

MARY CONNEALY

BROTHERS
IN ARMS

BOOK ONE

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For
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This book is dedicated to my cowboy.
He's retired now, but he'll always be a cowboy at heart.
He'd have done fine in the Wild West.

ONE

AUGUST 1870

BEAR CLAW PASS, WYOMING

Kevin Hunt came awake with a snap. A metallic clink. He didn't need to figure out more. He slid a hand over his little brother's mouth and felt Andy wake up instantly.

An inch from his ear, Kevin hissed, "Hide."

Not a word from Andy, not a question. Nothing but instant obedience. It made a big brother both mighty proud and sad. A shame the kid had learned such ugly lessons. Silence, fear, danger, death. Stay hidden. Move, move, move.

Ugly lessons they'd all learned well.

In the darkest night Kevin had ever known, he crawled on his belly around the campfire, its ashes burned down until they didn't even glow. The sky was a starless, moonless black mass. Not even a sliver of light.

Wind whistled with a mournful howl through the rolling hills and waving grass. The reminder that soon cold weather

would return to push back the warmth that now ruled August in Wyoming.

Fighting for silence and speed, hoping the wind covered when he failed, Kevin reached Molly on the far side of the campfire. Even though she was his sister, she said it was improper to sleep by the men. It was a cool night, and Kevin regretted Molly held herself apart from her brothers. She'd learned her own bitter lessons, and holding herself apart wasn't all about being proper.

He felt more than heard her wake up and stir just a bit. She judged the silence correctly and maintained it without his covering her mouth.

Bleeding Kansas had taught them a lot. Even all these years later, they remembered. All that teaching might save their lives tonight.

Kevin whispered just louder than a breath, "Hide fast."

Molly was moving before he said the second word, Kevin right behind her. His brother and sister were no kids. Molly an adult woman of nineteen. Andy fifteen. The three of them were on their way west, abandoning the town that'd turned on them.

Kevin crawled after Molly, scraping on his belly like a low-down cowardly worm, and it burned him to retreat. He'd like to stand and fight, but he couldn't fight what he couldn't see.

Summer grass closed overhead, but it wasn't tall like the prairie grass back in Kansas. Still, it was tall enough to cover a person lying on their belly. The grass rustled as they crawled into it, but with the wind covering their movements, Kevin hoped whoever was sneaking up on their camp wouldn't notice.

If they could just be silent and stay hidden in the grass, they had a good chance of surviving this night.

He listened. His vision was keen in the dark, but it was useless tonight, so he relied on sound and smell.

He heard a clink of metal again and a faint creak of leather. The very fact it was so quiet alerted him. A faint jingle of a horse's bridle, but not close. A brush of footsteps. More than one person. Whoever they were, they'd left their horses behind, sneaking up.

Not native folks. There wasn't usually metal on their hackamore bridles. And if it'd been an Indian, Kevin doubted he'd've heard them coming.

He turned back, crawled to the edge of the grass, not sure just where he'd be visible should the clouds part and the moon shine down. When he'd gotten as close as he dared, he waited, breath held, wondering where Andy was now.

An explosion of movement came from the far side of the camp. Two dark forms silhouetted against a black night leapt into the clearing and fired an instant after they appeared. Their deafening guns poured lead right into the blankets where Kevin and his family had slept.

Kevin saw the flare of light that accompanied each shot. Smelled the gunpowder, sharp and acrid. One of the men roared as if he were more beast than human. Their horses, tied somewhere nearby, whinnied as the noise of pistols blared.

Kevin forced himself to stay still. Any movement could bring those guns around to shoot at him.

The guns clicked on empty chambers. Then silence. Kevin's hand went to his holstered pistol. He could get them both before they reloaded.

Weight hit his back like a load of sod.

"No!" Molly's hiss was hidden in the breeze, only a hair from his ear.

She was a skinny little thing and couldn't have stopped him. But remembering all he stood to lose if his bullets missed and

they reloaded in time to shoot back made him release the gun and relax when he wanted to fight.

“They’re gone!” One of the men kicked the blankets aside before kicking at the campfire. “It’s gone stone cold. Are you sure this is where Hunt was camping?” A doubting Thomas who’d just told Kevin this wasn’t a simple robbery.

Not two men sneaking up on strangers to rob them. No, these men were hunting Kevin. And he knew just who one of them might be.

“Yep, three of ’em,” the other man replied. “I spotted them in Casper. Coming like we figured. Made sure they took the main trail west, straight for Bear Claw Pass, then I came for you.”

Like I figured. Very few people knew Kevin was coming out here. Very few people would profit from his death. Only one in fact.

A brother he’d never heard of until three weeks ago.

Kevin owned a share of Wyatt Hunt’s ranch. Or rather their pa’s ranch. Pa had been dead for less than a month. Again.

Before he’d left Kansas, Kevin had torn down the memorial headstone they’d put up for Pa twenty years ago. Tore it down and smashed it to pieces.

“If Hunt set up this camp and left, then they’re on to us. Let’s git.” Doubting Thomas whirled and strode back into the grass. His saddle partner hesitated for an instant, then went after his friend.

Kevin’s fingers itched to go for his gun. Letting Wyatt Hunt ride away unscathed didn’t suit him.

But shooting from cover in the dark didn’t suit him, either. Kevin wasn’t a killer. But folks killed who weren’t . . . if they had reason enough.

It wasn't long before Kevin heard two horses gallop away. On toward Bear Claw Pass.

Murderers were waiting on down the trail west.

"Another half hour, I'd say, and the sun'll rise." Molly climbed off him and patted him on the back. "Could you see their faces so we can recognize them?"

"Nope, but I think I'd recognize their voices." Kevin rose to his feet. In a low tone, he asked, "Andy, you all right?"

"Yep, Kev." Andy emerged out of the grass.

The clouds scudded along, and for a second, the moon peeked out. Kevin made out his little brother. Andy was still a gangly boy, but he was getting his growing on and stood taller than Molly, near Kevin's six feet. He was all coltish awkwardness, as if he hadn't learned what to do with his long legs and arms. It struck Kevin that his little brother was close to the age Kevin had been when Ma had died, and Kevin had become the father of two.

Running one hand through his brown curls, Kevin looked at his brother and sister. Good-looking blonds. They took after their pa, while Kevin looked like Ma. No sign of Kevin's father anywhere.

And wasn't that just the truth.

"I wonder what that was about?" Andy dropped his gun into his holster.

Molly tucked her gun away, too. They'd all learned to sleep armed. Hard lessons for a fact.

"Probably my brother trying to kill me."

That brought silence to both of them.

Finally, Molly, a quiet woman, said into the black night, "Wyoming's about as friendly a place as Kansas."



Andy fetched their horses. Those men had been bent on murder, or they'd've taken the time to hunt up the horses. Kevin had them well-hidden away from the camp, but a thief would have searched for them.

Kevin, Molly, and Andy made short work of loading the three packhorses and saddling the other three before setting out. Those two would-be killers would stick to the trail and ride straight toward Bear Claw Pass, the town nearest the ranch. They'd figure Kevin and his family were ahead of them.

That didn't mean Kevin was going to be reckless. They moved along slowly, sticking to the trail, but he could smell the dust of the riders ahead. They must be galloping to kick up the faint trail.

In a hurry.

Must be trying to catch up to Kevin before he could claim his land.

Kevin didn't see any way not to go where he was going, so he moved forward, grimly hoping he wasn't riding his whole family straight toward death.

Well, not his *whole* family. Wyatt was family, too, he supposed.

Another brother.

Huh.

Hard to get used to that.

It wasn't a long ride west from Casper to Bear Claw Pass. But Kevin was sickened by what this ranch meant.

Worse than the almost certainty of a fight with a brother he hadn't known existed, it was the shocking, undeniable proof his pa was a cheat and a liar.

A son in Wyoming. An abandoned family in Kansas. Kevin had gotten a telegram from some lawyer in Kansas, telling him

his pa—rather than being dead all those years—had owned a ranch in Wyoming. Kevin got a share. The only mention of a brother was telling him Wyatt Hunt, Clovis's son, lived there now. It added up to Pa leaving his family, taking up with another woman, and being a man with no honor.

Not something Kevin wanted to believe about his pa. Better to believe he died exploring the West. That didn't help Kevin's ma get food on the table, but being an explorer had a heroic, thrilling kind of lure. Kevin had understood why Pa had wandered off. Well, some days he'd understood. Other days he'd wanted to punch Pa right in the face.

Pa was no hero. He was a cheat. Old Clovis Hunt had a son with another woman while Kevin's ma was still alive.

That made Pa a no-account varmint. No lure in that to Kevin. Only shame.

Now the siblings rode along, all three of them paying sharp attention. Kansas had been a dangerous place the last years before the Civil War had broken out. Some said that Bleeding Kansas was the Civil War on a small scale before the big scale came along. And the danger hadn't stopped just because the war did.

They'd learned to sleep light, stay sharp, and hide away on short notice to escape renegade night riders thieving and killing in the name of their cause. And their cause was slavery, a free state, and abolition. In truth, outlaws used anything to justify their crimes.

The trail they'd been following widened just as the sun pushed back enough of the darkness to make out fresh tracks from two horses. Stretched out as if the horses were running. It didn't look like the riders had plans to dry-gulch Kevin and his family. They probably figured they'd do that later.

BRACED FOR LOVE

In the early light of dawn, Kevin saw a town ahead. It had to be Bear Claw Pass. Kevin had brought his sister and brother along to their new future. And now it looked like he was leading the two most important people in his life toward death.