



A family legacy built on a wild land.
A struggle for justice, love, and survival.

GALLAGHER'S PRIDE

Book One of the Montana Gallagher Series

MK McCLINTOCK

Chapters 1-3 of

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GALLAGHER NOVELS BY MK MCCLINTOCK

Gallagher's Pride
Gallagher's Hope
Gallagher's Choice

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The weariness settled in not long after her ship arrived in Boston. The anger, the pain, and the betrayal still consumed her heart. The grandness of the wild territory looming ahead did nothing to assuage these feelings. It seemed so long ago that she held her father's hand as he lay dying, though barely eight months had passed. She still remembered his final words as though he'd spoken only a moment ago. "Ye're not alone in the world, me darling girl." Gazing out the train window, across the expanse of land that marked only the beginning of her journey, Brenna realized her father couldn't have foreseen where those final words would lead her.

In the countryside of Borthwick, Edinburghshire, Scotland—1869

The mare fought bravely to bring the young filly into this world, and her struggles paid off. The beautiful silver-coated filly glanced around curiously as it sought purchase on its wobbly legs. Her mother nudged the little one until it stood triumphantly and quickly sought out nourishment. The young girl on the cusp of womanhood watched with rapt attention at the miracle, then turned from the stall and raced to the main house.

"Papa! Mama! Come quickly!"

Brenna jumped up and down in the doorway of the parlor, turned around, and headed back for the stable without bothering to see if her parents followed.

Her father chuckled at the retreating girl and his wife smiled. "You did promise her a new filly."

"So I did." He laughed again and reached for his wife's hand. "Let us go and see if that's what she'll be getting."

Duncan and Rebecca Cameron walked along the green grass to the stable that had born dozens of foals and fillies over the years. Brenna had impatiently waited in great anticipation for this one day to come, for this special filly to be born. Her first horse to raise just as she chose and the most perfect gift she'd ever received.

The couple walked up and stood beside their daughter, looking over the stall door at the young filly staring curiously back at them. Brenna stood between them, and sensed their excitement nearly matched her own.

"It will be a bit of time before she can be ridden, but she's a fine-looking filly, Brenna."

"She's beautiful, Papa."

"That she is," her mother said, and placed an arm around her shoulder. "What do you say we leave her to her mother?"

Brenna looked up at her father, pleading with him to let her stay out there. Her just-a-little-longer plea almost always worked when she looked at him with her small smile and wide eyes.

"Not this time, darling girl." He pulled his daughter and wife close to him and walked toward the stable entrance.

"There'll be plenty of time for ye to spend with her, but yer mother's right."

"Well, may I come out tomorrow? At sunrise?"

Her father chuckled again. "Yes, at sunrise."

Brenna knelt over the recently tilled soil, side by side with her mother. Together they sowed the flower seeds for a new garden they chose to plant near the orchard. It had always been one of her most cherished times, those hours she spent with her mother in the gardens or with her father at the stable. Few young people Brenna's age lived in their small village, but she didn't mind.

Her parents and the people who worked at Cameron Manor were her family and friends. She took her school lessons every day after she and her mother tended the gardens; her parents insisted she be educated. Her tutor, Mrs. Parks, a delightful older woman from London, spoke French and even traveled to Africa before her husband died. She encouraged Brenna to think freely and beyond the ideas written in textbooks. Brenna was delighted when her father presented her with a beautiful globe shipped from London. She spent hours asking him about his travels and how he met her mother.

Brenna remembered asking him once about her birth and if she had any other family. Her father grew quiet for a time, smiled at her, and said all the family she needed lived at Cameron Manor. He seemed so sad—she didn't ask again.

Not long after her tenth birthday, Duncan tried to teach her how to fish in one of the lakes on their estate. Brenna loved being outside, riding horses, and gardening with her mother, but she certainly didn't like worms or watching fish squiggle and squirm on the hooks. Her father seemed happy, though, so she smiled and tried not to grimace much. Secretly she thought he knew how she felt because he didn't take her fishing again. Instead, they enjoyed long walks through the woods as he pointed out the various plants, trees, and wildlife when fortune favored them enough to catch a glimpse of a deer or fox. Her father carefully showed her the boundaries of their land so she wouldn't wander into areas where hunters may mistake her or her horse for wild game. Over the years, Brenna led a sheltered life at Cameron Manor, but she couldn't imagine spending her life anywhere else.

In the countryside of Borthwick, Edinburghshire, Scotland—1875

One week after Brenna's eighteenth birthday, on a rare spring day when the sun shone with enthusiasm, Brenna's parents hoped she would join them for a leisurely ride. Brenna's mare, Heather, enjoyed a good run that morning so she opted to ride another mount for the afternoon. Brenna often woke early to ride so her father wouldn't discover her preference to ride without a saddle. She discovered early on that though saddles offered convenience, she and Heather preferred riding without the confinement. Her mother rode one of the geldings since her mare carried another foal.

The family coveted such beautiful days. Scotland's weather could change abruptly, so they took immediate advantage of glorious weather.

An hour into their ride, a light sprinkling of rain began. Brenna thought nothing of it because the sun still shone brightly through the clouds. When the wind picked up, she turned a worried look over her shoulder toward her parents.

"We'd best head back in!" Her father's shout carried across the howling wind. "The storm'll have us soaking before long!"

Brenna turned around to answer her father, but shouting against the wind proved fruitless. She quickly closed the distance between them when a crack of thunder

shuddered through the sky and frightened the animals. They started back as quickly as they could without causing injury to anyone, but another crack of thunder sounded close by and she watched as her mother's horse frightened. Rebecca couldn't calm the animal and it reared back, dropping her off the saddle before catching its leg in mud and falling over on top of her.

Duncan shouted for his wife, dismounted, and ran toward her as quickly as his legs allowed. The gelding had broken his leg and couldn't move, pinning Rebecca under its heavy mass. Brenna jumped off the mare and ran toward her parents, shielding her eyes from the pelting rain, which began to fall in earnest. She ignored the stinging pain as heavy drops made contact with her skin.

"Mama!" Brenna knelt down next to her mother's head and watched as her father tried to encourage the animal to move enough so they could pull Rebecca out from under it.

Brenna held onto her mother's cold hand and covered her with her body as best she could to shield her from the downpour.

"Brenna!" Her father looked at her and shouted over the storm. "Go, as fast as ye can and bring help."

"Papa." Brenna felt like a little girl again, uncertain what to do.

"Brenna, go! I'll stay with yer mother!" He shouted over the sounds of clapping thunder and gusting winds. "Go!"

Brenna mounted the mare and raced toward home, pleading over and over that they'd make it there without further injury so she could get help to her mother.

"Iain!" Brenna raced toward the stable, shouting Iain's name. He and his wife, Maggie, loyally served the Camerons for more than twenty years, and Brenna considered them part of the family. If anyone could help, it was Iain.

"Iain, please!" Brenna dismounted and turned, shouting his name again when he raced toward her.

"Brenna lass, whatever is wrong?"

She stood with rain-soaked hair and clothes and could not hide the panic from her eyes.

"Where are yer parents, lass?"

"Near the cliffs by Fowler's Cove." Brenna bent over, her breaths coming in short gasps. "Hurry, please. Mama's trapped under her horse."

Under different circumstances, Brenna could have admired how swiftly the older man moved into action. He rang the emergency bell by the stable door, which brought the few other servants outside. Maggie and the stable boy, who had been carrying wood inside, rushed across the grounds to the stables. Iain waited for the boy with saddled horses.

Brenna moved to remount, but Iain laid a strong hand on her shoulder.

"Stay here, lass," he said, even as she shook her head.

"I'm going."

"Ye'll hurt them more if something happened to ye. Stay."

Brenna couldn't take that risk. Iain's wife wrapped an arm around Brenna's waist, and they watched the two riders race into the storm.

Two weeks passed since the afternoon when the storm swept through and carried away bits of Brenna's heart. An accident. Everyone called it a terrible accident, but Brenna didn't want to think about it. She couldn't because her father needed her to be strong. He refused to leave Rebecca's side from the moment they finally pulled the horse off of her body. Brenna didn't have a chance to say good-bye to her mother. By the time they

brought her home, she had been unconscious. When the doctor finally arrived, Rebecca had passed.

"Papa?" Brenna softly closed the door behind her as she walked into her father's study. The room remained dark, much as it had been since her mother's death. He rarely left that room and rarely ate or slept.

Brenna walked quietly over the thick rug and knelt in front of the heavy chair, where her father spent many hours. She took his hands off his lap and held them softly in her own.

"Papa?" Brenna spoke in hushed tones, but this time he lifted his eyes to hers.

"She's gone, Brenna." His voice sounded painfully hoarse, and she pulled the blanket up higher on his chest. "My beautiful Rebecca is gone."

"I know." Brenna held back the tears, which threatened to fall. "But she's still with us and she would not want to see you this way."

This time Duncan leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his daughter. "I know, my darling girl. I can hear her now telling me to put away my whiskey and open the windows."

"I can hear her too."

"We'll be all right, won't we, lass?"

"Yes, Papa, we'll be all right."

2



Hawk's Peak, Montana—1877

"I'm not going back."

"You're being too stubborn, Ethan. You only have one year left of college, and the ranch will still be here."

"Am I interrupting?"

Ethan turned to look at his brother who poked his head into the room.

"Yes."

"No."

Ethan Gallagher looked at his father and tried to calm himself. This stubborn streak they shared had led to a few arguments since Ethan had come of age. He loved his father and felt grateful that he was willing to share the working of the ranch with his sons. As their father told it, Jacob left the city as a young man to escape a congested life and build a legacy for his children in the West. Ethan knew his father welcomed their input when it came to ranch business, but he also knew how much Jacob Gallagher valued a solid education.

"Ethan, we can argue about this until roundup, but you're still going back."

Ethan usually kept a cool head, but he and his father shared many of the same traits. He gave his old man a good hard stare trying to decide if defying him would be worth the argument he couldn't possibly win. It galled Ethan to know that his pa was right. It galled him even more to see his brother still standing there, grinning like a fool. Knowing that Gabriel didn't have much longer before he followed in Ethan's footsteps took away some of the sting.

"All right, Pa. One more year, but after that I'm staying for good."

Jacob clasped his son's hand and gave him a smile in thanks. "One more year. Now, let's go into dinner before your mother comes in and tans us both."

Hawk's Peak Land, Outside of Briarwood, Montana Territory—1879

He couldn't let the grievance go unanswered. His parents found thirty years of peaceful living in this beautiful and rugged land. They traveled to the northern territories to escape the sweltering madness of Texas, worked hard, and found peace. Even when the land became the Territory of Montana more than ten years ago, they lived in peace with the other settlers swarming the West to mine and graze cattle. In all that time, they had only one encounter with the Indians when they crossed the Gallaghers' land to reach their own. Since the army met defeat by some of the tribes about ten years back, the Indians were content to keep peace as long as the settlers stayed on their land and left the natives alone on theirs.

Peace for the Gallaghers had ended with Nathan Hunter.

The blackguard purchased land only a few miles from their extensive borders. The small stretch of grass between the two spreads belonged to a belligerent old swindler,

Dwight Dickens, who refused to work the valuable land. When he realized more than one interested party coveted the land, he let the bidding war begin. With little more than fifteen acres, the land didn't offer much except the water. Water and grass were the greatest currencies out west, without which a rancher may as well pack up and leave. Control of that stretch meant control of the stream coming down from the mountains. The snowfall each year assured that the water flowed continuously through till the next winter and kept their ponds full.

The Gallaghers won the bidding war, but only once they agreed that Old Man Dickens could keep his small homestead on the land. A small sacrifice for the water rights.

One week later, Nathan Hunter's men stretched barbed wire along the new boundary line. The Gallaghers hated wire.

When they first arrived in Montana Territory, the area consisted of a few small ranches in the area that they chose to settle, a day's ride north of Bozeman. Not many settlers lasted past their first winter in the harsh climate, but the Gallaghers found home and soon became one of the most respected ranching families in the territory. Known for their fairness in business and hard work, they made a solid name for themselves. Jacob Gallagher built a legacy on that wild land, and his children were damned if they'd let one man destroy it.

Ethan Gallagher sat tall atop the midnight black stallion, a magnificent animal bred from the Hawk's Peak bloodline. Gabriel, his younger brother by two years, sat just as tall on his own dark Thoroughbred, a beauty he brought with him to Montana from a Kentucky horse farm on his way back from school in the East. Both animals wore the staggered HP brand of the Hawk's Peak ranch.

Gabriel swore loudly enough to draw a glance from his brother. He settled the animal with a soothing word. Ethan said nothing. He appeared to not have a care in the world. Gabriel knew better. Ethan didn't wear his anger on the surface. The darkness of his eyes and the clenched jaw were sure indications that his brother could commit murder. In this instance, it would be the murder of Nathan Hunter. Gabriel wouldn't think ill of his brother if it came to that end.

When the wranglers went out to round up a few strays that had wandered during a fierce thunderstorm the previous night, they discovered the latest in a string of misdeeds. A cow lay dead on the earth, its blood mixing with the summer grass and its eyes open and lifeless. The cow dropped a calf only the week before. The calf had been injured trying to stay near its mother, but when the wranglers brought it back to the ranch, everyone knew they couldn't save him.

Ethan's gaze went to the mangled legs of the animal, sure indications that the innocent creature struggled and suffered before death and had been unsuccessful in its fight to survive. The deadly wire wrapped around the poor creature's legs left enough proof for Ethan. Proof that regardless of the backbreaking rail fence the Gallaghers put up to keep their cattle from that particular stretch of wire, someone deliberately put the wire onto their land.

Only one of many unprovable incidences which had occurred since the arrival of Nathan Hunter. Ethan was close to not caring about proof for the marshal. If the law of the territory couldn't put a stop to it, the law of the land would. Ethan spared his brother one last look, turned his mount, and headed for the bordering spread.

In the countryside of Borthwick, Edinburghshire, Scotland—February 1882

“Papa?” The hands firmly within Brenna’s grasp felt as cold as the frigid lochs in winter. Her emerald-green eyes, a gift from her mother, gazed into the haggard face of the only man she ever loved.

“Me darling Brenna.” His voice sounded hoarse and the strength behind his deep brogue weakened.

“Yes, Papa, I’m here.”

“I must . . .”

“You must rest now, Papa.”

“No, I must tell ye.” He breathed in as much air into his lungs as he could. When he spoke again, his voice came out surprisingly smooth and his eyes weary with the weight of secrets long kept. Brenna sat up straighter, and held tightly to her father’s weakened hand. She waited for him to find his words.

“Many years ago, I traveled to America. I ended up in Texas where I met yer mother.”

Brenna knew of how her parents met, but she waited and listened.

His eyes filled with determination as though these last words would be the most important he’d ever speak. “Yer mother and I fell in love immediately. I knew the moment we met that we’d marry. I would have done anything to make her mine Brenna. Anything. Her father dinna want the marriage and dinna want me near me Rebecca. Yer mother defied him and we married without his blessing. When he discovered her rebellion, he disowned her and told her never to return. Yer mother never wept for the loss. She packed her things and we left on the next train heading east and then a ship home to Scotland. We told ye yer grandfather died before ye were born.” Her father coughed and once again struggled with his breathing while the sickness consumed his lungs.

The great man Brenna loved and revered her whole life was not the man slipping away before her eyes. She feared what he would say next, but waited even as the weight of grief settled in her heart. He asked her to pull open the drawer next to his bed. Her hands wanted to tremble, but she didn’t allow herself that weakness. Brenna pulled an opened envelope from the drawer. The crispness of the paper had long since faded into worn softness indicating how often the words had been read. It was addressed to her mother, postmarked Texas.

His breathing became more shallow. “Yer mother and I agreed not to tell ye, but now I’m thinking that we did ye wrong lass. We never thought we wadna be here to protect ye.” He took another labored breath and in a voice barely above a whisper said, “Yer grandfather lives. He’s an unkind man and he . . . but ye’re not alone in the world, me darling girl.”

Duncan Cameron struggled to bring air into his lungs, and it became evident that the loving father who taught her to ride horses as a child would soon leave her. He didn’t have many breaths left in his once strong and proud body. Yet even now, his words pulled at something within her that she couldn’t explain. Brenna wanted to ask her father from what they wanted to protect her. Now she could ask him nothing. His eyes closed and soon after, his soul left his silent body and departed the earth.

Brenna never felt more alone. The pain his passing left behind soon festered into hatred. She never hated anyone before and didn’t think she possessed the capacity for it. Then she read her grandfather’s letter to her mother.

October 1857

Rebecca,

I have received your letter and will write only this once. I have not changed my feelings in regard to your scandalous marriage to that Scotsman or for your disregard to my orders that you not marry. Your mother is in agreement. You wrote to tell me of your children. Know only this. Before you left I told you what I wanted, and I expect you to heed my wishes.

Nathan Hunter

Brenna did not know why her parents kept the letter after all these years. Even after her mother passed on, her father kept it hidden. Duncan Cameron died before he could explain why Nathan Hunter spoke of scandal or why he hated her father so much. Brenna's mind filled with questions. What did my mother take? What of my grandmother? Did she still live? Papa didn't mention a grandmother. He said only that I wasn't alone, but he couldn't possibly mean my grandfather.

Even more troubling was the mention of children. She was an only child. Her father had left her with too many unanswered questions.

Only one choice remained. She knew Iain would never understand. Maggie would insist on going or at the very least, hiring a companion. Brenna didn't want to share what she believed had to be done with anyone, especially a stranger, and she couldn't ask Maggie to leave her husband and home. Brenna didn't know when she would again step foot on Scottish soil. The thought of telling them pained her, but she owed them the truth . . . or most of it. She would promise to hire someone to accompany her, but only until she reached the ship. By that time, it would be too late for anyone to stop her.

3



Briarwood, Montana Territory—October 1882

It seemed almost impossible that Brenna now stood in the middle of a dusty street on a brisk autumn morning thousands of miles from everything she knew and treasured. But there she stood in the town of Briarwood in Montana Territory. The arduous journey left her weary and homesick: the seemingly never-ending crossing of the Atlantic, the miles of train tracks, the stink of unwashed people the farther from civilization she got, and the rattling stage ride. But this is where her grandfather lived or so the telegrams she received from the private investigator had indicated.

It had not taken long to discover the whereabouts of Nathan Hunter. Once Brenna arrived on Boston's soil, a place so foreign to the country she loved, she had sent telegrams to the postmarked address in Texas from where Nathan Hunter's last letter was sent. A reply arrived less than two days later informing her that Nathan Hunter no longer lived in Texas. He had moved to the Montana Territory some years back. With a dozen more telegrams and the services of a costly private detective, she found him.

If Brenna's mind had not been filled with questions and worries, perhaps she could have appreciated the grandeur of the place where she now stood. Mountains higher than she'd ever imagined jutted upward from the earth. Those in Scotland stood as mere hills compared to the towering peaks surrounding the valley, which seemed to stretch farther than she could see. The fresh pine-scented air reminded her of the long walks she used to take with her father back home, when she picked bundles of heather for her mother. There seemed to be no end to the journey an eagle could take in the vast blue skies. Wildness and beauty unlike anything she'd ever imagined surrounded her.

Unfortunately this majesty was wasted on Brenna those first moments. She held her reticule close to her bosom, thinking of the letters tucked safely inside. She had found two more missives when she went through her father's belongings. Neither told her anything more about Nathan Hunter than what she already surmised. She detested the man and the facts began to support her feelings. Her hatred still lurked below the surface, even though she knew it likely hurt her more than him.

Brenna didn't need to look at the letters. She had memorized their content on the sea crossing. Those worn papers gave her a small measure of courage, misplaced though it seemed right now.

Many times on the journey here, she questioned her decision to leave behind her beloved Scotland to find this man who destroyed his family. Of course her mother had been happy. Rebecca loved Duncan Cameron more than life itself, but the kindest part of her soul still believed that her own father could someday soften his heart. Brenna learned something about her mother in those letters. Rebecca Cameron had possessed one of the most forgiving hearts she'd ever known a person to have.

Brenna had no intention of trying to spark a family relationship with Nathan Hunter, but her stubborn nature refused to let the matter of the letter's content go without answers. The most puzzling thing of all was the mysterious item that he claimed his

daughter took from him. The other two letters spoke of nothing but that, though bereft of details.

With a deep sigh, Brenna set those thoughts aside as practicality weighed in. She must learn her way around this foreign place and find accommodations for her duration. Reports indicated that the territory was a hard land, and her solicitor used every last bit of persuasion to convince her not to go. Brenna's determination won, though she was grateful at least one person knew where she'd gone.

The crisp wind blew across the grass-covered valley and caressed Brenna's face. She pulled the fine, wool scarf, the last Christmas gift from her mother, tighter around her neck and shoulders. Her long, heavy, wool coat kept the rest of her warm enough. Although, she admitted to herself that it wasn't the weather that brought on a sudden chill. Twenty-five years of Scottish winters made her impervious to the cool breezes she encountered in this country. The chill came from fear.

Fear unlike any she'd known in her life consumed her. Through the length of her journey here, she had been only angry and saddened about leaving home. Fear didn't have a chance to settle into her mind until she faced the stark reality of what she'd done. She had plenty of money to survive and even start a new life here if she chose. Her parents provided well for her, though some of that remained a mystery to her. The funds she now carried in her reticule had been tucked securely at a bank in Boston. Brenna's only clue had been a bank draft found among her father's papers in his study and later confirmed by his solicitor.

The other passengers alighted from the stagecoach, though her thoughts were not on them either. Nor did she notice at first the damp dirt on which she stood.

One man watched from the door of the general store. It seemed as though every day new folks made their way north. Some for opportunity, others for adventure, and some to find peace. He could usually tell by the looks of a person what brought them, and it didn't take long to tell which ones would be hightailing it back to wherever they came from once they'd had a taste of winter. Most of the men and women appeared to be well-seasoned to frontier life—except one. He stepped away from the general store and slowly made his way across the street to get a better look at a beauty he was certain fell into the group of those who couldn't possibly handle life in his wilderness.

Brenna took in her surroundings. Briarwood appeared to be exactly what replies to her inquiries reported—a small settlement content to grow at its own pace, with wide streets and a good-sized general store located next to a barber shop. Another large building, void of sign but well-tended, stood to the other side. Down the street near the livery, a medical clinic sign hung from the doctor's office. The hotel saloon, where she had been dropped off, was across from the general store and appeared clean enough, but she cringed at the thought of sleeping in a saloon and decided she'd find other accommodations.

A dressmaker's shop with simple versions of the latest fashions stood next to a small bank bearing a clock above the sign. A café and quaint newspaper and telegraph office were nearby. Farther down, a few houses lined the street, and in the distance a proud white church had been erected next to a well-kept churchyard. A small red schoolhouse was located off to the other side of a meadow near the church. It appeared to be freshly painted. Despite the population growing in the southern part of the territory, Briarwood seemed to move to its own rhythm. Ignoring the faster progress of other towns, the peacefulness of this settlement reminded Brenna of home. She held back the tears and replaced them with the determination that brought her this far.

Brenna watched as the stagecoach drove away and left a cloud of dust in its wake. Her gaze followed the last link to the life she left behind as the rambling transportation disappeared across the land. In her mind, there was no turning back until she found the answers she desperately sought.

Brenna picked up her small valise and noticed that the driver had left her trunks on the side of the road. Taking yet another deep breath, she turned and then nearly collapsed.

"What in darnation did you think you were doing, Riley?" The angry bellow followed a scrawny man who nearly aided Brenna in her fall to the sludge below.

A strong pair of hands caught her from behind and pulled her quickly back to the boardwalk. Forgetting those hands for the moment, Brenna watched the man she assumed was Riley fall face first and consume a mouthful of the grimed street in the process. A disturbing and apparently angry man pushed open the swinging doors and stormed out to the street. Riley picked himself up off of the ground before the goliath could kick him in the ribs, which is where his booted foot almost landed.

"That's right. You run off now and don't let me catch you back in here until you're old enough to drink and whore."

A small crowd gathered around and a few unapproved glances shot toward the rangy and unfortunate-looking man who had just shouted. He yelled at the onlookers who then dispersed and went about their business. Brenna stood there, not knowing what to think about the people of this new land. She had witnessed a brawl once in their village, unbeknownst to her overprotective parents, but these people appeared to be open about it. And she had heard people call the Highlanders barbarians.

Brenna also found herself fascinated and couldn't step away. The same disturbing man who had thrown the smaller man he called Riley onto the street, took off his hat and slapped it against his thigh a few times, transferring dust from his pants to his hat, before he turned and noticed her. A small smile formed on his mouth, showing the barest hint of crooked teeth. Brenna shuddered at the uncomfortable, and unwelcome, way his eyes roamed freely up and down her body. She felt exposed, despite all of the fabric she wore.

"Howdy, ma'am." The stranger approached her. "My name is Bradford James and it's sure a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Brenna wished for an escape, and her heart nearly leapt in her chest at the sound of the deep, smooth voice coming from directly behind her.

"Quite a show you've put on for us today, James."

Brenna saw the subtle change come over Mr. James and almost feared looking behind her. The strong hands. She now remembered them pulling her to safety. She would bet anything that those hands belonged to the man who seemed to be the cause of Mr. James's angry discomfort.

"Now, Gallagher, this ain't any of your concern. Just a little family disagreement." Bradford then turned his attention back to Brenna. "I didn't catch your name, ma'am."

"She didn't give it."

Goodness, that voice could scare the fierce Scottish winds off of their current. Brenna had never remained quiet for so long, but she willingly deferred this particular argument to her mysterious protector. She kept her peace and waited.

Bradford looked at Ethan and then back at Brenna. Brenna nervously tucked her red hair into her hat and prayed she wasn't about to witness an altercation between the two men. Bradford James eventually tipped his hat and sauntered back into the saloon.

Brenna let out a slow, quiet breath, grateful that Mr. James had departed. Everything

about that man made her wish she had quick access to a bath. Remembering why the stranger had made himself scarce, Brenna slowly turned around and stared into a wide chest covered in a clean black shirt and dusty coat. She tilted her head up, her eyes following a path that reached nearly a foot above her, and found a grin. She stared into the most beautiful blue eyes ever to be found on a man—not even a regular blue. They looked almost gray, but dark, like the night sky when the moon shone. His dark brown hair escaped from under the wide-brimmed hat she'd seen wear in the West. His face didn't appear to have met a razor in a few days. The result should have made him look unkempt, but instead he exhibited danger. The high cheek bones and square jaw combined with those dark eyes were magnified by his deeply tanned skin. Obviously her rescuer—a cowboy a gentleman on the train would have called him—didn't always wear his hat.

“Not exactly a place for a lady to be standing on her own.” The man's smooth drawl sent a shiver through her body.

“Yes, I realize that, sir, but the stage stopped here, so this is where I stand.” Subtlety and patience were two traits she did not possess, and she needed to find a hotel. “I don't suppose you know of a Nathan Hunter residing in the area?”

The grin slowly faded and those grayish-blue midnight-colored eyes became darker, if that was possible.

“Yes, he lives around here.” The cowboy's voice hardened.

She found that curious, but the relief that coursed through Brenna couldn't trample the anger still festering deep within her breast for the man she sought out.

“Would you happen to know where he lives?”

It appeared to Brenna that he didn't want to answer her, and his eyes took on a dangerous glint.

“Now, what would you want with Nathan Hunter?”

Brenna didn't know what about this man riled her more—the tone of his voice or the chilled look in his eyes.

“I do appreciate your help, sir, with my near tumble, but I don't see how that is any concern of yours.”

After a moment he still hadn't answered.

“He's my grandfather, if you must know.”

Ethan didn't think he could be more shocked if his brother walked down the streets of Briarwood naked. He studied the woman from head to toe, much like Bradford James had done, but with different intent. He couldn't tell much about her body as she kept it well covered in expensive blue wool and a deep-green scarf. She stood about a foot shorter than his six feet four, and he'd guess that she was nice and curvy underneath that coat. He did notice her hair—a deep, dark, flaming red under a midnight-blue hat. Her expressive eyes, as green as the summer pastures out at the ranch, were surrounded by creamy white skin that looked to have been well guarded from the sun. He couldn't fault James for admiring the shiny penny newly arrived, but out west that could mean trouble and it didn't mean he liked it.

Brenna found herself growing impatient as this man boldly studied her, though she had to admit that it didn't bother her. Mr. James's perusal disgusted her—this one merely irritated her. She grew impatient because after months of travel she was so close to finding her grandfather and this man wanted to gawk.

Finally he spoke. “The Double Bar is north of here. That's Hunter's spread, though I

wasn't aware of him having any relations still around here."

"Well, I haven't exactly met him before." *What business was it of this man's anyway?* If she wanted to be truthful with herself, it could be that from the moment she looked into those fascinating eyes and grinning face, she wanted to trust him. Brenna knew it could just be weariness from her travels, and she didn't need to be making mistakes. The journey had been difficult enough convincing men she wasn't alone. Brenna had even gone so far as to wear one of her mother's old rings over the glove on her left hand. Whether others had thought her married or a widow, she didn't care as long as they left her alone.

The stranger offered a sardonic raising of his eyebrow, which plainly told Brenna that the man thought she was daft.

Ethan most definitely thought Brenna was in over her head. He'd just as soon see the woman right back on the next stage out of there. In the meantime, he didn't want to take her out to the old man's place without more information. It didn't matter that she obviously possessed gumption; he couldn't risk it. Hell, he thought, I'd try to keep a stray dog from the hands of that man. For reasons he couldn't fathom, he just appointed himself her protector, and he didn't even know her name.

"Well, I can certainly show you the way to the Double Bar, but you may want to stay in town for a couple of nights until you've had a chance to actually meet Hunter."

"Thank you, sir, but I have no intention of staying with Nathan Hunter. If you could point me toward accommodations in town, I would be grateful."

As an afterthought, Brenna stuck out her hand. "It seems I've forgotten my manners. Brenna Cameron."

The man raised that infernal brow and stared at her hand, but he accepted it. "Ethan Gallagher."

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Gallagher."

In answer to her question, Ethan was about to point her across the street to Widow Dawson's Boarding House but Bradford James chose that moment to saunter back out of the saloon.

"Well, well. It don't appear you've gone far, Gallagher." He tipped his hat to Brenna and smiled, showing discolored teeth.

"I could say the same for you, Bradford." His smooth, deep voice took on a sharp tone.

Brenna wondered why these two seemed at such odds but decided to once again keep silent. She wasn't in such desperate need of friends that she would be willing to shake hands with Mr. James.

Bradford lost his smile. He ignored Ethan and turned his attention back to Brenna.

The idiotic sop was obviously intoxicated, Brenna thought.

"Ma'am, I'd be happy to escort you to your destination." He slurred his words, even as he held out his arm for her.

Brenna forced herself not to cringe openly and decided to break her silence. She didn't have time for the lout or his ridiculous advances. "That won't be necessary, sir, but I thank you for the gesture." She hoped that would be the end of it, and in polite society it should have been.

"Now, ma'am, it ain't safe for a lady like yerself to be walking around alone."

"Be that as it may, sir, I am quite capable and as you can see, in good hands." Brenna gestured toward Ethan, hoping he would forgive her boldness and go along with her deception. The dark look that came over Mr. James didn't reassure her.

"She's with you, Gallagher?"

"She is."

Ethan said nothing more, and Brenna slowly released the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. She did that a lot lately.

"Well now ain't that sweet. I hadn't taken her for the type, but I guess you never can tell," Bradford said with a beastly laugh, too drunk to keep quiet.

Another equally ugly man—she hadn't expected so many in one town—appeared to be a friend to the drunk, although he hit Bradford in the ribs and told him to shut up.

Ethan ignored the other man and stepped around Brenna, blocking her view of Bradford as he spoke with him. "And what type would that be?" His smooth voice sounded colder and harder.

Brenna worried that she might have caused what could turn into an unpleasant altercation. She gently laid a soft hand on Ethan's arm, hoping to gain his attention. He ignored her. She found that annoying.

"The type to bed down with the likes of you, Gallagher, but with all of that money, she probably just shuts her eyes."

Brenna cringed at the sickening laugh, but not nearly as much as the sound of a fist hitting bone and the blood that appeared all over Mr. James's face. Oddly, the crude comment about her being a whore didn't bother her and she easily discarded it from her mind.

"You're having all of the fun without me again, Ethan?"

Brenna turned to see another man closer to her age with dark brown hair and an easy smile. There could be no mistaking where those eyes came from. This one looked just as handsome as Ethan, and Brenna had no doubt they were related.

Ethan waited a moment to be sure that Bradford would stay on the ground. "No, you're just late as usual." Ethan offered the younger man a genuine smile. "Are you finished up at the livery?"

His brother merely nodded as his attention focused on Brenna. "The name is Gabriel Gallagher, ma'am, and it is indeed a pleasure." The grin on the man's face brought one to Brenna's, and she found herself delighted with his charm.

"I am Brenna Cameron, Mr. Gallagher."

"Please, it's Gabriel."

"Very well, Gabriel. Your brother kindly came to my aid with a certain . . . mishap."

Ethan arched a brow at her as he looked back at Bradford being carted away to the doc by two of his equally inebriated friends. He half wondered how a genteel woman did no more than slightly shudder at what just took place.

Gabriel lifted his own brow in mocking laughter. "Yes, well, Ethan is our local rescuer of damsels in distress."

Ethan rolled his eyes at his brother.

Brenna laughed. "Well I assure you that I am no longer in distress and merely here to visit . . . uh family."

"I know pretty much everyone in these parts, though no Camerons. Who might your family be?"

Brenna wondered if others felt the same way about her grandfather.

"Nathan Hunter."

Ethan watched as the smile and charm left his brother's chiseled face and waited for the smoldering ball of fury to erupt as it usually did when Hunter's name was mentioned.

He knew Gabriel wouldn't take his anger out on a woman, but his hatred ran deep, like all of theirs.

"I wasn't aware of old Hunter still having any kin." Gabriel's words came out strained. *Now why does everyone keep saying that?* wondered Brenna.

"Yes, well, he does. Now if you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I really should procure myself a room for the evening." She turned to Ethan. "I do thank you for your assistance."

Just as she was about to walk onto the street, a strong hand once again grabbed her from behind. Brenna turned and looked up into those dark eyes. She wasn't used to being handled so casually or with such strength. No man of her acquaintance could compare to the ones they bred out here.

"It would be best if you didn't stay in town tonight, Miss Cameron."

"And why is that?"

"I guarantee that bad element is just waiting to find you alone, and Widow Dawson is hardly suitable protection."

"And what exactly are you suggesting, sir? The saloon?"

"Yes, what are you suggesting, Ethan?" Gabriel lost his smile, and Brenna regretted that.

Ethan shot his brother a dark look and turned back to those waiting green eyes.

Damn. In the deepest part of his gut, Ethan knew he couldn't just shrug this woman off and send her on her way. He felt protective of all women, as did his brother. They just couldn't stand by and watch a woman being mistreated, whether it was their business or not. This, however, seemed to be something more. A part of Ethan that he had believed died long ago also told him not to let this new arrival get away. He tried ignoring it, but duty came first and it was only Miss Cameron's safety he had in mind. At least that's what he kept telling himself.

"You'll come home with us."