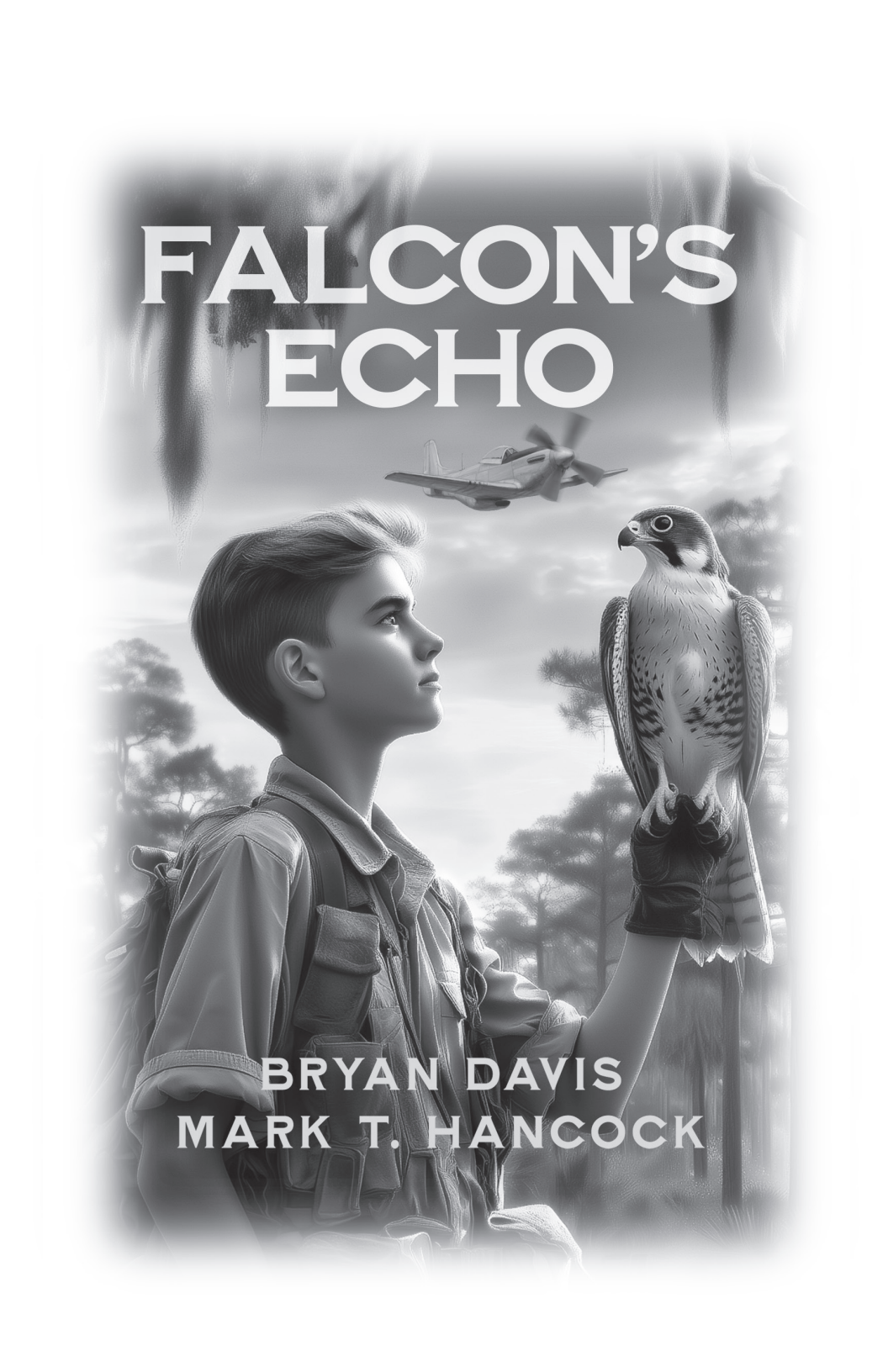

FALCON'S
ECHO
BRYAN DAVIS
MARK T. HANCOCK

FALCON'S ECHO

BOOK 2 OF

FALCON'S QUEST

A TRAIL LIFE ADVENTURE SERIES

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DEDICATIONS

BRYAN DAVIS

To every boy who feels the warrior spirit within, you know that God is calling you to do something great, to be a heroic man of God. This story is for you. As you continue your faith journey, you will be living your own story as you soar in your faith and become a man after God's own heart.

MARK T. HANCOCK

To Luke and Logan, whose love of reading inspires me to write stories for boys. And to the tens of thousands of Trailmen across the USA, whose love for adventure inspired this one.

CHAPTER 1

A MYSTERIOUS SHACK

Dylan hiked through the grassy field, his gaze darting between the ground in front of him and his handheld computer. With the danger zone coming up soon, Mr. Piper and Mr. Sproles led the way, blazing a trail through the vast meadow, each hiker wearing cargo shorts, T-shirts, and wide-brimmed hats.

As Dylan and his Trail Life brothers—Alan, Jacob, and Isaac—hiked closer to the red dot on the computer pad's map, the distance meter next to the dot counted down to a place to stop and get some relief from the weather. The Florida sun beat on them like a humid hammer, drawing plenty of sweat that dripped into their eyes in spite of their sweatbands.

Dylan lifted the top of his T-shirt and sponged the wetness away. The falcon pin attached to his shirt's neckband rubbed across his eyelid—the pin he had taken from the smuggler, the pin that he now wore every day, the pin that gave him hope that his father was still alive.

To Dylan's right, Alan stared at Dylan's phone, attached to the remote-control device that guided *The Falcon*, their model replica of a P-51 Mustang fighter

plane. "*The Falcon*'s about thirty seconds from the zone. So far, I can't see anything but trees. But trees are good." He took his hat off, releasing his mop of light brown hair, and brushed sweat away from his forehead with a wristband. "We need some shade. I've sweated through all of my clothes, including my socks and shoes."

"No wonder," Jacob said from behind them. "It's ninety-eight degrees ambient with a heat index of a hundred and ten."

Dylan glanced back. Jacob was looking at his weather wristwatch. Next to him, his twin, Isaac, winked. "It feels more like a hundred and nine to me. You should get that watch checked."

Jacob scowled at Isaac. "I calibrated it this morning against my backyard weather station. They matched perfectly."

Isaac nudged Jacob with an elbow. "Gotcha good, Bro. I can't really tell if it's one degree off."

Jacob pushed Isaac's shoulder. "You didn't get me. I was playing along."

"Were not. I got you so bad, you'll be thinking about it every time you look at your watch from now till—"

Dylan's phone rang, interrupting the brothers. Alan put his hat back on and quickly adjusted the controls. "It's your mom. I'll put *The Falcon* in an orbit so you can answer."

"No. Just give me the controller, and I'll put her on speaker." Dylan traded the computer pad for the controller, then pressed the phone's speaker icon. "Hey, Mom."

"Hello, Dylan. I got your text that you're on a hike. I called you a couple of times, but I guess you were out of range."

"Yeah. We were deep in the sticks." Dylan glanced at the phone's signal meter. "Right now we've got only one bar in the signal, and it's been going in and out."

"Okay. Then just give me a quick summary. What did the FBI agent say this morning?"

"Let me think. My brain feels like it's on fire." Dylan glanced to the right. Not far away, the edge of a forest curved closer as they marched on. If only they could hike under the shade of those trees, but they were too close to the target to change direction now. "Well, an agent said they got some data from the Cessna's GPS, but only a few hours' worth before the smugglers turned it off. We know some places they landed, maybe to get fuel, meet people, or load stuff. The FBI will be investigating those spots."

Dylan took a breath. "They also made a map of possible places Maya was being held before they moved her to the peach orchard. I guess when they interviewed her, they got some good clues about directions she went and the distance she flew. Anyway, she's with her dad now, and they're supposed to interview him today."

"Right," Mom said. "Since Maya's father was the head of an importing company, the smugglers used her to get favors from him. That means he must have had some way to communicate with them. They could track down those leads."

"Exactly. So, the FBI is concentrating on that instead of checking out the possible locations of Maya's first prison because those were probably abandoned quite a while ago. Since they're somewhere in north Florida, they're close enough for us to drive and check a couple of them out ourselves. The first one was near a road, so it was easy to check, but we didn't find anything. For the second one, Mr. Piper drove his van as far as he could, and now we're all hiking the rest of the way. *The Falcon*'s scouting ahead to watch for anything dangerous. And my phone is controlling him, so I gotta go."

"I understand. Call me back when you know more, that is, if you have a signal."

"Will do." Dylan terminated the call and switched to the navigation app's camera view. On the screen, a gap in the forest appeared with a small building visible on the ground. "I see something ahead. Maybe a shack. No movement, though. I'll put *The Falcon* in an orbit around the place to see if I can get a better look." Dylan adjusted the camera to show *The Falcon*'s left side and sent him into a circular path around the building from about a hundred feet above.

After another minute, Mr. Piper halted and turned toward the boys, prompting them to halt as well. His muscular form filled out his damp T-shirt as he took off his hat, revealing his short dark hair. "I hear *The Falcon*'s engine, so we're getting close." He mopped sweat from his brow with the sweatband on his wrist and put his hat back on. "Keep your eyes and ears open, and no more talking unless it's something important."

The boys and the men all walked as quietly as they could. A forest lay ahead, and the engine noise grew louder. Dylan kept his stare fixed on the screen, barely glancing at the ground as they continued.

The screen's view shifted wildly, and the ground shot toward it. The screen turned black, and the engine sound cut off. Dylan whisper-shouted, "I think *The Falcon* crashed!"

Everyone stopped in complete silence. Then a familiar shriek pierced the air.

Jacob whispered, "That sounded like a hawk."

Dylan's mouth dried out, and his throat tightened. Barely able to speak, he forced out, "That's not a hawk. That's a falcon."

Alan squinted at him. "How do you know?"

Dylan fingered the falcon pin on his shirt, his hand trembling as he tried to calm his thudding heart. "Because …" He swallowed hard. "Because I would know that call anywhere. It's Blaze, my dad's falcon."

Alan gasped. "I was wondering what happened to his falcon. You never said."

Dylan took a deep breath to settle himself. "Because Blaze went missing before my dad did. No one thought a bird flying away had anything to do with my dad disappearing."

Mr. Piper spoke in a low, serious tone. "We'll walk together to the forest. Once we're in the shade, Dylan and I will go to the building while the rest of you boys stay with Mr. Sproles. If it looks safe, we'll call for you to join us."

After another few minutes, they reached the tree line. Everyone took a long drink from their water bottles, then Dylan and Mr. Piper walked on, Dylan still holding the controller. Keeping their footfalls quiet on the needle-laden ground, they weaved their way around the tall pines. Soon, they reached an area with fewer trees and more open space. A simple wooden shack stood near the center of the area with warped boards for walls and holes in the wooden roof. *The Falcon* sat on the ground, apparently undamaged except for the camera lying face down under a wing.

Dylan scanned the tree branches overhead, searching for Blaze, but he was nowhere in sight. "Think it's safe to look in the shack?"

"Maybe." Mr. Piper withdrew a handgun from his waistband in the back. "Follow me, and stay close."

Bending low, they skulked toward the shack's dilapidated front door. Along the way, they passed close to *The Falcon*. Dylan detached his phone from the controller and set the controller on the ground next to the plane.

When they arrived at the shack, Mr. Piper turned the knob and swung the door in. The hinges broke free, and the door crashed inside. He and Dylan both cringed at the noise, but nothing inside moved, at least nothing they could see.

Mr. Piper pulled a phone from his pocket and turned on its flashlight. Letting the beam lead the way, he walked in with Dylan at his heels. The afternoon sun, even shaded by nearby trees, kept the interior quite warm



and provided enough light through the doorway to see everything.

In the midst of scattered brown pine needles, a thin mattress rested on the floor with an equally thin pillow at its head. A sheet lay haphazardly on the mattress with spots of green on its white material giving reason for the odor of mildew in the air.

Mr. Piper turned the light off and slid the gun away. "I don't think anyone's been here for quite a while."

Dylan kicked the mattress. It slid a few inches and bumped against the wall. "But Blaze is close by. Why would he stay here if he hadn't seen my father in the area?"

"How can you be sure it's Blaze? Don't falcons sound pretty much alike?"

"Mostly alike, but Blaze has a little warble at the end of his call. Dad said it was different, like he was imitating the whistle he used to call Blaze."

"Do you still have your dad's whistle at home?"

Dylan shook his head. "We couldn't find the whistle or Dad's falconry glove. Mom thinks he probably kept them somewhere on the plane when he searched for Blaze after Blaze went missing."

"How long after that did your dad go missing?"

"Three days."

"Interesting. I'll have to think about that." Mr. Piper walked toward the doorway. "I'm going to call the others to join us."

"All right if I stay here and poke around?"

"Sure." Mr. Piper walked outside and shouted, "It's safe. Just walk in the direction we were going. You'll find us."

Dylan looked at the bed. Something dark protruded from under the pillow, maybe pushed out when he kicked the mattress. He turned his phone's light on and shone it on the object. Using his foot, he pushed the pillow away, revealing a dark brown falconer's glove.

His heart thumping, he dropped to his knees next to the glove, snatched it up, and set the light close to the glove's thumb. Burned into the material, black letters spelled out T. Baxter.

"Mr. Piper!" Dylan called, his voice catching. "I found something!"

"Just a second." Mr. Piper's voice came from well outside the shack. "I'm checking *The Falcon* for damage."

Aching to put the glove on but knowing various critters might have taken up residence inside, Dylan held the glove up by the fingers and shook it hard. Something fell to the mattress. He moved the beam to it. Dad's whistle lay there with a leather lanyard attached.

Alan walked in. "What did you find?"

Dylan put the glove on and held the whistle on his palm. "My dad was here."