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# FEARLESS

A NOVEL

# M. W. CRAVEN

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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**M.W.  
CRAVEN**



**FEARLESS**

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# Contents

[More praise for Fearless ...](#)

[Also by M.W. Craven](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

## **[Part One: A City of Magnificent Distances](#)**

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)  
[Chapter 27](#)  
[Chapter 28](#)  
[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 37](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)  
[Chapter 39](#)  
[Chapter 40](#)  
[Chapter 41](#)  
[Chapter 42](#)  
[Chapter 43](#)  
[Chapter 44](#)

## **Part Two: Road to Nowhere**

[Chapter 45](#)  
[Chapter 46](#)  
[Chapter 47](#)  
[Chapter 48](#)  
[Chapter 49](#)  
[Chapter 50](#)  
[Chapter 51](#)  
[Chapter 52](#)  
[Chapter 53](#)  
[Chapter 54](#)  
[Chapter 55](#)  
[Chapter 56](#)  
[Chapter 57](#)  
[Chapter 58](#)  
[Chapter 59](#)  
[Chapter 60](#)  
[Chapter 61](#)  
[Chapter 62](#)  
[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)  
[Chapter 65](#)  
[Chapter 66](#)  
[Chapter 67](#)  
[Chapter 68](#)  
[Chapter 69](#)  
[Chapter 70](#)  
[Chapter 71](#)  
[Chapter 72](#)  
[Chapter 73](#)  
[Chapter 74](#)  
[Chapter 75](#)  
[Chapter 76](#)  
[Chapter 77](#)  
[Chapter 78](#)  
[Chapter 79](#)

### **Part Three: A Special Kind of Madness**

[Chapter 80](#)  
[Chapter 81](#)  
[Chapter 82](#)  
[Chapter 83](#)  
[Chapter 84](#)  
[Chapter 85](#)  
[Chapter 86](#)  
[Chapter 87](#)  
[Chapter 88](#)  
[Chapter 89](#)  
[Chapter 90](#)  
[Chapter 91](#)  
[Chapter 92](#)  
[Chapter 93](#)  
[Chapter 94](#)

### **Part Four: Advance to Contact\***

[Chapter 95](#)  
[Chapter 96](#)  
[Chapter 97](#)  
[Chapter 98](#)  
[Chapter 99](#)



[Chapter 100](#)

[Chapter 101](#)

[Chapter 102](#)

[Chapter 103](#)

[Chapter 104](#)

[Chapter 105](#)

**[Part Five: Man Plans, God Laughs](#)**

[Chapter 106](#)

[Chapter 107](#)

[Chapter 108](#)

[Chapter 109](#)

[Chapter 110](#)

[Chapter 111](#)

[Chapter 112](#)

[Chapter 113](#)

[Chapter 114](#)

[Chapter 115](#)

[Chapter 116](#)

[Chapter 117](#)

[Chapter 118](#)

[Chapter 119](#)

[Chapter 120](#)

[Chapter 121](#)

[Chapter 122](#)

[Chapter 123](#)

[Chapter 124](#)

[Chapter 125](#)

[Chapter 126](#)

[Chapter 127](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

*To Joanne. Who told me I had to dedicate this book to her.*

## **Part One**

### **A City of Magnificent Distances**

## Chapter 1

Six was kind of an insult. It wasn't enough. I thought they were going to need a bigger boat. It's a line from *Jaws*. The sheriff says it when he sees the great white shark for the first time, when he sees how big it is. It's now an idiom for being outmatched. Like how over the moon means happy. Or break a leg means good luck. So when I saw there were only six of them, that's what I thought. They were going to need a bigger boat.

Then again, it was a small town – maybe six was all they could spare. Maybe six was everyone. And it was an urgent operation. Panicked even. Had to be. If it wasn't, Wayne County wouldn't be doing it. They'd be relegated to cordon control. This had been a hasty phone call followed by an even hastier order: 'Do it now before he moves. You don't have the luxury of waiting for reinforcements. In the meantime, we're scrambling everyone we have.'

I'm not a huge man – five-eleven, weigh a buck-ninety – but they approached me like I was unattended baggage. They looked scared. Jittery. Probably never had to do a job like this before. Lived in Wayne County to get away from jobs like this. Cold sweat on furrowed brows, faces rigid with tension. One of them had a twitch going on in the corner of his right eye. Probably a nervous thing.

They were doing OK, though. Hadn't tried to rush me. They weren't shouting, weren't giving contradictory instructions. They'd walked through the bar without causing alarm. A ripple of hush followed them. The barman even switched off the music. All eyes turned to me. Not something I was used to these days. They fanned around my booth without getting in each other's way, and then waited. There was no hostility. Just cops doing their duty. If I hadn't seen what was on the TV, I might not have known they were there for me.

It's an oversimplification to say there are good cops and there are bad cops. Cops can be both brave and cowardly, honest and corrupt, and they can be clever and stupid. And they can be all of those things or none of those things. So, to make things easy, I don't trust cops. I don't trust anyone. It's why I'm still alive.

Even before I'd seen them, I'd auditioned several scenarios. None were good. They didn't work out well for me and they sure didn't work out well for them. In the end, it came down to math: when all your options are bad, choose the one that allows you to fight another day. You play the odds.

Before I hit somewhere new, I make sure I'm not walking into a town like the one from the first Rambo film, the one with the sheriff who didn't like drifters.

Wayne County Sheriff's Department covered a large area, and the sheriff was a woman called Diane Long. They had a good reputation. The men in front of me were deputies from the road patrol department. Solid, no-nonsense cops. Not high-profile like the NYPD, but in a small department like Wayne County, the sheer variety of their daily call sheets made them tough and adaptable.

So far, no one had spoken. Their weapons were drawn but remained at their sides. It wasn't a standoff – they were waiting for a signal. A man wearing sergeant's stripes was covering their backs. He said, 'Now,' and, as one, they raised their weapons.

Two were holding Taser X26s. Black and yellow and nasty. When discharged, they launch two probes that attach themselves to the target's clothes or skin, completing an electrical circuit. Hurts like hell. Completely debilitating. They have a range of fifteen feet, and the cops were eight feet away. The ideal distance. I didn't want to be tasered.

The only woman of the group was aiming a shotgun at my chest. I couldn't tell what shells she was packing, but my gut told me they'd be non-lethal. Probably beanbag rounds. Enough to cause a bad bruise and, if I was standing, put me on my ass. Nut-busters, I called them once. Useless, unless you go rogue and aim for something soft and dangly, because with a six-foot-five musclehead who's in the middle of a Hulk-like meltdown after he's overdone the gym candy, centre-mass shots barely tickle. A blast to the balls, however ...

They'd been told to bring me in alive.

That was good.

The sergeant was carrying a standard-issue Glock, though. A serious man with a serious gun. Loaded with 9-millimetre Parabellums. If one of *those* hit me centre mass, I wouldn't be getting up. 'Parabellum' is taken from the Latin '*para bellum*'. It means prepare for war. I've always thought it's a good name for a bullet. The sergeant had a barrel chest, square shoulders, and an even squarer chin. His mouth formed a rigid grimace. His gunmetal-grey eyes fixed on me with no disengagement. The Glock wasn't drawn, but his hand rested on the butt and the holster was



unfastened. Although I got the impression he'd been told he wasn't to point his weapon at me, I knew that, at a hint of danger, his hand would shoot out like it was remote controlled. I understood his anger: they were doing someone else's dirty work and, federal order or not, he didn't want his guys getting hurt by some asshole he hadn't heard of until half an hour ago.

The sergeant spoke. 'Can you come with us please, sir?'

I said, 'You're going to need a bigger boat.'

## Chapter 2

An hour before things went all screwy, I'd been sitting in a hotel bar, nursing a pot of tea. It was good tea. Heavy with tannin. Thick enough to stand a spoon in. My surname is Germanic – my grandfather moved to the States when he was forty, got his citizenship in '46, and dropped the umlaut in König when being German wasn't popular – but my mother is English, and I guess that's where my love of the drink comes from. I like coffee, but I prefer tea.

I'd been minding my own business. Trying not to be noticed. It's what I do. I mind my own business and I try not to be noticed. As a rule I avoid small towns, the kind that remember strangers, but there was a claims adjusters' convention on. And conventions change things. *Everyone's* a stranger during a convention. Towns are crowded and that's good. Crowds are my friend. I can use crowds.

I'd been zigzagging across New York State. Planned to visit Chittenango, the birthplace of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* author, L. Frank Baum. I'd heard that the town's sidewalks are painted yellow, and when you have nothing to do but keep moving, you may as well go and see things. I was in no hurry, though, and that night I'd ended up in a town called Gosforth, Wayne County. I was hoping to get a hot meal and maybe score a cheap room for the night. I'd been outdoors all week, and although it was warm and I had a one-person backpacker's tent, a bit of luxury never usually killed anyone. Then again, I'm an unusual person.

I was in the lobby bar of the Four Pines Hotel. It was like thousands of other bars: horseshoe booths, red leather armchairs and round stools at the bar. Shrill laughter and raised testosterone. A disinterested, acne-ridden barman polishing glasses with the rag he'd just been wiping the tables with. Seven mute televisions, all showing the same ball game: Red Sox and the Yankees at Fenway Park. I was sitting in a booth. It was covered in red, plastic leather. 'Pleather', I think they call it. Comes in long rolls and is easy to wipe clean. I checked the menu while I finished my tea.

The first thing that went wrong was the barman putting a bowl of peanuts on my table.

I'd read somewhere that the average bowl of bar nuts contains traces of over one hundred unique specimens of urine. Men and women coming back from the bathroom without washing their hands. And while a different study disproved that, their arguably worse claim was that over 40 per cent of ice cubes contain coliform: the bacteria that comes from human faeces. I hadn't eaten a bar nut for nearly ten years. Been drinking my Coke warm for about the same time.

I pushed the peanuts back in the barman's direction. 'No, thank you,' I said, then wished I hadn't. Refusing free stuff was unusual. It was *memorable*.

The barman gave me an odd look, then shrugged like it happened all the time. He picked at a spot on the side of his neck and said, 'Get ya anything from the kitchen?'

'Burger,' I replied. 'American Classic with bacon, Monterey Jack cheese and a double patty, rare. Side order of fries and a chocolate milkshake.'

'Good choice,' he said. 'It's my favourite.'

I doubted that. He'd said the same thing to two women who'd ordered mac 'n' cheese not ten minutes earlier.

'It might be a half hour,' he added, after he'd made a note of my order. 'Everyone seems to be eating now.'

Thirty minutes was way too long. I wanted to be back on the road before nightfall. Find somewhere safer than the Four Pines to hole up for the night. I removed a twenty from my roll. 'This speed things up?'

'Considerably,' he replied, slipping it into his apron pocket. 'Fifteen minutes?'

I don't know what my twenty was supposed to buy me, but my burger and shake took longer than the promised fifteen minutes. It actually took longer than the originally offered thirty. When it finally arrived, it was the same barman carrying it over. He made no attempt at an apology. Just put it on the table along with some cutlery. Headed back to the bar and started polishing glasses again. Every now and then he glanced at me but did it like he knew he shouldn't.

He was acting differently, and in my world that's a big, fat red flag.

I had to leave. I didn't know what had happened, but I hadn't survived the last six years by waiting around to see if I was right all the time. It was a pity, but the barman was now openly staring. Wasn't even trying to hide it. It was time to move on. I pulled my backpack closer. It contained everything I owned and was always within reach.

Which was when I saw the television.

It was showing a newsbreak, one of the two-minute updates they have during an innings change. Even though we were in New York State, and the Yankees were playing, no one was really watching the game. I'd been glancing up sporadically to check the score.

The peroxide-blonde anchor was silently reading the last news item before they returned to the game. There was also a rolling banner at the bottom. One of those horizontal text-based displays with the day's headlines and a toll-free number to call. I was too far away to see what it said, but the image on the screen was crystal clear.

It was a photograph. Despite not having seen it for years, I knew it well.

I stared at the screen.

My own face stared back.

## Chapter 3

It was a photo from my previous life. Almost fifteen years old, but still the most up-to-date one there was. When you disappear, one of the things you need to do is destroy all your photographs, and despite only having had a day's notice, I'd taken the time to do this. Virtually every photograph of me was gone. Either burned or deleted. But there'd been photographs I couldn't access. Ones held in federal databases.

The agency that had supplied the photo on the TV screen was the same one that had taken the photograph: the United States Marshals. I'd finally made their Fifteen Most Wanted list. I was now one of the most sought-after fugitives in the country.

Which didn't make sense. *I* knew why I'd disappeared, but the US Marshals didn't. And even if they did, they wouldn't look for me this way. They would find a different, quieter way. Putting me on the list smacked of desperation, of someone with a deadline.

After what seemed like an age, the channel returned to the ball game. A weak voice cheered at the end of the bar. At least one person was watching the game then. I looked round, feeling exposed. The barman was still watching me.

I had a problem. My face was on a national channel, not a local one, and it hadn't looked like a breaking story. It could have been running for days, even weeks. For six years, no one had managed to get near me. I'd hoped people thought I was dead. That I'd died in some backwater town somewhere. A John Doe. But the federal government had just announced to every Tom, Dick and opportunist that I was alive and well.

Hunting season would begin again.

Which was a bit of a nuisance.

I needed to get to the bottom of this. The answers wouldn't be found in Gosforth, though. They'd be found in Arlington, Virginia. That's where the US Marshals were headquartered. Someone there would know what was happening. I still had friends in Arlington.

I grabbed the burger and took a bite. It was dreadful. Canner-grade beef, a thin slice of tomato and limp, brown lettuce. The doughy bun was



unbuttered and twice as big as it needed to be. I took another bite anyway. I wanted to be fifty miles away by morning, and I had no idea when I'd eat again. Never turn down calories or sleep, I'd been taught.

The first indication I was too late was when I checked to see if the street was clear. My booth had a window, and although the curtains were drawn, I'd been pulling them to one side and peering out every now and then. Not for anything in particular – up until the newsbreak I had no reason to suspect anything was untoward – it's just one of those things you do when you're sitting by a window; you look out of it. The last time I'd looked, the street had been busy.

Now it looked like an empty movie set.

It wasn't a coincidence. Without external factors, the street being empty would be a phenomenon. Mathematically implausible.

It had been cleared. There was a cordon set up. Somewhere out of sight. A crowd of onlookers behind a barrier, cell-phone cameras at the ready, waiting for something to happen.

It had probably been the barman who'd called the toll-free number. He must have been looking at my photograph all day and couldn't believe his eyes when I walked in. Came over with the bowl of peanuts to make sure. I'd figured his odd look was because I'd turned down some urine-soaked peanuts, but it must have been when he realised he wasn't going crazy. The man in his bar was one of the US Marshals' most wanted fugitives. When I'd ordered my burger, it gave him the excuse he needed to go into the kitchen to make his call. He'd probably been told to act natural, delay me if he could. Give the cops time to arrange something. That was why my meal had taken so long.

Instinct and experience told me that I was about to be arrested. That a team was already outside. No one was getting in or out without their say-so. And if they were already at the door, it meant it was going down now.

I put my hands on the table and sat up straight, like a meerkat.

I didn't want anyone to get hurt.

## Chapter 4

‘You’re going to need a bigger boat,’ I said to the sergeant with the Glock.

He frowned. He’d probably rehearsed what to say when he reached my table and I wasn’t following his script. He’d asked me to come with him and I was supposed to stand up. Instead, I’d told him he was going to need a bigger boat. Without context, my response was nonsensical. Irrational.

I took a fry off my plate and popped it into my mouth. It was greasy, like the oil hadn’t been hot enough when they went in the fryer. I picked up another and held it up.

‘Did you know the French and the Belgians are in constant conflict about who invented the fry?’ I said. ‘The Belgians say it’s just another case of French gastronomic hegemony. That any Belgian cuisine they liked was assimilated into their own, then *claimed* as their own.’

‘I didn’t know that, sir,’ he said. His confusion was obvious. I had been talking about bigger boats and now I was talking about French fries.

I shrugged. ‘Personally I think they’re more likely to have been invented in Spain. They were the first European country to get the potato after it arrived from the New World, and they already had a tradition of frying their food in oil.’

He raised his eyebrows.

‘I used to watch a lot of TV,’ I said. ‘And I used to read a lot of books.’

‘And now?’

‘And now not so much,’ I said. ‘Anyway, I’m telling you about the provenance of fries, Sergeant, only to demonstrate that things are not always as they seem. Calling something French doesn’t make it French.’ I threw the fry back on the plate. ‘And putting someone on the Most Wanted list doesn’t make them a criminal.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind, sir.’

‘Am I under arrest?’

‘No, sir. But we *would* like to talk.’

‘There are six of you. Talk among yourselves.’

The sergeant didn’t crack a smile. Probably heard that joke a million times before. ‘I need you to accompany us to the sheriff’s office, sir.’