

FREE

FALL

A NOVEL

NINA ATWOOD

Free Fall: A Novel

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CHAPTER ONE

Hannah Lee Winn breathed in once, twice, and felt excruciating pain. It began in her lower back and extended to her abdomen. It was dark, but that was only because her eyes were closed, or so she thought. *Don't bother opening your eyes; you won't like what you see.* She lay still for a while, drifting in and out.

Later, she swam out of the darkness behind her eyes and into real darkness. Her brain couldn't register her location, only the biting cold. She focused, concentrated as hard as she could through the waves of pain. First, she wiggled her fingertips, felt dirt, tiny pebbles, and some type of plant matter. *I'm outside, lying down, on the ground.*

What happened to me? How did I get here?

But before she could answer those questions, she needed to figure out the condition of her body.

She focused on her body, trying to assess the extent of her injuries. Something was terribly wrong in her lower back and abdomen. She moved her feet slightly, and that gave her a tiny ray of hope. *Not a spinal injury.* That was a good sign. She raised her right arm in the air, but that seemed to generate another wave of pain in her abdomen. She raised the left, gritting her teeth with the pain.



Hannah Lee lay still for a while, letting her mind drift to the possibilities. She struggled to remember. Was I thrown from a car? She listened but couldn't hear any vehicles passing nearby. She might be in a ravine beside a highway, the road too far above for her to hear the traffic. Maybe someone would notice the place where her car left the road.

Wait. She slowly rotated her head, looking around. There was no sign of a vehicle. There was, however, some kind of large, tent-like piece of blue fabric or canvass lying nearby. That brought a faint glimmer of memory, but not enough to formulate a chain of events, not enough to understand how she'd gotten there.

If she lay somewhere with no roads, the likelihood of another driver noticing her was remote. It was up to her to get herself out of there. A shiver of anxiety traveled from her scalp down her spine. *Time to try.*

She tried to roll over on her side, hoping to get into position to sit up, maybe stand. That tiny bit of movement set off another wave of unbearable pain. She felt herself slipping away from consciousness. This time, she fought the darkness, sensing that she needed to stay awake, stay alert.

It was cold, and she felt the temperature plunging. She began shivering, couldn't stop. She had to do something to avoid hypothermia. She looked again at the tentlike fabric. It seemed so far away. But she had to get to it, had to cover herself.

She began pulling herself along the ground. It was agonizing. You don't realize the purpose of core muscles until you lose them, and with her abdomen in so much pain, she could barely move.

It seemed to take forever, but she finally got close enough to touch the fabric with her fingertips, then to grasp the edge of it. She pulled with all her might and, at last, succeeded in covering most of her body. Gradually, she stopped shivering.

She looked around at the deep velvet night. The moon rode high and shed light over the landscape. Her view encompassed rocks, scree, hillside, and scrub. But, where was she? And how did she get here?

She noticed a sense of altitude. Even though she couldn't see beyond her immediate surroundings, she sensed she was at the top of a ridge or on the side of a mountain.

Hannah Lee lay silently, watching the stars slowly wheel overhead, glowing brilliantly. Every movement brought heightened pain, so she lay still. She heard night birds calling, their whispery ululations echoing in the canyon below. Insects chirped and buzzed nearby. She wondered absently if there might be snakes, poisonous snakes.

An owl hooted as it swooped overhead. Owls were such beautiful night creatures—swift, silent, and deadly. She felt so small, so feeble, so vulnerable.

“Hello!” she called out for the umpteenth time. Her voice cracked, a whisper in the wilderness. She didn’t believe anyone could hear her, but she tried at least every hour anyway. She swallowed dryly, wishing she had water.

The rocks and scree under her body made it impossible to lie completely still. It was just too uncomfortable. She moved her head slightly to try to get off of the small rock that punched a hole in her scalp. Like a pebble in a shoe that won’t move, this one stayed firmly underneath the back of her head. Slowly, she reached with one hand and brushed away the pebble under her head. That brought scalp relief but increased her other pain.

She wondered how many bones were broken. A terrible thought occurred to her—what if her initial assessment was wrong? What if she had internal injuries? Dread filled her mind, and her pulse skittered in fear. What if she was bleeding internally? Panic rose.

Stop it!

She made herself take deep, cleansing breaths. She began to pray. *Please God, bring help. Bring it fast. I don’t ask for much, but this time, I’m asking.*

Her thoughts drifted, searching for answers. *What is the last thing I remember? Basics—start with basics. Breakfast? What do I normally eat? Granola, yogurt, and fresh coffee with just a trace of real half-n-half. Yes, that’s it. Where is my favorite place for breakfast?*

She visualized her spacious wood deck, cantilevered on the side of a hill, hummingbirds darting around potted geraniums and impatiens, the morning sun hovering just below the horizon. A cushy deck chair with a light throw, a small, round table topped with multi-colored glass, her coffee mug sitting within reach. And the view—Carmel Valley, filled

with lush, rolling green hills.

A memory surfaced. Breakfast on the deck, interrupted by her husband, Ryan, asking her something. What was it? She couldn't pull up the entire memory. It was as if she saw a brief clip of a movie that suddenly faded away. Desperate, she tried to remember the rest of it, but couldn't. Even more disturbing, she had no idea if that was this morning, yesterday morning, or a month ago.

Ryan! He must be so worried. She never went anywhere without letting him know. She had no sense of the passage of time, but at a minimum, she'd been on the side of this mountain for several hours. Her hands and lower arms were cold, and she couldn't feel her feet.

How long can someone lie in the cold darkness, injured, and survive? She vaguely recalled stories she'd read in the media of people lost in the wilderness, who survived on water they found and food they scrounged.

But that wasn't her. She'd never find water if she couldn't move, couldn't stand, couldn't even crawl. Forget food.

The pain in her lower back and abdomen began to spread. It was unbearable, and after a couple of minutes, she felt herself slipping away. This time she didn't fight it. Darkness descended, and she welcomed the escape.



Hannah Lee swam out of the darkness. She heard a loud *whump, whump, whump* overhead. It grew louder, then faded away. It sounded familiar, but she couldn't place it.

Her mind swirling, she tried again to recall where she was, recent events. *What day is it?* Impressions emerged—the clear blue sky, the wind, followed by utter quiet, and, suddenly, the sensation of falling. Then, the impressions quickly receded behind a curtain.

Fingers of crimson spread gradually in the sky—dawn's early light. She peered around, saw that she was on a ridge, on the side of a small mountain, as she'd theorized. But where? The horizon lay far away, shrouded in low clouds. Nothing looked familiar.

Fear gripped her. How could she not know where she was or how she got there? It was far too difficult to stay focused, so she began

fading. Faintly, in the distance, she heard voices calling out. She fought the blackness but it didn't matter. Darkness descended.



Light penetrated the darkness, and voices swelled. *Why don't they turn out the lights, be quiet, and let me sleep?* She wanted to fade away, to go back into the darkness where there was less pain.

"Hannah Lee! Hannah Lee, can you hear me?" Someone was calling her name. The voice was soothing and calm, and somewhat melodious, but distinctly male.

"Hannah Lee!" There it was again. She moaned, unable to call out.

"Over here!" shouted a deeper male voice nearby.

"She's semi-conscious, possibly in shock," said the first voice.

"She's hypothermic. Let's get her warmed up," said the other voice.

Someone wrapped something around her. She shivered uncontrollably.

"Let's stabilize her neck with a brace."

Something was wrapped firmly around her neck. Then something hard slid underneath her body. It was even more uncomfortable than the ground had been.

"Hang in there, Ms. Winn. We're getting you onboard. In just a short time, we'll get you to the hospital, where you will be in great hands. They know you're coming because we've radioed ahead. You're going to be fine," said the first voice again.

She felt movement, the hard platform on which she lay in motion. *They're taking me somewhere.* She could hear the sounds of breathing nearby. There was jostling for a moment, awkward movements, the hard surface tilted, all of which elicited another moan.

"Sorry, Ms. Winn. We need to get you up this hill, and then it will be less uncomfortable."

The shivering decreased. She was still, could hear voices around her, and then the loud rotor she'd heard in the distance, now right next to her. *Whomp! Whomp! Whomp!* The noise and vibrations increased in intensity, and she could feel the entire vehicle take off and move rapidly upward.

I must be in a helicopter, she thought just before consciousness began slipping away. She heard someone say, “Check her blood pressure—it’s dropping like a rock,” and then, “She’s bleeding internally!”

After that, the darkness was complete.