

MARY CONNEALY

BROTHERS
IN ARMS

BOOK TWO

A MAN
with
A PAST

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This book is dedicated to a beautiful
new baby in our family.
Welcome, Adrian.
You make Grandma's heart just sing.

ONE

AUGUST 1870
INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

When a man grows up in wild country, huntin' food, eyes wide open for trouble, he knows when he's being watched.

And that stranger back'a him weren't out lookin' for a place to have a Sunday picnic.

Falcon had fought shy of a dozen towns and wanted no part of Independence, Missouri. 'Ceptin' he didn't know where in tarnation he was going, and to his understanding, this was his last chance to figure it out.

So he went ridin' right smack into that beehive of a town on his old rawboned mule to find out how to get to Wyoming. And a man commenced to following.

For a lot of people, it might be right hard to spot a single man on these crowded streets full of shops and freight wagons. Everywhere Falcon turned, people swarmed.

But staying alive wasn't easy in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Tennessee, where a man could find a way to die near every

time he turned around. And yet here Falcon stood, as tall and rawboned as his mule, proving he was a tough, savvy man, and he didn't intend to trust luck with that man on his tail.

He intended to trust skill.

He'd said a word or two here and there as he traveled—and more often just a word, not two—and found out how to go along the Oregon Trail. Funny how much a man could learn by listening. He didn't want to ask a lot of questions for fear that man a-doggin' him might come along wanting to know what Falcon had been talking about.

The same men who went to yammering about the Oregon Trail would be just as likely to shout out every word Falcon had said.

So he said mostly nuthin'.

But he'd learned enough to find which way the trail went. As he understood it, Wyoming was two or three states along it to the northwest—mighty big states. Bear Claw Pass was the town he was looking for, and it was right on the trail, too. If he just followed the path, well-marked so they said, he'd find what he was looking for.

But before he showed himself there, Falcon wanted some answers. A lawyer who held information for him about an inheritance was in Casper, the first town east of Bear Claw Pass.

The sun was setting on a long August day when Falcon headed out of Independence. He planned on sleeping at a campfire tonight, as he'd done every night. He'd heard tell of such as a hotel, but he couldn't figure why a man would pay for a roof when he could have the stars for free.

The crowd thinned as he edged out of that crazy, loud town. The closest he'd come to a town before, not counting the ones he'd avoided on his way out here, was Chickahoochi Cove back

home, and he didn't go there 'cept if he had trading to do that the traveling peddler couldn't handle. That'd only happened a few times in his life.

As he left that wild herd of people behind, the man following him dropped back and back and back.

And when the town got really thinned out, that's when Falcon spotted the second man. The other lagged farther back. Falcon only spotted him because the buildings were sparse on the edge of town.

One man, on foot, Falcon might've just braced him and told him to fight or run.

But two was a more concernin' business. And two men riding.

Checking his saddlebags, he was able to sneak a good look at both men. Well-armed. Not tenderfeet. Falcon would beat 'em. But it wouldn't be easy. And tough as he was, those two men could get lucky.

Leastways now he knew what he was up against.

There were bluffs outside of Independence. They weren't any match for the Blue Ridge Mountains back home but hills sure enough and fully wooded. And these humble Missouri woods and hills called to him as if they were his natural home.

Land he could vanish into.

A lot better to take these varmints on here than on the plains he'd ridden across coming west. Of course, he'd've done it if he had to, but these men had only taken up after him today.

He did himself some thinking as he rode toward those trees, doing his best not to alert the men that they'd been spotted. He wanted to vanish, and for that, he needed surprise.

Were they horse thieves? He was astride his mule, but Harvey wasn't worth much money. They'd passed dozens of riders with better stock than old Harvey.

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He had every bit of money he owned tied into a leather pouch tucked inside the waist of his britches. His bedroll was tied on the back of his mule. And his saddlebags just had food, a few pans, and bullets and a bullet mold.

Falcon had sold what little he had when he headed west, but he hadn't flashed the few coins he carried. He wasn't a rich-lookin' man. Homespun clothes and moccasins and a fine broad-brimmed hat that he'd made himself. His family had never had themselves any cash money, and there was nuthin' about him that looked worth stealin'.

It must be they were after Harvey.

He'd let 'em have the saddlebags if they were only packed with food—he was a good shot and could get more of that—but he needed those bullets and the mold to make more.

There was a pistol holstered at his waist, a rifle slung across his back, and a razor-sharp Arkansas Toothpick tucked in a scabbard under the front of his shirt.

A man could live forever with those tools. Falcon Hunt was likely to have to prove that right soon.

He rode into the trees covering a bluff and took off up a game trail climbing north. He considered every move he'd make because likely enough he was only going to get one chance to do this. He needed to use his woods savvy to hide, and he could do that a whole lot better alone. It burned him bad to realize he might have to let them take the mule. But he'd get him back.

He watched the woods, scouting out a spot where he wouldn't leave a track.

He heard hoofbeats picking up speed behind him and knew the men were closing in. Not much time to find just what he needed.

And then, right before him, a massive, fallen-down tree stretched from the edge of the trail into the woods.

Falcon leapt down, landing on the rough bark of the massive broken trunk. He stripped his saddlebags and bedroll from the mule in a few quick swipes and slapped Harvey hard on the rump. The old boy wasn't stubborn, as mules were often said to be. He took off up the trail, knowing that was what was asked of him. The coming riders would be on him in a minute. Falcon scampered along the trunk, glad he wore moccasins instead of boots.

A bullet cut through the trees, then another. A man shouted, "Stop or we'll kill you!"

Stupid thing to yell. Nothing about it to cause Falcon to stop. But the shooter must've caught a glimpse of Harvey or Falcon or both, or he wouldn't have opened fire.

The downed tree Falcon stood on wasn't long dead. An old oak. The branches spread before him, thick and a lot of 'em still hung with dead leaves and clusters of acorns. Ducking around limbs, he looked for a hiding place. He didn't want to be seen, but he wanted to be close.

One of the heavy branches had snapped off and wedged against another big tree, slanting up such that it formed a near cave.

He heard the riders coming and dropped down to the ground in the V between the tree trunk and the broken branch. He ducked low and waited, tensed up, his hand on his pistol.



Cheyenne had nightmares . . . and she wasn't always asleep. Nightmares of digging up Clovis Hunt and strangling his rotting corpse with her bare hands.

She jerked awake, as she did nearly every night since they'd read the will.

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Her ranch. Given away to strangers.

A ranch her pa, Nate Wild Eagle Brewster, had started before he'd married her ma. Pa was a long-time friend of Grandpa's. He had been the trail guide on the wagon train that brought Grandpa and Ma out west, and he decided to settle in the same area they did. After a while, he and her ma had gotten hitched.

Pa had died when Cheyenne was a wee thing. Before Ma's head had cleared from her grief—or at least that was Ma's story—she'd married up with a handsome mountain man by the name of Clovis Hunt. Clovis was Pa to Cheyenne's little brother, Wyatt.

Wyatt was her partner in the ranch and a fine man, but his pa was as worthless as perfume in a chicken coop.

Now Cheyenne lay awake fretting. Her mind chasing like a mad thing, trying to undo what had been done to her.

She rolled onto her shoulder and stared out the window. She'd propped it open to let in the warm summer night.

No more sleep tonight. Not after she'd gone round with Clovis in her nightmares. Studying the sky, she saw the moon was low and the stars were winking out.

Throwing back the covers, she decided to get on with the day. Maybe she could make a big breakfast and have it ready when Wyatt rolled out of bed. Slipping silently into her clothes, she swung her door open to face Wyatt.

He was fully dressed and heading downstairs. "I thought you might be getting some sleep for once," he said.

Shaking her head, she said, "You want flapjacks and side pork? I can add biscuits and gravy." She threw her arms wide. "Oh, for heaven's sake, there's plenty of time if you're hungry for an apple pie."

His mouth turned up in a humorless smile.

“Flapjacks if there’s plenty of ’em. I’ll help. We can get a jump on the day.”

They’d gotten a jump on the day every day since Clovis had turned up his toes. Died peacefully in his sleep like the lazy varmint he was. Cheyenne and Wyatt hadn’t even noticed he was dead until the noon meal.

They walked downstairs together. She thought of Winona Hawkins asleep in her own room. No sense making her get up. They’d leave food for her.

She’d squawk. She was over here staying to help feed them during branding. But she sure didn’t sign on for breakfast two hours before sunrise.

While they worked silently together, Cheyenne fumed. She and Wyatt were a good team and had been since Ma died three years ago. And why not? They were equal owners in the ranch and had been raised for that.

And now two unheard-of brothers, no doubt sidewinders just like Clovis, were heading here to steal all of her ranch and a chunk of Wyatt’s. Wyatt held on to a third, but Cheyenne was cut out of everything.

She couldn’t strangle Clovis Hunt, but she kept the idea in reserve in the event she got a chance to use it on Wyatt’s brothers.

TWO

The horses came into sight. The saddles were empty.

They knew Falcon had sent Harvey on ahead. Dropping to his belly, Falcon listened with every bit of his wits.

Eyes sharp, smelling for anything out of place, listening for the slightest rustle of leaves while trying not to make a sound or a sudden move.

The huge, broken tree stretched into the woods. Falcon edged along it. He had to get over it to go downhill. If the men were on this side of the trail, he'd come upon them.

There were only the quiet sounds natural to the forest. An inch at a time, Falcon reached a tear in the earth that looked like water ran down it during heavy rains.

It allowed him passageway beneath the tree trunk. He scooted under. The gap was skinny enough he thought for a second he might get stuck. Sucking his stomach in and shoving hard with his feet, he got through.

On he went, downward, listening. A soft crackle of shaking

leaves drew his gaze up and to the left. Close to the trail. Up and up some more. Overhead, he saw one of the men climbing a hickory tree. Hoping for a lookout spot.

Easing to the side, under a thick stand of scrub cottonwoods, Falcon watched. He didn't want to shoot. It wasn't his way to go shootin' a man. He'd do it if there was no other way to stay alive, but he wasn't to that point yet.

But close maybe.

Besides, any gunfire would bring the other outlaw down on him. The man overhead was the one he'd spotted earlier. To his way of thinking, that made the other man more careful, more dangerous.

As alert as a jackrabbit in a wolf den, Falcon heard the other man. Focusing on the source of the sound, it took all he had to make this man out. He was motionless, nearly silent. His clothes blended into the dry leaves and bare trunks like part of the woods.

Falcon might never have noticed him if the varmint hadn't blinked at just the right time.

With care to keep hidden from the man overhead, Falcon moved straight for the one on the ground, using dips in the dirt, stones, and scrub brush for cover. The outlaw was looking at the trail, as if he expected Falcon to come walking down it. Falcon was coming at him but from another direction.

The outlaw held an aimed gun. One wrong move, one snapped twig, one startled bird, and he'd see Falcon coming. All he had to do was turn his head.

Checking the man in the tree, who was facing the trail when he had oughta be looking around him, Falcon drew in a deep breath, then launched himself rattler fast at the man in front of him. Falcon slashed his gun butt across the man's head.

The only sound was that dull thud.

Falcon grabbed him before he collapsed. Eased him to the ground and tucked him out of sight behind the undergrowth.

Stripping him of his pistols, rifle, and knife, Falcon made quick work of hog-tying him. He had more sneaking around to do, and he didn't want this one coming around and getting back into the fight.

Mulling what to do about that varmint perched up in the tree, Falcon examined him through the heavy thicket of branches surrounding him.

Giving the man plenty of time to settle in, Falcon watched him study the trail, then after too long, look around. Content that he saw nothing, he looked at the trail again. The man must've figured his saddle partner was sneaking up on Falcon and this fool was keeping a lookout.

The Tree Climber gave his long look around, then went back to the trail. Falcon didn't think he could climb a tree without the idiot up there noticing him. But he didn't think he had to.

He worked his way around so he was downhill, the direction the man almost never studied. Pulling the knife he'd taken off his captive, Falcon gathered himself, and then in one smooth motion, he stood to get all the strength of his legs and back involved and hurled the knife straight at the man.

Falcon dropped back into hiding just as the man howled and clawed at the back of his leg where the knife sunk deep. In his desperate grab for whatever was biting him in the leg, he let loose of the tree and fell to the ground. Landing with a painful crack, the man started firing his weapon in all directions. Falcon kept moving, heading for a large tree just a bit on downhill. He ducked behind it and waited for the gunfire to stop.

When he heard the hammer click on an empty gun, he leapt up and charged the man, who was still yelling like a lunatic.

Falcon had a notion of what he looked like by the sheer horror on the man's face. He knew he had strange fiery golden-brown eyes. Eyes that he'd been told could go wild and mad.

Ma had called him a berserker. She had talked of such in her family history and said he had the blood of Viking warriors in his veins.

The man's screams dropped to whimpers. Falcon slammed a fist into his face to shut him up. He jerked the knife out of the man's leg and wiped it on the Tree Climber's pants. He added it to the saddlebag he still carried.

Then he stripped the man of his guns and knives. Tied him up and dragged him to where the other man lay, still out cold.

Studying the two, he had no idea what to do about them.

He could take them to the sheriff, but Falcon had bested them at every turn. If anything, *he'd* attacked *them*.

They'd followed him. They'd taken their shots. They'd threatened him.

But were they men a sheriff would hold? They'd done him no harm, despite making a good effort. And Falcon had done them plenty.

A chill ran down his spine as he thought of stories he'd heard of men who had the ear of a sheriff. Such things happened up in the Blue Ridge Mountains where he'd grown up. Family roots ran deep, and a lawman might turn against an honest man and fight for kinfolk. For certain he'd do it if it was a choice between kin and a stranger.

Grimly unsure, Falcon pondered it for a while, even sat on the ground and ate some jerky while he thought it over.

Neither of them showed any sign of waking up. He wasn't sure

what he'd ask them if they did. The only real question he could come up with was, Why in tarnation did you pick me to rob?

They were breathing steadily, and he figured they'd live. He'd never killed a man before, but he'd fought plenty. He was known for fighting at the drop of a hat. And he'd been known to drop the hat himself.

Someone always needed a lickin' back home. He'd hoped the world outside his Blue Ridge Mountains were a sight more peaceable.

Just now he wasn't feeling particularly hopeful.

The day was wearing on, and he wanted to get on down the trail. He figured when these two woke up, they might be right behind him again.

Finally, he decided to hand out his own kind of justice. He took the men's guns, nice ones. Frisked them more carefully and took a hideout knife that'd come in handy.

He even took one of their store-bought holsters. A sight better than Falcon's handmade one.

He found a leather pouch full of coins in one of the men's pockets. The other man had a bit of cash money, too. And of course, they both had horses. They'd soon fight free of their bonds, but they'd be hard-pressed to ride after him without horses. There was a brand on the critters, not the same one on each. Falcon had no notion of what the brands might mean, who they'd be connected to. Well, he'd find out if the brands were trouble when he tried to sell them, but he wouldn't get to that until he'd put plenty of miles between him and these would-be killers.

About the time he scouted out their horses and gathered up the reins, figuring to search the saddlebags later and keep the leather along with the horses, Harvey came meandering down

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the trail. Falcon strung the two new horses end to end behind Harvey and rode on.

He usually set up camp before dark but not tonight. Falcon set out to put some miles between him and those two sleepy men. Maybe even a whole state.

He rode into the night a much richer man.