

A man in a cowboy hat and vest stands in a field with a horse in the background. The man is wearing a dark brown cowboy hat, a maroon long-sleeved shirt, a tan vest, and a grey scarf. He has a serious expression and is looking off to the side. The background features a wooden fence, a brown horse with a saddle, and rolling hills with autumn foliage under a blue sky with light clouds.

MARY CONNEALY

BROTHERS
IN ARMS

BOOK THREE

LOVE
on the
RANGE

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To my mom, Dorothy.
She's survived COVID-19 and
a host of other struggles that go with being ninety-three.
Mother of eight. Grandmother of twenty-nine.
Great-grandmother of thirty.
A legacy of love and hard work and faith.
I love you, Mom.

And to the hard-working staff at the
nursing home where my mom resides.
They have worked through such a hard time, doing their
best to keep the residents they care for safe and healthy.
Thank you to the Oakland Heights Nursing Home.

ONE

SEPTEMBER 1870

BEAR CLAW PASS, WYOMING

*M*olly Garner bent over Wyatt Hunt, bathing his fevered brow. How many gunshots did a woman have to tend in one lifetime?

This was her third in the last month. It might happen more if you were a doctor or fighting a war, but she thought she'd done more than her share, and she'd had several pointed conversations with God about why this kept happening to her.

Of course, she wasn't the one who had been shot. So she admitted, as much as she'd been called on to doctor people, she was better off than the wounded. And they weren't yet sure they'd caught whoever had shot Wyatt, so that danger remained until they got a confession out of one of the outlaws.

Yes, in calmer moments she admitted that tending gunshots

wasn't as bad as being shot. So she wasn't the only one who'd had it hard.

God's answer was to make Wyatt's fever come back up, so Molly tried to quit feeling sorry for herself and just pray for her patient, tend him, worry, and pray some more. His fever had been up and down several times.

The work didn't occupy her mind. It occupied endless hours with no sleep and precious little help, but soothing his fevered brow with ice-cold water and pouring willow bark tea and a few other concoctions she'd contrived didn't take much thinking. While she cared for Wyatt, she considered how much her life had changed in just a month's time.

One big change: Kansas.

She most certainly wasn't in Kansas anymore.

She had been born and raised there. Now she was long gone, living at a ranch in Wyoming. It was only two states away from Kansas, but they were *big* states. She thought of what she'd left behind in Kansas and fervently hoped they were big enough.

Another change: Kevin, her brother, got married. His bride, Winona Hawkins Hunt, seemed decent enough. She worked in the kitchen to keep the broth and tea brewing for Wyatt. She'd started talking to Molly a few times, as had Kevin, but it seemed they both had a talent for wanting to talk right when Wyatt started burning with fever.

A second wedding was joining Wyatt's big sister, Cheyenne, and his big brother Falcon. Molly would have enjoyed watching them explain that to the parson.

Andy, her little brother, was turning into some kind of cowboy.

And of course, Molly—her own life had changed.

Somehow she'd become the cook, housekeeper, and doctor for a crowd of strangers. What did they call it? She remembered something . . . oh yes, chief cook and bottle washer. Or maybe jack-of-all-trades, master of none.

Or just the dupe who'd found it her lot in life to care for a herd of thankless strangers who kept getting themselves shot.

She caught herself. Breathed in and out. Bathed Wyatt's fevered brow and calmed down, counting her blessings. Then she thought of Kevin getting shot and forgot about calm. He was no stranger. And he was mostly well by the time he got home, so he required no doctoring. And neither Kevin nor Andy was thankless, but they weren't around all that much.

And maybe worst of all, Kevin, her big brother, her closest confidant, the man she trusted most in the world, a man who had once saved her—he'd betrayed her.

And she couldn't wait to get shut of all of them.

She'd do it as soon as Wyatt got over this most recent gunshot.

She'd thought Kansas—before, during, and after the Civil War—had been dangerous. They'd called it Bleeding Kansas, after all. A state acting out the Civil War before the real one got started, with people deciding elections by shooting the opposition to stop them from voting. There was a half-witted way to run a state.

But Wyoming was no Sunday picnic party, either.

"Chey!" Wyatt tossed his head. His fever had come back up. He was calling for his sister, Cheyenne, whom he called Chey. It sounded like *shy*, and no woman Molly had ever met was less likely to be called shy.

But tough, dangerous, not-shy Cheyenne wasn't here to help with her brother. Her real brother—not the connected-but-not-by-blood brother she was marrying. And her absence upset Molly's patient. And that made Molly want to punch Cheyenne right in the face.

Of course, if she did, Cheyenne would probably beat her to a lump on the ground and shoot her, so Molly would just daydream about swinging a fist while doing *all the work and taking care of everyone*.

Something that, in all honesty, she felt like she'd been doing all her life.

She caught herself again. Breathed in and out. Bathed Wyatt's fevered brow and calmed down, counting her blessings.

"Chey. Chey." Wyatt tried to throw the covers back. He couldn't. Molly had a firm hold of his right hand, and his left arm was strapped tight to his body because, in Molly's doctorly opinion, he'd broken his collarbone. It wouldn't heal if it wasn't kept still.

Cheyenne should be here helping with this.

Yes, they'd gotten home late last night. Yes, they'd captured four gun-slinging outlaws. Yes, they'd found and rescued Amelia Bishop, who'd been kidnapped, and yes, they needed to go with the Pinkerton agent, Rachel Hobart, to talk to the sheriff today about the crimes committed by people far and wide. The wedding was going to be in there somewhere, so yes, they had a lot to do.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

Fine!

With a moment of desperate recklessness, Molly sat down beside Wyatt, cradled his rough, calloused hand as she'd seen Cheyenne do, dropped her voice to a hoarse whisper, the best she could do to imitate Cheyenne, and said, "I'm here, Wyatt. I'm here. This is Cheyenne."

She held tight. Her right hand to his. A bullet wound in his upper left shoulder. She rested more weight on him, trying to keep him still, and set the cool cloth on his forehead.

"I'm here. Stay still, please. Lie still."

For a moment, his eyes fluttered open. They were dazed and cloudy with the fever. The bullet wound didn't appear to be suppurating. It gave her hope that he just needed to beat this fever, and he'd be fine.

But that didn't help her get through this moment, right now.

"You're not Cheyenne." He'd quit thrashing at least.

"I'm taking care of you until Cheyenne gets back. She'll be here right away."

Let him think she just went to get supper or tidy her hair. Molly wasn't about to remind him that his sister was off marrying Falcon Hunt. That news had almost shot him out of bed before. Cheyenne had at least told him though. More than Kevin had managed when he'd sneaked off to his wedding.

"Why is it so h-hot?" Wyatt's throat worked as if he was parched. "Oh. Summer."

Molly gingerly released his hand, got a few sips of water down him, more willow bark tea. Then she dipped the cloth in the basin again to cool it, then wrung it out and folded it, keeping an eye on him in case he started rolling around.

Trying not to say anything that got past his dazed confusion. Once he started remembering things, like the bullet wound, who knew what all he might recall.

“You’ll be fine. You need to rest.” She had a doctor’s voice, and she used it as best she could. She lifted the cloth away so he could see her, and he shook off the hold she had on his right hand, grabbed at her left with the cloth, and pressed it back to his brow.

“Feels good. Stay, stay with me.” He held her hand with the cloth beneath it. “Burning. Hot. Hot.”

His eyes locked with hers as he refused to let her go. Of course, she wasn’t exactly fighting to escape. The poor man needed someone to care about him. His cheeks were flushed. His gazing eyes were that same brown shot through with gold that Kevin and Falcon both had. There was a dimple in his chin that was barely noticeable with his three-day scruff of beard. All three brothers had those eyes and that chin dimple in common, features they shared with their worthless father, Clovis Hunt.

Beyond that they didn’t look much alike. Wyatt was a handsome man, though he could use a haircut. Falcon was a rough-looking mountain man dressed in homespun clothes with little interest in haircuts and shaves. She had her suspicions about his interest in baths, but Falcon had recently been swept a long way down a stream, and they’d cleaned him up when he got back, so that was two baths in a short stretch of days.

Kevin was . . . well, Kevin was her brother. It was hard to think of his looks because he just looked like himself.

Since Wyatt gave her no choice, she kept the cloth in place.

Slowly his grip relaxed. The willow bark tea mixed with yarrow was bringing the fever down. Before this most recent feverish stretch, she'd gotten a fair drink of water down him and some broth with bits of bread soaking in it. It combined to give him the strength to . . . sleep.

And he was one of the strongest men she knew, so that was a sad commentary on his condition.

He sank down into real sleep. She stayed with him, hoping the cool cloths fought his fever. Finally, she was satisfied the fever was coming down again.

This time she promised God no whining. No self-pity. Before her mind could start churning again, being awake for twenty-eight straight hours caught up with her.