

# FALLOUT by Carrie Stuart Parks

## EXCERPT

*Publisher: Thomas Nelson*

### Prologue

Hanford, Washington

November 23, 1988

The November wind blew across the almost-barren plain, attempting to leach any warmth from the man's black wool coat. He pulled the woolen balaclava higher on his nose and wished he'd worn goggles. The wind raised icy tears that blurred his vision.

Snow clung to the scant protection offered by basalt outcroppings and meager shrubs.

The moon provided weedy light, enough to avoid the sagebrush and tumbleweeds, but not enough to reveal the ground squirrels' burrows. He'd fallen twice.

He paused for a moment to check his compass. He figured he'd covered about six of the eight miles. There was little chance he'd be detected. He'd approached the area by boat on the Columbia River, which flowed down the eastern side of the remote facility in South Central Washington State. Though the site was massive—570 square miles—the roads were heavily patrolled. After all, the Hanford Nuclear Reservation was the largest producer of postwar nuclear weapons.

Hanford's creation of the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, had provided the turning point in World War II. Afterward, the plant morphed into a Cold War arsenal against the Soviet Union until the last nuclear reactor finally shut down just a year ago.

He'd chosen the date carefully—Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving. All the staff and workers would have left early in preparation for the holidays. Only a minimal number of employees would be working, and they'd not be inclined to venture into the frigid night.

Though he'd been on the Hanford Site since he'd left the river, his goal was the Hanford Tank Farms. The tanks held 53 million gallons of the highest-level radioactive waste found in the United States. He would be targeting the SY Tank Farm, three double-shelled waste storage units built

between 1974 and 1976, located at the 200 West site. The tanks at this location were each capable of holding 1.16 million gallons of nuclear waste.

He shifted the backpack slightly. The bomb, made with C-4, was safe enough from his jostling cross-country run. It took a detonator to set off the explosion, which he'd rig once the materials were in place.

The tanks themselves were built of one-foot-thick reinforced steel and concrete and had been buried under eight feet of dirt, but the hydrogen from the slurry had built up in these particular tanks to dangerous levels. He didn't need to reach the tanks themselves, only disable the exhaust vent and the temperature thermocouple assembly. He knew no maintenance work was going on around the tanks that might create a spark or heat, so chance of discovery was extremely slim.

He paused for a moment to catch his breath. He'd paddled down the treacherous icy river, then jogged for miles, but his fury fueled his drive. In February of 1986, the Department of Energy had released nineteen thousand pages of documents describing the declassified history of the Hanford operations. Hints of a darker truth were written between the lines, and more evidence came out in the batch of documents released the following year. Everyone else would have missed it, but he'd been able to piece the sequence of events together.

They'd grown rich while he'd been discarded like so much trash.

Now was his time to get even.

He'd use the threat of the bomb to force the acknowledgment of their role and his own innocence. Anything less than the possibility of a Chernobyl-size disaster would lead to a governmental cover up.

A massive press conference. Facts and figures. Undeniable evidence.

In the meantime, he'd personally take care of those directly responsible.

He increased his pace. *Soon now.*

He knew this part of the facility well.

He found the location he'd identified before, knelt beside the various ports, detectors, and vents, and swiftly assembled the parts according to the bomb-maker's directions. All that was left was the trigger mechanism. He'd placed it in a secure box inside his backpack.

The box was gone.

He ran his hands over the backpack again. Then again. Then a third time. It was gone. *Did I forget to pack it? No.* It was here in this backpack when he'd left home.

He broke out in a clammy sweat and rocked back on his heels. *How could this have happened?* Where had it dropped out? Could it be back in the boat? Somewhere on the ground between here and the river's edge? Separated from him when he fell?

*Calm down.* He had a backup. Even if he didn't find the trigger, all it would take is a reasonable-sized explosion on the surface to start the process.

If it took the rest of his miserable life, he'd carry out his plan. They wouldn't get away with it. Not this time.

# One

## September 2015

*Bam! Bam!* An engine roared, growing louder, closer.

I glanced up from the shading technique I was demonstrating for my elementary-school art class. A black Suburban was barreling across the parking lot directly at my classroom.

“Run!” I screamed.

The children didn’t hesitate, bolting for the door. I shoved the last boy outside toward the gym just as the Suburban smashed into the side of the building and plowed into the room. The portable classroom moved with a *screech*. Desks, chairs, books, glass, and chunks of the wall and ceiling exploded in a cacophony of sound and movement. Metal fragments, shattered glass, and hunks of wood pelted me. I found myself outside next to the gym doors, not knowing how I got there. I curled up and covered my head, praying nothing would crash down on me.

*Hisssssssss*. The stench of an overheated engine and hot rubber made me gag.

The crushed front of the Suburban had shoved the classroom into a covered storage shed before punching through the opposite wall. Fluids hissed and dripped from under the smashed hood, right beside me. The shed had collapsed onto the SUV.

I was shaking so hard I didn’t think I could get my legs to work. *The children.*

*Don’t worry about the children. Someone will help them. Someone will help me.* I just needed to stay put. *I’m safe here.*

But they wouldn’t respond to someone calling to them. I taught them to be cautious.

*If I move, the roof will come down on me. I’ll be crushed. Stay put and be safe. Someone will come for me.*

*But my students are frightened. I need to help them. Heavenly Father, help me.*

I placed my hands on the ground. White powder drifted down on my head. Carefully I crawled away from the SUV.

The beam shifted, sliding sideways.

My crawl became a scramble.

The beam shrieked as it slid across the metal desk holding it up.

I plunged, then rolled away.

The roof of the shed slammed against the ground, sending up more dust and powder.

Leaning against the school, I waited until I could catch my breath. The glass in the door to the gym beside me had shattered. I couldn't see anything of the driver. I slipped through the frame, wincing at the stabs of pain from the hurtled projectiles.

Ahead of me was a second door leading to the front of the school. A quick glance into the gym showed it empty. I was pretty sure the children had raced through both sets of doors, scattered, and found safety. I'd trained my class of first-through-third graders on what to do in case of an emergency or active shooter. The school board had rolled their eyes at me, assuring me that this was covered in the student handbook and that school shootings wouldn't happen in a sleepy farming community like LaCrosse, Washington, population 330.

I'd finally convinced them. They allowed the drills and the self-defense class I offered on Tuesday evenings.

Fortunately, my art class was an after-school event, and the rest of the school was essentially empty. We met in a portable building because some of the classrooms were under repair for water damage.

I staggered outside. Mr. Parsons, the school maintenance man, rushed over to me.

"Samantha? Sam? Miss Williams? Are you all right? You're bleeding. What happened?"

"Help me find the children first."

"They're fine. They ran as you taught them." We looked around the manicured lawns in front of the school buildings.

"Olly olly oxen free!" I called out, voice shaking. I cleared my throat and tried again. "Olly olly oxen free!"

Slowly my class emerged from their hiding places. I counted them as they appeared. *Please, Lord . . . Five, six, seven, eight . . . nine.* All present and accounted for. My stomach tightened on what could have happened, would have happened, if even one of them had paused to ask, *Why run?*

"Aren't you supposed to just say 'all clear'?" Mr. Parsons asked.

"I know the handbook says that, but anyone could access the emergency plans and use them against the children."

Several of the children had tear streaks running down their faces, but as soon as they caught sight of me, they started to giggle.

“Miss Williams, you’re all white!”

“You have stuff all over you!”

“You should see yourself!”

I looked down. I was indeed covered in a white powder, probably from the recently installed smashed Sheetrock and insulation. “Oh my. It looks like I’ve turned into the magical snowman.”

“Nooo!” The giggles grew louder. “It’s not winter!”

I bent forward to be on eye level with most of them. “Maybe I’ve become Belle, the white Great Pyrenees from *Belle and Sebastien*?”

“That’s a dog.” The giggles became high-pitched laughter.

I grinned at them. “How about Casper, the friendly ghost?”

The kids were now laughing so hard they couldn’t answer for a moment. Finally Bethany gasped out, “You’re not dead.”

*Thank You, Lord.* I straightened. “Well then, if I’m not a snowman, dog, or ghost, I must be Miss Williams, and you know what that means.” As they eagerly lined up, I said, “I am not afraid of storms . . .”

“For I am learning how to sail my ship,” the children finished.

*Leave it to children’s books.* As they approached me, each one gave me a sign as to what type of interaction they wanted. Hands out to the side, a hug. Hand held up in the air, a high five. Closed hand, a fist bump. Right hand sideways, a handshake.

They all wanted hugs.

So did I.

Bethany was the last in line. I tried not to hug her the longest. Teachers aren’t supposed to have favorites.

The school buildings rested on a hill facing the town park. The wail of sirens and stream of cars and trucks announced the arrival of help and parents. I moved my small huddle of children around to the front toward the parking lot so their folks could find them. The parents, once reunited with their son or daughter, peppered me with questions.

“What happened?”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Was that a drunk driver?”

“Are you okay?”

As I stumbled through various versions of “I don’t know,” a deputy from the Whitman County Sheriff’s Department strolled over. He had to be at least six foot three inches tall, with silver hair, thick black eyebrows, and dark brown eyes that looked like they’d ferret out the facts of any case. He smelled of cigarettes. His name tag said R. Adams. “Ma’am. Looks like you were in the building when the accident happened.”

“Yes. Is the driver—”

“Come with me.” He had a slight New York accent. We walked to the gym, then around to the back side where the accident happened. I had to trot to keep up with him.

“Do you know if the driver is okay?”

His long stride covered a lot of ground. “We don’t know yet.”

The raised gravel parking area near the gym was filling with the LaCrosse ambulance, volunteer fire department, and sheriff’s department vehicles. People were rushing around like ants in a disturbed mound. The Suburban was completely buried under the collapsed roof, and a large group of men and women were working to clear the debris.

Deputy Adams led me to the ambulance where an EMT waited. “Are you hurt?”

“I don’t think—”

“You have a cut on your head.” The EMT had me sit while he checked me over.

Deputy Adams kept an eye on the rescue efforts as he pulled out a small notebook. “You got all the children out safely?”

I winced as the EMT removed a sliver of glass from my hairline. “By the grace of God, yes. They’re all on their way home.”

He nodded and gave me a slight smile, softening his face. “Absolutely. How many people were in the SUV?”

“I don’t know.” I told him about what sounded like gunfire and the sound of an engine and getting the children clear of the room. I left out my cowering in the debris.

“Gunfire? Are you sure?”

“It could have been backfire.”

He looked around, then motioned for an officer to come over. They spoke for a few moments before the man left.

I glanced over at the gathered first responders, parents, and neighbors. What if—

“When did you first see the SUV?” Deputy Adams asked.

I pointed. “He, or whoever was driving, must have come up either First or Hill Avenue, crossed this lot, then shot straight into the building.”

A farmer drove up on a John Deere tractor and began lifting larger chunks of rubble with the bucket.

After the deputy took my name, address, and phone number, he handed me a business card. “I’ll be contacting you soon for your statement. You might want to head home as soon as possible. We want to clear the area.” He strolled away.

More people had arrived and pitched in to free the SUV and its occupants. A truck with a Miller Construction sign on the side parked next to us. Men in hard hats, work boots, and lime-green safety vests got out and set to work.

A pregnant woman in her thirties with long, dark hair pulled into a french braid drifted over and hovered nearby. When the EMT finished putting a bandage on my head and moved away, she approached me. “Hi. I’m Mary Thompson. I overheard you talking to that deputy. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“I guess. You’re a reporter?”

“No. Copywriter for a medical company in Spokane.” She rolled her eyes. “Booooooring. You’re Samantha Williams?”

I nodded.

“Well, Samantha—”

“Call me Sam.”

She grinned. “Sam then. You saved all those children. You’re so brave. I would have been scared out of my mind.”

Warmth burned up my neck and across my cheeks. “I . . . ah . . . so . . . um . . . what brought you to LaCrosse from Spokane?” I stood. “That’s 86.9 miles from here.”

“I was already here.”



An officer started herding the onlookers away from the crash. “Move on, folks. Nothing for you to do here.”

“Come on,” Mary grabbed my elbow and pulled me into the shade under a tree.

My brain was buzzing from the adrenaline and all the activity. “I’m sorry. I’m a little—”

“I bet you are. I guess I should start at the beginning. I’m following the story about the body they found last week. And the one they just found.” She waved her hand at the construction workers.

“Bodies?” I knew I was out of touch with the news. I didn’t own a television, computer, or phone. “What bodies? Wait . . . I’m not sure I want to know.” My legs started to buckle.

“Let me help you.” Mary grabbed my arm and helped me sit on a patch of grass. She sat next to me. “Can I get you something or—”

“No, I’ll be fine. Just a little woozy.”

“Take your time.”

Most of the onlookers had now moved around to the front of the school. With nothing to see, they started wandering back to their homes or cars.

She cleared her throat. “So do you want to talk about what just happened or—”

“No. You go ahead. You said there was a body . . . or was it two? Here at the school?”

“No, of course not. I followed someone to here and . . .” She paused at my expression. “I’m not weird or a stalker.” She twisted her lips. “As you can see, I’m pregnant. The baby’s father, my husband, Mike, disappeared two months ago. I reported it to the police but they’re not doing anything. I mean, he could be dead!”

I blinked at her. “Why would you think that?”

“Mike had—I guess you’d call it a wild streak. He had . . . questionable friends. Some issues with drugs in the past, stuff like that.” She absently rubbed her stomach. “I thought the baby would . . . redirect him.” She looked at me. “He’s a good man, just impulsive. And he’d never leave me. Not now. Not without telling me . . . something.”

I took a deep breath. The shaking threatened to start again. “So you thought one of the bodies—”

“Could be Mike.” She swiped a hand across her eyes. “That deputy.” She pointed to Deputy Adams. “I was told he was the investigator on the case. I’ve been following him around trying to get

him to talk to me, but he says it's an active case and won't talk about it. I followed him here to the school earlier—he has kids here that he was picking up—and was giving it one last go around.”

“Did you find out anything?”

“No. Not yet.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a leather-bound notebook. “I keep track of everything.” She flipped it open and fanned the pages, displaying a mass of tightly written notes. “I won't give up until I know for sure.”