



by *USA Today* bestselling, RITA, Christy, and Carol Award-winning Author Susan May Warren

A winter storm stirs up the past... Six months ago, an epic plane crash in Montana's wilderness threw smokejumpers Hannah Butcher and CJ St. John together in a fight to survive and ignited feelings they're both trying to ignore. Now, a mutual friends' wedding throws them together again. But when a winter storm sends their car off the road in the middle of nowhere, they'll have to face their darkest fears—and deepest feelings—in order to stay alive. A Christmas story about the miracles that happen when the weather outside turns frightful.

~ Excerpt ~

CHAPTER ONE

If she just kept moving, the howling would stop. Hannah all but pressed her hands to her ears as she quick-walked around the corner of the Kalispell Regional Medical Center emergency department, her white-soled sneakers squeaking against the polished floor.

Don't run. The voice in her head reached out for purchase, but she had already started into a jog, her heartbeat at the helm.

Just keep moving. She passed the ER entrance into the main hospital, her feet scrubbing on the carpeting in the hallway, adding traction to her flight, and she ramped up her speed, not caring now that she might be making a scene.

A nurse fleeing the hospital. Yeah, that would help PR.

It could be worse. She could let free the sobs burning her throat, gathering like a storm in her chest.

An eerie wail had started low in her gut, a moan, an ache, more of a feeling than a sound.

Not until the doctor pushed Hannah aside, his hand bruising her arm, did the moan twine up through her, a poison saturating her body.

Because she'd frozen. Did *nothing*. Sure, her station as a student nurse held her captive, but please, someone had to do *something*.

But she'd simply shut down, her insides screeching to a halt as the baby emerged, blue. And when the mother's BP bottomed out—

Hannah hit the door with both hands, slamming it hard, gulping in the cool December air.

Clamped her mouth shut against the cry that shook through her.

Don't fall apart.

The Rocky Mountains that corrugated the pocket of flatland to the west of Glacier National Park contained too much balmy warmth for the season. No lacy snowflakes drifting from the sky, no icy droplets from the rooftops, nothing to suggest a hint of cheer for the upcoming holiday weekend.

Even the stars hid from view, thanks to the clutter of thick cumuli jamming up the sky. An irritating dust of moisture layered the air, a hint of something brewing.

Hannah made it to the edge of the sidewalk, then bent and caught her knees with her hands, breathing hard.

Closed her eyes as the howl shook her.

Apparently, she couldn't run far enough.

"Hannah?"

Oh no. She winced, even as she shook her head, blinking away the tears.

Big girls, nursing students in their final year, didn't freeze under pressure.

She stood up, wrapping her arms around herself, the air cool enough to raise gooseflesh. “Margarquet.” She didn’t have to see her head nurse to know her expression.

Disappointment, not a little embarrassment.

But out of all of the nurses Margarquet Flemming *understood*.

So Hannah said nothing more as Margarquet, her sweater pulled around her lean frame, came up next to Hannah. Blonde hair cut jaw short, twenty years of experience etched in the lines around her eyes, Margarquet pulled out a couple of hankies, handed one to Hannah, kept one for herself.

Hannah fisted the cloth and stared at the razor-backed outline of the far-away mountains. “I’m sorry I ran.”

Margarquet nodded, a soft bobbing of her head. “Sometimes I want to run, too.”

Hannah looked away, pressed the cloth to her eyes.

The howling shrank back to the pocket, deep inside, where it resided.

“A good nurse doesn’t run,” Hannah said. “It was just so—”

“Do you want this, Hannah?” Margarquet glanced at her. “You’re my best student. But...”

Hannah waited for it. *You panic. A good nurse doesn’t panic.*

“You’ve been through a lot this year. Maybe you need to take a break.”

Oh. Not what she expected.

And in the wake of her words, images. Memories. Heat searing her legs, the sweat and grime of the earth in her mouth, the whistle of air as her plane dropped from the sky.

CJ.

And behind it all, the howling.

No. “I’m fine. Really.” Maybe if she said it again, this time with less tremble in her voice, she might believe it.

Margarquet said nothing. The moisture in the air thickened, and a breeze kicked an empty coffee cup across the parking lot.

“How’s CJ?” Margarquet asked softly.

Hannah lifted one shoulder. “Fine, I think.”

“You think? What happened—?”

She glanced at Margarquet. “We were never more than friends.”

See, her voice was better that time. Maybe because she actually spoke the truth.

Margarquet clearly wasn’t buying it because her eyebrow arched.

“Seriously. We were just...together. Because of the crash. Because we needed each other.”

Margarquet’s voice fell, soft, a whisper of truth. “Maybe you still do.”

“No. He’s fine. In rehab at his parents’ ranch near Miles City. He’ll probably even be back jumping next summer.”

“No one expects that of him. Or you.”

Hannah gave a brutal, quick laugh. “Oh, I’m not going back to smokejumping. I’m not that brave.” But the words were acid in her throat.

“You’re exactly that brave, and more. Capable and smart—”

“And I panic.” Hannah shook her head, sighed. “If I was brave, I wouldn’t have run from a woman whose baby died in her arms five days before Christmas.”

So much for the advent message—God showing up to save a scared and broken humanity.

Or, for that matter, her.

She’d learned long ago that she was in this alone.

Margarquet put her arm around Hannah’s shoulder. “Go home—”

“But my shift isn’t—”

“Tomorrow then. Tomorrow, after your final, go home. To Ember. Be with your family. Call CJ. I know you’re still friends.”

Hannah pressed her lips together. They were friends, at least online, but he didn’t need her anymore, not the way he had.

She could still feel, however, the press of his hand in hers, the soft tenor of his voice as it wove through the darkness.

We’re going to live through this.

Probably she’d never stop needing him.

A ping of cold rain hit her scalp.

Margarquet glanced up. “I think we’re in for a storm.”