

The best and worst of life are unexpected.

Alaina Claiborne

A British Agent Novel

MK McClintock

Chapters 1 - 3 of

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GALLAGHER NOVELS BY MK MCCLINTOCK

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In the spring of life your cry prevailed,
Blossomed and flourished with every wail.
The bloom and blush of roses fair,
Each morning and night, an answer to prayer.
Blessed child within the heart,
From this love we'll never part.

-MK McClintock

1

Benbrook Ball, County Wicklow, Ireland—October 1880

The room sparkled, from the glistening chandeliers to the flickering light of the candles. Beautiful people in elegant clothes danced across the gleaming floor in grand style. Laughter and whispers mingled with the fluid music of Brahms, teasing young men and women into a dance of subtle seduction and promise. Never before had she been allowed to witness such grandeur. Her young mind processed every detail, every movement, every word. Images of herself ten years from now, dancing with the boy she loved, filled her imagination—until the boy spoke.

“I told you I did not dance, Alaina,” Braden grumbled, and he stepped on her foot for the second time.

“You are the smartest person I know, Braden Melbourne, and you are telling me you have danced not once?”

“I never said I didn’t know how—I’m just not good at it.” He stepped on her foot again. “Do not say I did not warn you when your toes are bruised tomorrow.”

Alaina smiled in response to his gruff reply and continued to dance. *My joy is nearly complete, she thought, and someday I will marry Braden, and we will be the happiest couple in all of England or perhaps even all of Europe!* Best friends always made the best husbands, or so her mother once told her. For now, she was content to dance with him and think about racing him to the pond when they returned home to England. The song ended and Braden escorted her back to her watchful parents.

The evening continued to wear on as they were introduced to a seemingly never-ending line of people. Alaina gazed at every woman who waltzed past her and studied the way these ladies of society behaved. *What did men find so fascinating about them?* she wondered.

Of course, the ladies in attendance were either married, widowed, or closer to her age. Alaina’s perusal of the guests continued until she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. She turned to look up into the loving eyes of her father.

“Would you pleasure me with this dance?” he asked, bending down to whisper.

Alaina smiled at her father and curtsied. “I would be delighted.” Then she leaned over and whispered, “Papa.”

Christopher smiled down at his daughter as she wrapped her arm through his, and he escorted her out to the dance floor for a waltz.

Christopher Claiborne excelled at almost everything he attempted, and dancing was just one of his many talents. Alaina felt as though she danced on air as they glided across the ballroom. She did feel like a fairy tale princess, and this was her magical night in the arms of her father and in the company of those she loved the most. A ten-year-old girl who had known only love in her life failed to believe anything would ever change. This was a night for her to remember.

Melody after melody continued lilting through the air as the band played on. Alaina glanced up at her six-foot-tall father. Her neck cramped, but she didn’t mind.

“Papa, is life all so wonderful?”

Her parents had taught their daughter to be honest and to respect that virtue, but her father did not want to erase her joyful smile with life's truths, so he looked into the innocent eyes of his daughter and answered carefully.

"I want to tell you something, Alaina, something my father told me a very long time ago, when I was about your age." The music carried on and he continued. "We were fishing in the small pond near the house, and I caught my very first fish. When I reeled my line in, I grew excited until I saw the fish coming closer. I saw it struggling against the hook in its mouth. My father held up the net to catch the fish, and then he laid it on the ground until the fish stopped fighting. I had never seen anything struggle for life before and it upset me. I wanted to put the fish back in the pond, and when my father asked me why, I told him I didn't want to eat something I killed." Christopher continued the dance as he held his daughter, his voice covered by the music.

"My father loved me very much, as I love you, Alaina, but he wanted me to understand something that day, a truth I didn't understand until many years later. He told me life is a circle and in the circle exist hate, love, happiness, sorrow, and death, and in order to appreciate one, we must experience the others. Without those experiences we are not whole and live only a part of the life we were given, and it is up to us to make our lives full, for only within ourselves can we find peace."

Christopher paused to study his daughter's face and saw confusion and an innocent kind of wisdom. He feared someday she would understand his words far more than he desired and prayed for that time to come later rather than sooner. Her confusion still in place, she asked, "Papa? Was what your papa told you really about the fish?"

Her perception never ceased to amaze him. "No, my sweet, it was not about the fish, but I didn't realize it at the time. Someday you too will understand what he meant, but not now. Tonight we only remember this dance and how much your mother and I love you."

"I love you too, Papa, and Mama, so much." She hugged her father as the music ended and they returned to Clara and Braden, who stood on the side, enjoying the view of husband and friend.

The evening's entertainments slowly ended, and the foursome bid their hosts farewell. They had been offered a room for the night, but they did not have far to travel, so they elected to return home. The moon lit up the night sky, and moments after the carriage departed the old castle, the two younger passengers slumbered peacefully. Christopher gazed up at the moon through the window, his wife's head resting on his shoulder.

"Christopher?"

"Yes, my love?"

"Thank you."

"For what, my dear?" he asked and pulled her closer to his side.

"For bringing us here, for loving our daughter so much, and for being such a wonderful husband." She placed her hand on his knee, and he covered it with his own.

"My darling, I will love you both forever."

"As will I, my love. As will I." She raised her lips to meet his and felt all of the love in his heart. The kiss ended, and she ran her fingers softly up and down the length of his arm as they drifted into a companionable silence until something jostled the carriage occupants.

Braden awakened abruptly and scanned the carriage. "What is happening?" he asked no one in particular, still not fully awake.

“Nothing to alarm yourself over, son. It was just a deep rut in the road,” replied Christopher. The horses quickened their pace and one of the footmen lowered himself partially over the side so the passengers inside the conveyance might hear him. The footman was young, and Christopher clearly recognized the young man’s panic.

“My Lord, we have trouble,” he managed to say before the carriage reached a dangerous speed and he had to return to his perch.

“Christopher.” The panic-filled word forced him to look at his wife and he felt a deep pain clench his heart.

Everything he loved and everything worth living for were with him inside the carriage. He smoothed his hand over his wife’s cheek and kissed her brow. She did not need words to know what his eyes so freely spoke, but he said them anyway.

“I love you, Clara.”

“Do not even think what you’re thinking, Christopher.”

They both glanced over at their daughter, who had not been disturbed. Braden held the young girl carefully in his protective embrace. He was young, but he refused to allow any harm to come to her.

Christopher nodded to Braden and saw immediate understanding in the young man’s eyes. The earl lifted the window flap aside and stuck his head out to speak with the driver. The carriage had reached maximum speed, and he found it difficult to speak with the wind blowing ferociously in his face. Finally, he gained the driver’s attention, who motioned behind them.

He turned his upper body to look behind the carriage and saw what he feared the most—riders. There appeared to be half a dozen, but this area was not usually frequented by highwaymen—they tended to stay closer to the shipping ports and the more traveled roads to ensure a bigger purse.

Christopher pulled himself back into the carriage, grabbed a gun from a small box behind his seat, and then took one more look at his wife and silently prayed.

The chase continued for another half a mile, but the riders, not burdened with luggage and passengers, slowly closed the distance between them. Braden continued to shelter Alaina from the jostling caused by the bumps in the road from their rough ride, but he felt her begin to stir.

A shot pierced the night sky and echoed through the valley. Alaina shot straight up, not mindful of the warm arms around her or the sudden lurching halt of the carriage. She noticed only her father holding her mother with one hand and a gun with the other.

Another shot.

The horses lurched forward, but as they attempted to once again move forward, a third shot rang out and the geldings reared back while the driver did his best to keep the team under control. The horses fought the reins, but too many piercing shots had frightened them and the animals backed up perilously close to a slope in the hill. Shouts were heard as the passengers sat in silence, too fearful to even breathe loudly.

Their driver shouted at the men and again at the horses. Another man laughed a sickening laugh that brought a prickling of fear to Christopher unlike any he’d ever felt. The carriage wheels teetered precariously on the decline, and the horses lacked the strength to pull the heavy conveyance back once it started to tip. The carriage toppled over and the woman screamed. The horses whinnied, and the driver yelled again as he jumped off his perch. Down they went, rolling over and over, the sound of cracking wood echoing inside.

The doors flew open and broke off. Christopher tried to shove Alaina through the portal as they continued to roll, but he was unable to reach her. Then he saw Braden try his best to hold

onto the seat and reach for Alaina. With more strength than a young man of his age should have possessed, Braden grabbed his best friend and guided her to the opening, where there were only splinters from the broken door. Christopher watched as Braden pushed her from the carriage. He slipped and lost his hold in the same moment they hit the clearing and the carriage stopped, landing on the once open door.

Christopher braced himself to take his wife's fall, and they lay there, suspended in time.

2

Scarce moments passed before they managed to relax their bodies enough to breathe properly, and with the carriage lying on its side, they had little room to maneuver. Christopher checked his wife, and though she looked bruised and shaken up, she appeared to be without serious injury. Hurriedly he reached over to Braden to check him for injuries, but the young man lay still. Christopher steadied his fingers above the young man's mouth, but no breath touched his skin.

Christopher slowly levered himself up and gently lifted the younger man's head on his lap as best he could, and he felt for a pulse. It was still—the fall had broken his neck. Christopher leaned over the boy as something wet dropped on Braden's face. Christopher reached up to wipe away another tear before it fell. He held the young man, who in the last moments of life had given his own for a friend. Christopher felt his wife wrap her arms around him and heard her gentle sobs. They knelt over the friend their daughter loved more than life and prayed for him and for their daughter's safety.

The carriage rattled and they heard mumbled voices outside. The only way out was above them, through the other broken door. A man's head appeared, but the light of the moon shone behind him, and they could not discern his features.

"Ye get yerselves ou' of that there carriage right now, or I'll get you ou' meself." There was no mistaking the threat in the guttural slur, and they had no choice but to comply.

Christopher laid Braden's head back down and turned to embrace his wife. He kissed her with all of the love they had shared over the years, and it took more willpower than he knew himself to possess to pull away from her.

"Remember always, Clara."

The tears in her eyes flowed freely and she kissed him once more. They heard an impatient pounding through the carriage wall.

"Enough! Remove yourself from the carriage at once."

This was a much more formal and cultured voice. *Too cultured for these swindlers*, thought Christopher. For the safety of his wife alone, Christopher lifted himself out of the door and studied the men. There on the ground were nine men, a few more than he had counted before, which led him to believe others had been waiting up the road and they had fired the shots.

The horses had broken free from the carriage and now lay lifeless on the slope. Exhaling deeply, he turned back toward the opening and leaned down inside to lift his wife out of the carriage. He maneuvered to the edge and lowered himself to the ground first. He then lifted his wife down to stand beside him. Christopher did his best to shield her from the men, but they were curious and moved around to get a better view. Clara was a smart woman and she knew that to say anything meant their death, so she remained inside the protective embrace of her husband.

"Bobby, make sure there is no one else inside," spoke the cultured voice, which came from one of the men on horseback.

The other man did as ordered and clumsily climbed up on the side of the carriage with the help of the wheels. He peered down inside and said, "Why, me lord, there's a boy down there."

"Well, then pull him out," replied the man, keeping his shadowed eyes on the couple.

“He ‘pears to be dead, me lord.”

The man on horseback turned back to the couple. “My condolences. I do detest the death of innocent children.” The man offered no sympathy in his dry voice, and he pulled a thin cheroot from his breast pocket, lighting the end. He looked at the men and then back to the couple. He ordered for Clara to be brought to him.

“No!” Christopher and Clara yelled at the same time. Everyone paused as the leader continued to study the couple, and then he tried another approach.

“And who might you be? Other than an Englishman far from home.”

The reply was not immediate as Christopher tried to remember where he had seen or heard this man before. “The Earl of Claiborne.”

The leader’s queer smile vanished instantly, and it was a moment before he spoke again, all pretenses of formality gone.

“Well, this is indeed a pleasure. It is not every day men such as us happen upon such a wealthy conveyance. I had no idea when I took this job, I would have the opportunity to settle a score between enemies.”

Christopher was puzzled for a moment by the cryptic remark until realization of what the leader said hit him. Someone had wanted them attacked, and this was the man they had sent. Mindful of his wife still holding on to him but not speaking, he looked more closely at the man on the black mount.

“Croxley,” Christopher practically snarled. Clara gasped and her husband held her more tightly.

“I must say that I am pleased you both remember me. It has been many years, but I can see you have prospered. You have both changed. Why, Clara, you were a mere girl last I saw you. Tell me, Lord Claiborne, have you enjoyed bedding the woman who was supposed to have been my wife all of these years?”

“She was never yours.”

“Oh, yes, I had great plans for us as did my father,” replied Lord Croxley, ignoring the last comment.

“You were a monster even then. Her father saw it, and it was why he refused your offer.”

“Her father was a fool! She should have been my wife. Tell me, did she only breed the one son?”

Anger suffused Christopher and he almost forgot the precarious position they were in as he stepped forward, fists clenched at his side.

“Now, now, we don’t want any of that. I suggest, Lord Claiborne, you cooperate or you might find your regrets to surpass the death of the boy in the carriage.” Lord Croxley stared down at Clara with lust-filled eyes and spoke to the man she held tightly.

“I suggest you tell your wife to step forward, or I won’t guarantee your safety,” said Croxley.

“You will never have me. Never!” Clara yelled, breaking her silence.

She turned back to her husband but not before she felt the anger radiating from Croxley. Christopher pulled her with him and backed up as far as the fallen carriage allowed. Their efforts were laughed at and then with the signal of Lord Croxley’s raised fist, four guns pointed directly at Christopher.

“Now, my dear, you have two choices. You either come with me now and we spare your husband, or he dies and I take you anyway. Only one way will save him, so choose wisely.”

“I will kill myself before I ever let you touch me,” yelled Clara.

“I will eliminate your husband, my dear. You may decide if he will die slowly or painlessly. Now come here,” Croxley replied in a snarl, holding his horse calmly.

Christopher pushed his wife back behind him. “Never!” he shouted.

“Then you leave me little choice.”

When she realized what was happening, Clara stepped out in front of her husband and hugged herself to him, even as he tried to push her back. It was too late. The sound of the bullet leaving the chamber permeated the air, and Christopher stood suspended in shock as he felt his wife stiffen against him. He lowered her to the ground and smoothed his fingers across her cheek.

“Always, my love,” she struggled to whisper before the breath left her body.

“No!” Christopher wrapped his arms around his dead wife and rocked back and forth, his tears flowing freely as he temporarily forgot the men around him. “No, no, no, no,” he moaned into her hair. “Clara, come back to me. Clara!”

It was the cry of a man whose heart had been torn from his chest. Lord Croxley was surprised at the emotion the earl expressed for his dead wife. He had desired Clara for himself many years ago, though she had always claimed to love another. He had never forgiven her or her husband, but he had not wished her dead.

Lord Croxley turned to Bobby, who stood shocked at what he had just done and even more so when he felt the bullet from Lord Croxley’s gun enter his back. The other men watched as one of their own fell limply to the hard ground.

Christopher kissed Clara’s brow, smoothed back his wife’s hair, and whispered for her and him alone. “Always, my Clara.”

“Stand him up!” ordered Lord Croxley.

Unable to draw the strength to fight the men, Christopher allowed the men to drag him to his feet. They pulled him away from the still body and ordered him to kneel down in front of their leader. Christopher complied, knowing his life ended with his wife’s. He had no hope of escape. He prayed Alaina had survived and would someday forgive him for not protecting all of them.

“This brings me great pleasure, Lord Claiborne. You denied me her, so you shall have her no more. She was always mine, and you will pay for taking her from me.”

“She was never yours. She will always be mine. You and death cannot change that!” And forgetting that three guns pointed at his head, he continued. “She never did anything to you. She only followed her heart. Now you will live, knowing she died rather than be with you. She reviled you that much.”

The crack of the pistol and the smoke from the gun lingered. All three men with guns looked up to their leader, who still held his arm up, the grip on his pistol tight and unyielding.

Silence filled the air, broken only by the brush of wind as it moved through the trees. They watched the nobleman fall to the ground, and their leader put his gun back in the leather holster.

“Take everything you can carry from the carriage and mount up. Our job here is done.” The men obeyed and moved in rapid fashion as the lord on the tall black gelding looked down at the two motionless bodies on the cold earth. His men waited for him to ride ahead, and with one last look, he turned his horse around and led the group up the hill to the country road.

Back in the clearing, where silence now engulfed the land and the animals lay quiet in the crisp late-autumn night, they had failed to notice the small form huddled behind a nearby bush, bright blue eyes staring out after them as they rode into the darkness.

3

British Agent Safe House, Scottish Highlands—1887

Tristan stared at the stains covering his hands. He couldn't tell where the dirt ended and the blood began. From across the room, he watched as Devon took his turn at the washstand. Charles sat on a stool nearby, his blood-stained shirt partially unbuttoned, revealing his bandaged chest.

Devon Clayton and Charles Blackwood had been with him on every mission since they joined the agency after they had all finished their studies at Oxford. For three years, they worked side by side, mission after mission, with the highest success rate in the agency. The youngest, brightest, and best trained, they were called on by Britain because they succeeded where others had failed. However, they had not expected this.

Tristan had killed men before—it came with the work—but he had always felt those killings had been justified. At the tavern they had done everything possible with their combined knowledge to save the woman and child who had unknowingly fallen victim to their hunt. Their target—the woman's husband—had used her as a shield. Another man had used the child. They had never fired on a woman or child and had momentarily backed down—a mistake which cost too many lives, including two of their own.

Tristan replayed everything from the moment they had reached the tavern, attempting, in vain, to see any other way for a different outcome. There had been five agents and six men expected to be at the location. Their source had been mistaken or had betrayed them. There were eight men and the woman and child, sitting down to supper. Tristan and his agents did all they could to make the arrests without injury, but the men had refused to go peacefully.

He saw again the woman's husband throw her into the middle of the ruckus as he attempted to escape out the back door. Charles shot the man. The other, who had used the child as a shield, had held a knife to the boy's throat. As he tried to make his exit, the knife slipped.

Tristan remembered every man and every move. He had seen two of his agents go down, each taking a culprit with him. One had escaped, but he couldn't recall how. They might be the best at what they did, but they had made a deadly mistake. Tristan once again studied his partners and friends. Neither would forget what happened either. The woman and child's screams promised to haunt them all for years to come.

Tristan cleaned his hands, watching the blood darken the water. Some of it left a temporary stain on his hands, but a more permanent one stained his mind.

He nodded to his friends and they all left the room. They were due to return to England, and there were bodies to collect before they left.