?
- **The Author's Background:** The author, Steve Shipley, mentions his background as a “semi-retired corporate IT consultant” who has “worked in the most difficult global environments”. How do you think this real-world experience influenced the realism and depth of the corporate espionage, technological aspects, and geopolitical themes in the novel?
- **Real vs. Mythical Locations:** The author notes that some locations are real (e.g., Hobart, Sydney, Harvard), while others are mythical (e.g., Baxter, Vantage Island). Did this blend of reality and fiction enhance or detract from your immersion in the story?
- **Luxury as a Façade:** The book prominently features settings like Justin's lavish Spirit Hill mansion and the world of billionaires. How did the depiction of opulence and his philanthropy serve to mask deeper, darker activities in the novel?
- **Character Names and Nicknames:** Several characters have nicknames or changes in name (e.g., Holden Holden, Dmitry/Damien Romaniski, Rebecca/Yun Mei/Emerald Jade, Robert Baumgartner/Blizzard). Did these names add to your understanding of the characters or their roles in the story, or did they create any confusion?