



Chapters 1-3 of

GALLAGHER'S HOPE

Book Two of the Montana Gallagher Series

MK McClintock

GALLAGHER NOVELS BY MK MCCLINTOCK

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

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Trappers Peak Publishing



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Rousseau Mansion, New Orleans—October 1883

Nothing existed of the life she had known.

Her slender arm wrapped around the little boy's shoulder and pulled him closer to her side. She could feel his slight trembling and wished more than anything that she could take away his sadness. They were alone in the world. They had each other, and she prayed that would be enough for them both.

They stood and listened as the priest gave the final blessing, and two men lowered the caskets into the ground. The few other mourners who had been kind enough to attend the funeral asked her to leave with them, but she needed the closure. She needed her eyes to see what her heart refused to accept. "An unfortunate affair," everyone called the incident, for it wasn't every day that a man murdered his wife and then shot himself. Isabelle wished not to think on the possible reasons why, but she couldn't seem to help herself. She never imagined her family to be anything but happy. Their father's death, however, revealed the truth. No one spoke of it with them, of course, but the lawyer had made the situation quite clear.

They were penniless.

Isabelle thought back to the days before college, when she kept the family's books. *Did I miss the signs?* She remembered her father's stories and struggles about commerce during the war and knew how difficult it had been for him. They enjoyed great prosperity after they left Philadelphia for New Orleans five years after the War Between the States ended. His struggles paid off, and wise investments in land and timber after the war ensured the Rousseau's wealth. Her mother did not seem to care about the hard work it took her husband to make it through the war, but she enjoyed spending his hard-earned money. She thought of little more than to host party after party, ball after ball.

Isabelle recalled their last ball—her mother lay unmoving on the ballroom floor. Dr. Simmons assured them of a full recovery.

Her mother's episodes began four months later. She argued with her husband over the most mundane details of their lives. She treated the servants and children deplorably. Isabelle's father placed his wife under the care of a doctor, and after a month of treatments, she returned to her family, once again herself. No one knew what caused the illness.

Isabelle's father gave her the opportunity to attend college—she wanted to be a teacher. When she returned from school, she had planned to take a position at Landers Preparatory School for Girls rather than keep the family books. Therefore, she didn't know the truth of their dire finances. The only truth Isabelle knew now stood solemnly next to her. She would give up everything for him, but right now she needed to find a way to support him properly.

Isabelle managed to set aside enough funds from her modest teacher's salary to last a few months, but they couldn't stay in New Orleans. She wouldn't do that to Andrew. She refused to let him grow up in a city where whispers and gossip could reach his ears.

Gently and with great love, she guided her brother away from the church cemetery to the waiting buggy. They'd be without a buggy after today, for the bank wanted all of the property, down to the last piece of furniture and candlestick in her home, to pay off her father's recent and massive debts. The lawyer kindly informed them that they may stay at the mansion until the end of the week.

Isabelle helped her brother into the waiting buggy and sat down beside him, pulling him close and covering them both with the light, woolen, travel blanket. He'd been silent in the three days since their parents' death, and she worried for him fiercely. She swore to herself to find a way to give him a better existence and to help chase away his haunting memories.

Andrew fell asleep with his head of golden hair resting against the crook of her shoulder, as the smart-looking black curicle made its way through the streets to the home they no longer owned. Without waking her brother, Isabelle pulled out the small advertisement she had found the week before in the paper. She didn't know at the time that what should have been an adventurous idea would now be a necessity. It was a chance at a new beginning, and she longed to grasp it, if for no other reason than to keep her brother safe. With resolve, she placed the notice back in her voluminous skirt pocket and laid her head back against the buggy. Sleep and appetite had eluded her the past few days, but at least for these precious moments, she closed her eyes and dreamed of what could be.

Her life now followed a path she never imagined, but a more traditional path was no longer an option. Her lack of desire for marriage or to carry on in society had vexed her mother for many years. Most women and acquaintances of her age married and dutifully began families of their own. They frequented the city's best tea rooms and spent their evenings at parties, while their children stayed at home with nannies. That might have been her had she made other choices. Isabelle preferred not to socialize, but she was always encouraged to attend the balls and parties, much to Isabelle's dismay. She knew her mother's only purpose had been to ensure her daughter's place in society and secure a good marriage with a man of wealth and influence. Her tall stature, long, golden hair, and soft-gray eyes made her popular among society's young gentlemen. Isabelle recalled the last time a young man courted her—an experience she had no desire to entertain a second time.

Isabelle studied the mansion one last time. The driver loaded the luggage onto the buggy for the ride to the train station, and the heavy air of the Garden District weighed heavy on her skin. She had imagined such a different future.

No matter how her father had left them in the end, he had given them a good home. He didn't arrange a marriage for her as many other fathers in their social circle had done.

Isabelle gazed out the window of the train as it slowly carried her and Andrew into a wilderness that excited her as much as frightened her.

During the war, Isabelle had heard stories of men and boys heading west to avoid joining the fight. Their family had been lucky in that regard. With her father old enough to have been left alone and her brother not yet born, their family had remained intact. When her father moved the family to New Orleans, society welcomed them, regardless of where they had lived during the war. Their French heritage and wealth had certainly helped.

That acceptance mattered little now. She left behind no one who meant anything to her. When it became known that she and her brother had been left penniless, many of

those she called friends stopped visiting after they'd paid their initial respects. One young man offered marriage. She declined and immediately sent a telegram to Briarwood, Montana Territory, accepting the position as a schoolteacher.

Isabelle scanned the changing landscape. The last three days offered views of dense trees and farmland but nothing to excite her about what lay ahead. Before they left, she had spent hours reading accounts about massive mountains so high a person could never climb them and land so vast that people lived lifetimes on it and never saw everything.

She glanced down at her brother, who rested quietly in the seat next to hers, his head against her arm. Isabelle brought her gaze back to the landscape and welcomed a small rush of pleasure at what she saw in the distance. The grand mountains loomed over the landscape, and pine trees became more plentiful the closer they came to those majestic peaks. Her heart raced as excitement overpowered the fear, and for just a short time, she allowed herself the pleasure of imagining something better.

2



Briarwood, Montana—October 1883

Isabelle allowed the portly man with a graying mustache to help her down from the stagecoach. He'd been traveling in their same direction ever since St. Louis and though kind, he told Isabelle more about himself than she wanted to know. Even so, when he let go of her hand and tipped his hat in a farewell gesture, a small sense of loss crept into Isabelle's heart. He had spoken to her more on the journey than her family's so-called friends had after the funeral. Shaking the maudlin thoughts from her mind, she held Andrew's hand as he stepped off the stage. One of the stage drivers unloaded their baggage and then accepted a pouch from an older man who waited nearby. The man turned toward them, and Isabelle saw kind, brown eyes in a wrinkled face.

"You waitin' for someone, ma'am?"

"No, sir, we're not." She glanced around, uncertain about what to do next. Andrew squeezed her hand, and she looked down at his tired eyes. The last stretch had been long and tiring for them both. "Is there a place to eat nearby?"

"Well, sure. Tilly's Café is just over yonder." He pointed toward the telegraph office. "Walk that way and you'll see it."

"Thank you, sir." Isabelle paused, never having been in a situation to carry her own bags. She released Andrew's hand and lifted one bag into each hand, then studied the large trunk.

"Uh, ma'am?" The man stepped forward. "I'm Loren Baker, proprietor of the general store." He pointed to the building behind them. "You can leave those here for a spell. I promise to keep an eye out."

"That's kind of you, Mr. Baker, but . . ." Isabelle glanced down at Andrew's tired eyes. "If you're sure it's no trouble."

"No, ma'am, no trouble at all." His warm smile helped put Isabelle at ease. "Might you tell me your name, ma'am?"

"Miss Isabelle Rousseau. I'm the new schoolteacher."

"Well, I'll be. Miss Rousseau." Mr. Baker smiled. "We've been expecting you. A lot of folks around here will be mighty pleased you've come."

"That's kind, Mr. Baker. Thank you." She'd taken another step and realized kindness was not missing from the world.

"Now, you go on and get yourselves a good hot meal at Tilly's, and you just tell her who you are and that I sent you over." Mr. Baker looked as though he might shoo them away, so with Andrew's hand in hers, Isabelle walked in the direction Mr. Baker had pointed.

Isabelle's eyes took in everything around her, from the dusty streets to the men in odd clothes. The few women she noticed stared at her, and Isabelle did her best to ignore the curious glances. She knew they looked out of place in this wilderness. Time in New Orleans had not prepared them for frontier living.

Tilly welcomed them to town and ushered them to a table that had a lovely view of the meadow. "Now, who do we have here?" Tilly smiled brightly at them both, her warm manner as comforting as the storekeeper's.

"I'm Isabelle Rousseau, and this is Andrew."

"Well I'll be, child, I'd recognize that accent anywhere!" Tilly slapped her hand on a thigh and grinned. "Are you all from New Orleans?"

Isabelle preferred to keep her past private but wouldn't lie to the woman. "We are."

"Too many years since I've been home." Tilly tucked a white towel into her apron. "Now, you just go on and tell me all about yourselves."

Gabriel slipped his brother's telegram into the pocket of his brown duster and smiled. Ethan said he'd finally be coming home next week and bringing along a couple of surprises. Gabriel had received Ethan's letter about marrying Brenna, but he found himself a little curious as to what the other surprise could be. He was just happy that his big brother finally made peace with the fact that he'd fallen in love. Ethan and Brenna had an unusual beginning, but Gabriel supposed that was to be expected when a woman from Scotland accepted help from a Montana rancher. Their determination brought them together, and their stubbornness had kept them apart. Luckily, Ethan had come to his senses and followed Brenna to Scotland.

With a light heart and long, efficient steps, Gabriel stepped away from the telegraph office and into the dirt street. He still needed to pick up the supplies on Mabel's list and a few things for Eliza. With list in hand, Gabriel headed for the general store after a quick detour at the livery.

"Hello, Loren." Gabriel sauntered into the store, as comfortable there as he was at home. "Anything new off the stage today?" Gabriel set his list down on the wood counter and narrowed his deep-blue eyes at the other man. "What has you smiling so big?"

"New schoolteacher finally came."

"How about that." Gabriel glanced outside the store windows to the schoolhouse. "It's been too long since we've had a proper teacher for the kids."

"Ain't that the truth?" Loren rubbed his chin. "You ought to head on over to Tilly's for a look. Sent her over just a short bit ago for a meal. Introduce yourself."

"I don't have any kids going to school, Loren."

"You're the most prominent family here. I'm thinkin' it wouldn't hurt to make her feel welcome."

Curious, Gabriel considered the storekeeper. *What is he up to?* "I guess I'm going to meet the new teacher."

"You do that, and I'll take care of this here list of supplies for you." Loren's enthusiasm might have worried Gabriel if he thought the man was capable of manipulation. "Your wagon out front?"

Gabriel nodded.

"I'll just have one of the boys help me load it up, then."

What the hell just happened here? Gabriel set his hat on his thick brown hair and made his way to Tilly's Café. When he rounded the corner of the telegraph office, he stepped up to the boardwalk in front of the small restaurant. His eyes scanned over the few patrons sampling Tilly's amazing food. He found the woman at one of the tables next to the window.

He took a moment to admire the beautiful woman with her golden hair partially hidden under a dark-blue hat. The morning sunlight shined directly on her face and revealed features as clear as a painting: smooth, alabaster skin; a small, pink smile; and light-colored almond-shaped eyes.

His eyes darted to the boy sitting next to her, and one look told him they were related, for the youngster had the same golden hair. Gabriel wondered about the boy's relationship to her. Both woman and child were smartly dressed. She wore a deep-blue dress of fine wool and a long, black cape that fastened just below her chin while the child wore a tailored, gray suit that he appeared to be comfortable in. As they ate, the woman glanced up from her plate of Tilly's hotcakes and met his eyes.

Loren Baker isn't as old a fool as people think.

Isabelle noticed the tall stranger staring at them through the window. She held little trust for men, though she'd have to admit to herself at some point that she needed to start trusting someone if they planned to survive out here. Most of the men she'd seen appeared far too filthy and of all the things to worry over, she hoped that she and Andrew would find a place nearby for daily washings.

The man continued to stare, and she found herself smoothing down the invisible wrinkles in her overcoat. He donned the same odd clothes she began to see a few days after they left the city. Work clothes were common on field workers at the plantations back home, but these looked different, from the wide-brimmed hats many of them sported, to the long coats on their backs and the odd boots on their feet. Some donned chaps and spurs, but this man wore neither. However, he did wear a cloth tied around his neck. Isabelle couldn't see much more of him since he stood in the shade of the building, but she did wish he would stop staring. As though he heard her thoughts and simply didn't care, the man moved away from the window and into the café.

Gabriel wanted to do more than just meet the new schoolteacher—he wanted to know her. Uncertain as to whether her cold expression stemmed from fear or annoyance, Gabriel decided to risk being told to mind his own business. He stepped into the café, and walked to the table closest to the window, tipping the brim of his black hat.

“Hello, ma'am. Loren Baker over at the general store told me you're the new schoolteacher.” He removed his hat and offered his hand. “The name's Gabriel Gallagher.”

Her voice sounded courteous but wary when she finally spoke, and her sweet accent charmed him. “Isabelle Rousseau, Mr. Gallagher. Will you have children attending school?”

“No, no children. I just wanted to welcome you to Briarwood, though if you don't mind my saying, I noticed some luggage out in front of the store. Are those yours?”

Isabelle wanted to be left alone, but she glanced down at Andrew's curious eyes and remembered she needed to make an effort. “Those are, yes. Mr. Baker kindly offered to watch them while we took breakfast.”

Gabriel smiled at Tilly when she came over to clear away the empty plates.

“See you've met the new schoolteacher.” Tilly continued to smile while she gathered the cups. “Folks sure are glad she's come.” Tilly patted Isabelle's shoulder with her free hand and walked briskly away, carrying the dishes.

“You’ll find this is a friendly town.” Gabriel turned the focus back to the conversation they were having before Tilly came over. “My wagon is over at the store right now. I’d be pleased to offer you a ride to your destination.”

Isabelle’s eyes discreetly scanned Gabriel. From the thick, dark-brown hair showing from beneath his hat and the startling blue eyes, to the long legs and broad shoulders beneath his coat, Isabelle took it all in. She looked at her brother once more and believed she had no other choice than to accept help from someone. “I need to find the church.”

“The church, ma’am?” He gave her a questioning gaze.

“Yes, I’m looking for Reverend Phillips.”

“Oh, well the church is the right place though not much for accommodations.” Gabriel fixed his gaze on the small boy at the woman’s side. He couldn’t have been more than five years old.

“And who are you, young man?”

The kindness in his voice kept Isabelle from snapping out at him for speaking to her brother.

“This is Andrew.” Isabelle stood up from the table, motioning for the young boy to follow, and took his hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both. Why don’t we head on back to the store, and I’ll load your trunks into my wagon? I can give you a ride over to the church. I’m sure the reverend is still there with it being so early.”

“Wait there now, Gabriel!” Tilly shouted to them from her place at the stove. She picked up a basket covered in cloth, hurried toward them, and handed the basket to Isabelle. “You take this, child. Just so you aren’t worrying about supplies your first day here.”

Isabelle glanced down at the basket in her hands and then back up at Tilly. “That’s very kind of you, but—”

“No arguing now.” Tilly pushed the basket into her arms and grinned. “Welcome to Briarwood.”

Isabelle stared after Tilly and then lifted confused eyes to Gabriel.

“I told you it’s a friendly town.” He held open the door for them and motioned toward the street. They walked companionably, though he sensed Isabelle’s wariness, and kept a good space between them. He glanced up at the sound of muted voices mingled with deep laughter coming from the saloon and hoped the reverend’s arrangements included a safe place to stay.

When they reached the store, Gabriel asked her to wait a moment while he loaded their trunks into the back of the wagon already filled with supplies. Usually, one of the men from Hawk’s Peak would have made the supply run, but Gabriel had ranch business to tend to in town. Gabriel had been annoyed at the inconvenience when the army supplier moved their meeting from the ranch to town, but now he found himself silently thanking the officer.

Mr. Baker stepped outside. “Well now, how did you enjoy your breakfast at Tilly’s? She treat you right?”

“She was lovely, Mr. Baker. Thank you for the recommendation.” Her voice sounded stiff and unfriendly, even to her. She made an effort to relax.

“I see you’re in good hands, too.” Mr. Baker pointed to Gabriel. “Now don’t let me keep you. I’ve a store to tend to.” The storekeeper disappeared, and Isabelle prepared herself to take the next step.

Gabriel helped them to the seat, placed the boy between them, and set the two blond horses in motion for the short ride to the church. Gabriel had a feeling that she didn't want to talk, which didn't bother him. He wasn't much of a social person himself unless he enjoyed a game of cards with the boys at the ranch or spent time with his family. But he did want to be social with the new teacher.

Gabriel halted the handsome team in front of the white structure just as Reverend Phillips pulled open the front door. The reverend stood tall and slender with graying hair and large brown eyes. Gabriel met him on a few occasions, and he'd taken an instant liking to the cheerful man.

"Good morning, Gabriel. It's a fine day when you show up in front of the church."

Gabriel gave a small smile for the reverend. "Now don't go getting any ideas, Reverend. I'm just delivering a couple of newcomers looking for you."

The reverend stepped up to the wagon and beamed at the woman and child. "You must be Miss Rousseau."

"Yes, Reverend. I do apologize for arriving early."

"Oh, no need to apologize." He waved a hand as though the matter wasn't worth the concern.

Gabriel jumped down from the wagon and deftly lowered the boy, who waited by his side until he placed Isabelle next to him. His hands lingered a moment longer than necessary on her trim waist, and his eyes sought hers.

Reluctantly he released her, and she stepped away, once again lifting the boy's hand into her own.

"I am so pleased you've come, Miss Rousseau. I began to wonder if we'd ever find a teacher and then your telegram came and our prayers were answered."

Gabriel's eyebrow shot up, but he said nothing. The reverend turned, catching Gabriel's attention.

"Gabriel, since their items are already loaded in your wagon, would you mind taking them over to the school?"

Gabriel nodded. "Not at all, but wouldn't we just have to move them again?"

"We'll be staying at the school for now, Mr. Gallagher." Isabelle's clipped tone surprised him. Gabriel took a better look at her now, and though her eyes indicated strength, she obviously hadn't been taking care of herself. She looked far too tired and in need of a few large meals.

"I'd be happy to take your things over, Miss Rousseau, but if it's permanent accommodations you're seeking, there's a vacant cottage in a nice spot. It's about half a mile down the road behind the schoolhouse. The rent is reasonable," he added when he saw her hesitate.

If it had been only her, Gabriel thought she might have refused on the spot, but he saw her eyes drift to her brother who huddled close to her side. Whether or not she fought her pride, he couldn't tell, but he smiled at her answer.

"Very well, Mr. Gallagher. We'll look at the cottage."

"That's wonderful." The reverend clapped his hands with excitement and urged them all back into the wagon. "I can show you the school tomorrow, and you can spend today getting settled."

Isabelle thanked the reverend, and Gabriel, once again, lifted them up like feathers into the wagon. She remembered a time when she'd been stronger and fuller, and cursed the past few weeks. They weren't without the money for food, and Andrew always ate his fill,

but her lack of appetite prevented her from eating more than a few morsels at each meal. She knew her frame suffered for it and was grateful that the folds of her cloak hid the looseness of her dress.

The short ride to the cottage passed in quiet much like the ride to the church, but Isabelle couldn't stop the slight gasp that escaped her lips when they came upon the small dwelling, so beautiful and unexpected in this wild and remote world. Made entirely of stone with a large white porch in front, the small cottage nestled between groves of stately pine and apple trees now spent of fruit. On either side of the whitewashed door set two large windows with empty white boxes beneath. The garden appeared well-tended with the flowers recently cut back in preparation for the coming winter.

Without a word, Gabriel stepped down from the wagon and lifted both of his passengers out. Her reaction to the cottage pleased him, as it held dear memories for his family. It had been his mother's escape from the ranch, and she and his father often found themselves tucked away here. The cottage didn't get much use unless one of the Gallaghers stayed overnight in town, but they hired a woman from town to clean it once a week. He knew the money went to help feed her three boys, so he didn't mind paying the unnecessary expense. They all helped to keep the place up, but the inside remained much as it had before their parents died. No one used it but family—until now.

Isabelle stepped away from Gabriel and faced the cottage. It took her a moment to gain her composure before she turned back to look at him. "Do you know what the owners are asking in rent?"

Gabriel shrugged. Curiosity drove him mad and his was insatiable. With the expensive attire the pair clothed themselves in, he wondered how money was an issue.

"A dollar a month is reasonable in my estimations."

"One dollar? That can't be. Even a place like this would go for at least ten times that in New Orleans."

"Ah, that explains the accent."

She shot him a defensive look, but he returned it with a smile.

"I mean that with the kindest respect. I happen to like the accent myself. In fact my new sister-in-law is from Scotland, and every time she speaks, it sounds like a song."

Isabelle smiled, and though slight, Gabriel took that as a good sign and returned the gesture. He pulled a small gold key out of his pants pocket and handed it to her. Each sibling kept a key when they went into town in case their trip became an overnight stay. Gabriel hadn't slept in the cottage in over a year.

She stared a moment at the key. "You already had a key?"

"I help keep an eye on the place." Gabriel set the key in her outstretched palm. "Go ahead inside; I'll just bring your trunks in."

With an absent nod, Isabelle and her brother walked to the front porch, and she turned the key in the door. It opened without a creak, and she stepped into the cozy front room. She jumped, a hand pressed to her chest, when Gabriel spoke up behind her.

"It would have just been cleaned a few days ago, so it's not too dusty and all of the linens should be fresh." He scooted around her and set the trunks next to a large high-back chair in the front room.

"This is lovely and so much more than I expected." She momentarily dropped her guard, and Gabriel accredited that to the weariness he noticed earlier.

"To whom do I give the rent each month?"

"I can go ahead and take care of that for you."

Isabelle didn't relent. "I'd like to meet the owners and thank them. It's a kind person who would rent their lovely home to a stranger."

"You're not a stranger any more. You're the new teacher and a part of this town, and the folks who built this place would be happy to have you here."

Before he gave her a chance to ask any more questions, he listed off some information. "You've already met Tilly, and the general store should carry everything you need, but if you can't find something, Loren—Mr. Baker—can order it for you. The weather's going to get a little cold here soon, and we're expecting a good long winter. I imagine there will be some days you'll have to close the school. The snow will get a little deep to walk in, and we've got an extra wagon and horse at the ranch you could borrow until you get your own. I'll bring it by tomorrow."

Gabriel looked at the other two occupants of the room. Even the boy looked at him as though he'd lost his mind. Gabriel simply smiled, tipped his hat, and left the cottage.

He was gone before Isabelle could respond, though he didn't sound as though he was giving her much of a choice. She turned to her brother and gave him a soft smile. Her heart nearly leaped out of her chest when he spoke his first words in over a month.

"That man sure did talk a lot, Ibbey."

3



Isabelle wept.

She wept out of joy and love for her brother. Isabelle worried for so long that he wouldn't speak to her or to anyone else.

She told her brother how much she loved him while she fed him a dinner of cold meats and bread from the basket Tilly gave her. Together they read the story of *Robinson Crusoe* from a small collection of books she refused to leave behind. Once she tucked Andrew safely into bed in one of the two small bedrooms, cozy beneath the fresh white linens and heavy quilts, Isabelle sat down next to him.

"Why did you stop speaking for so long, Andrew?"

Andrew lowered his eyes for a moment, seeming to concentrate on his hands. He looked up at his sister with big blue eyes. "I'm sorry, Ibby."

"I'm not upset with you." She smoothed back his hair. "I just missed hearing your voice."

"I was sad when Mama and Papa went away."

Isabelle reached over and hugged her brother. "I was sad, too."

"You won't ever leave me will you, Ibby?" Andrew held onto his sister.

Isabelle's tears threatened to fall. "I promise I won't ever leave you."

Isabelle walked through the front room, the small parlor, the kitchen, and finally the other bedroom. There hadn't been time before now to look at everything in the cottage. Her trunks still waited on the floor where Gabriel set them, and they beckoned to her. Isabelle knew that once she unpacked those precious books and the stylish gowns that currently fit too large and made her feel out of place here, she would be admitting her need and desire to stay.

Briarwood seemed like a good town and a good place to make a new start. She had to believe that. They needed a new start. It may not be grand like New Orleans—but this breathtaking land could feel like home. Her first glimpse of the majestic mountains from the train had stunned her with their beauty. The towns had begun to be farther and fewer between with people slowly being replaced by cattle and herds of wild game she'd never before seen. When they transferred from the train to the stage, the force of the beauty around her had become more apparent. She had wondered if they could make it in this wild land, a world so different from the one in which she'd been raised. But the crisp fresh air that had surrounded her when she stepped off the train had given her just enough fortification to get into the stagecoach.

Isabelle moved over to the side of the bed and sat down. She ran her hand across the beautiful hand-stitched quilt and up the post of the bed. The tears came unbidden again, and she lacked the strength to stop their descent.

This time the tears were for her. After her parents' death, not once did she shed a tear. But she couldn't stop them and knew why. This place was a safe haven, and she could succumb without worry. The tears fell as she lay down on the quilt and let sleep whisk her into peaceful darkness.

The following morning Isabelle woke before dawn, feeling refreshed. She chose to forget the sadness and embrace their new life. Andrew was her greatest hope and she reminded herself, her greatest responsibility.

She woke him an hour after she dressed, breakfast already on the table.

“Good morning, Ibby.” He yawned then bestowed her with a big smile.

Love for her brother swelled up within Isabelle, and she bent to kiss his brow. “And a good morning to you, Andrew. I hope you’re hungry.”

“Where did you get the food? Did you go to the store without me?” He sounded disappointed by the possibility, and she hid her smile.

“Of course not. This is the last bit of what Tilly, the nice lady from the café, gave to us. We will go to the store after I speak with Reverend Phillips at the school.” She set a plate of eggs and thick bread in front of her brother and went back to the stove to fix one for her.

Isabelle set the plate down at the table and took a seat. It was time she worked on getting her figure back—she dreaded the chore of taking in all of those dresses. For the second time in a month, Isabelle finished the food on her plate and watched happily as Andrew enjoyed his.

“Are you going to be my teacher too, Ibby, or am I still too little?”

“You’re never too young to learn. I will be your teacher, and there will be lots of other children for you to make friends with.” Isabelle took the plates to the washbasin and told her brother to go and clean himself up for the trip to town. He wasn’t moving quickly enough for her, but when she turned around to tell him again, she paused. His head was slightly bent, and he looked close to tears.

“I don’t think they’ll like me.” Andrew spoke barely above a whisper, and he wouldn’t look up at her. With a confidence she didn’t quite feel, Isabelle sat down next to her brother at the small, polished, pine table and lifted his chin with her slender hand.

“Why don’t you think they’ll like you?”

“They didn’t like me at home. They looked at me funny. I don’t like New Orleans. I never want to go back, all right?”

His lower lip quivered, and for a moment Isabelle realized she almost forgot how very young her brother was—only five years old but already such a brave boy.

“We never have to go back, I promise.”

“Can we stay here? I like it here and that Mr. Gallagher was nice.” Andrew wiped his nose on his sleeve and apologized to his sister since he wasn’t supposed to do that.

“Yes, I think we can stay here, and yes, Mr. Gallagher is a nice man. Now why don’t you go and clean up so we can meet with Reverend Phillips?”

She watched him leave the table, but her thoughts turned back to the man who helped them the day before. Isabelle hadn’t given Gabriel Gallagher much thought since he left them at the cottage the previous morning. She’d been far too tired and full of unspent emotions to take care of herself properly, and she wondered if he noticed. She was determined to gain some of her weight back, and with that goal in mind, she mentally made a list of the supplies she needed to purchase at the general store.

Isabelle didn’t have much left in the way of funds, for it took a fair amount to get this far, but they had enough to see them through the first few months in Briarwood. Not once did she feel a moment’s guilt for taking her mother’s jewels from the box on the dresser. The collectors took their time and hadn’t packed everything before Isabelle and her brother left New Orleans, and she needed whatever she could carry. Isabelle managed to

sell a few pieces when they stopped in St. Louis, but the few she had left would have to be safely tucked away. Isabelle doubted that the area demanded such finery.

An hour later they stood outside of the small schoolhouse as the reverend walked up to meet them.

“It is a beautiful day, isn’t it?” His beaming smile became contagious.

“It certainly is that, Reverend Phillips.”

“I just want to say again how pleased we are you’ve come. We fretted even being able to open the school back up for the winter term.” The reverend opened the door to the schoolhouse and motioned them in ahead of him.

“As you can see, it’s not overly large or what you’re used to, I’m sure, but it is room enough for the students we have, and of course we do keep it well stocked.”

Isabelle ran her hand over the top of one of the small desks and walked slowly to the front of the room. There stood two large blackboards behind the teacher’s desk and what appeared to be a new wood stove in the corner. Four square windows proudly looked out to the mountains on either side of the small structure, letting more than enough light in for working. It was a lovely room and though not as elaborate as the school she used to teach in, it certainly inspired her.

“This is perfect, Reverend. Thank you for this opportunity.”

Andrew came up next to her and stuck his hand in hers. Though he found his voice again, it appeared he chose to remain quiet around strangers.

“Oh, we’re the lucky ones, Miss Rousseau. With your experience and education, the children of this town have the opportunity to learn more than we ever hoped.” The reverend’s bright brown eyes darted happily from Isabelle to Andrew, and he clapped his hands together, though Isabelle couldn’t understand why. He appeared to be a man of great energy.

“Have you settled into the cottage?”

“Oh yes, it’s wonderful, though I meant to get the names of the owners so I might thank them.”

The reverend gave her a blank look for a moment. “Well that cottage belongs to the Gallaghers. Surely Gabriel told you.”

Isabelle shook her head in response and the reverend continued. “Their folks built it when their children started getting older, or so I’ve been told. They passed on some years back, so Gabriel, Ethan, and their sister Eliza tend to the place now.”

“Well, I will be sure to thank the Gallaghers next time I see them.” Isabelle did wonder why Mr. Gallagher avoided telling her the truth. It sounded like charity, but she was stuck. To turn it away now would be cowardly and more so, she couldn’t do that to Andrew.

Reverend Phillips nodded as though agreeing to something, and Isabelle just assumed that the man found it difficult to go long without moving.

“Well, I think that’s about all I can show you. Classes start in two days if you’re ready.”

Isabelle wondered if she looked as nervous as she felt. “I’m ready.”

“Wonderful. I’ll have Mr. Simmons put the notice in the paper, and you can expect around ten or twelve children to show up. Sometimes it’s more, sometimes less.” The reverend shrugged as if to say it’s just the way of things. “Some folks will keep their older children home, helping to prepare for the coming winter, but most of them find their way to school at least a few days a week.”

Isabelle wondered why they even bothered to have a teacher and then scolded herself. Every child deserved the chance at an education. She thanked the reverend for his time. "I'll be here Monday morning next, bright and early."

Isabelle looked down at her brother and smiled. "So what do you think?"

The little boy found a smile of his own, and it warmed Isabelle's heart. "He's a funny man."

"Andrew, you shouldn't speak that way of your elders." Then realizing her rebuke sounded ridiculous when she herself smiled, she stifled a quiet laugh of her own. "I suppose he did seem a little funny, and I thank you for showing him the proper respect in his presence. But I meant, what do you think of this place?"

"I like it, Ibbey. I like all of the big fields, and there are lots of places to play outside instead of the small park where we used to live."

Where we used to live. Isabelle squeezed his small hand. "I like it too, Andrew, I like it too." With a soft sigh and a smile, she walked with her brother outside the schoolhouse and gazed at her surroundings. A person could certainly make a new beginning for themselves in a peaceful place like Briarwood. Isabelle wondered if she would get used to the quiet, though the night before had been one of the best night's sleep in recent memory.

"What do you say we go on over to the general store, and perhaps we can get some pie over at the café?"

With eager enthusiasm, Andrew nodded his head, and they made their way through the meadow to the main street of the small town.

The dirt road beneath Isabelle's feet was a new experience. She'd been to the countryside before, but within towns she'd lived, the roads were paved. The sound of her city boots meeting the wooden planks as she ascended the steps of the general store brought a smile to her face. A world so different from everything familiar she'd ever known, and yet those differences gave her hope.

Isabelle paused inside the wooden doors of the store and took in the small space. Nothing like the emporiums she used to patron, the store appeared to carry everything a person might need, or at least everything the storekeeper thought a person needed. Glancing around, Isabelle thought it wasn't such a horrible thing they had limited funds because there was nothing extravagant to purchase. Shelves along the back wall contained books on one side, lamps and household goods in the middle, and food staples on the other side. Her gaze flickered to a corner where she saw a selection of both men's and women's clothing, though in short supply. Baskets, blankets, and sundries were set out on a table near the clothing and more food staples filled shelves on another wall. At least the town had their priorities in order. The store appeared to have a storeroom behind the counter, but a canvas curtain hid the room from view. She mentally adjusted the list she made when Mr. Baker stepped out from behind the curtain.

"Well, hello there." As before, his generous smile put her at ease. "Glad to see you two back here. Are you settling in?"

"We are, thank you, Mr. Baker. We've just come for a few things." Isabelle glanced around the store. "Though I'm not certain if you have everything."

"We've got what you need and if we don't, I'm thinking you won't be needing it. Heard tell you rented the Gallagher's cottage."

News moved quickly among the society set in New Orleans, but not this fast. "Yes, we have."

“Well, you’ll need some supplies.” She swore that’s what she already said. Mr. Baker seemed excited about the idea, though Isabelle couldn’t tell if it was because she moved into the cottage or because she was a new customer.

“Just some food items.” Isabelle listed off what she hoped would tide them over for a couple of weeks. “I didn’t notice a butcher. Is there one in town?”

“Nope.” Mr. Baker shook his head, but his smile remained. “Just me. Most folks hunt their own meat or raise animals for such purposes. My sister’s husband just slaughtered a cow yesterday. I’ve got some good cuts.”

Isabelle pictured the slaughtering of the animal she planned to purchase. She didn’t know anyone who had slaughtered an animal before, but this was her life now, and she was certain to encounter many new experiences.

“I’ll take a side of whatever meat cut you have, Mr. Baker, and some eggs, too, please.”

Mr. Baker smiled and went about collecting the items on her list. She watched as he carried a bag of flour and a bag sugar to the counter and realized she’d have to make two trips. Andrew tugged on her hand and she lowered herself to hear him, but he didn’t say anything. Her eyes found where he pointed, and she smiled.

“We’d also like two pieces of the licorice, please.”

Loren kindly agreed to hold her supplies at the store while she and Andrew enjoyed some pie at the café. He suggested she talk to Otis Lincoln, the blacksmith, about borrowing a wagon to move the supplies. Isabelle didn’t feel right about asking for such a favor but nodded and decided to make the two trips. They left the supplies at the general store and walked hand in hand across the dirt road to Tilly’s Café. Tilly looked just as pleased to see Isabelle as she’d been the day before, and Isabelle smiled at the woman’s kindness. Like the reverend, Tilly moved as though there weren’t enough hours in the day to accomplish everything, and Isabelle wondered if it was just them or if the fresh mountain air stimulated everyone.

Andrew glanced up at Ibbey. “Does she have the pie?”

Isabelle didn’t mean to laugh, but she couldn’t stop herself.

Neither could Tilly who answered, “Of course I have pie! Do you like cherry?” Tilly smiled down at Andrew, and he shyly returned one of his own and nodded.

Tilly chuckled and waved her towel to a nearby table. “Well, you just sit on down there, and I’ll bring you a big slice of cherry pie.”

Gabriel took the final box of supplies from the young boy who currently helped out at the livery and watched as the pair of them walked into the café, holding hands and smiling. The sight warmed his heart in places he didn’t know could be warmed. Gabriel never understood what his brother meant by an instant bond with Brenna Cameron. He thought perhaps he understood now. Something about this pair tugged at him and brought his protective instincts to the surface, but there was something else about them that didn’t seem right. The expensive clothes and the smooth cultured accent didn’t fit with a woman and her brother in the middle of nowhere all alone with few funds.

Gabriel had seen the proud look in her bright eyes when she had mentioned staying in the schoolhouse temporarily. Whatever had happened to them, it must have been recent.

Content for now to let her know he was a friend, Gabriel walked into the café and over to their table. “Hello, Miss Rousseau, Andrew.” Gabriel tipped his hat but didn’t move to

sit down. He'd been right about her upbringing because she automatically offered him a seat, as though she played hostess in a fancy parlor.

"Much obliged, ma'am."

Gabriel smiled when Tilly walked over and asked if he wanted some lunch. Gabriel noticed that his table partners were just starting on some fresh cherry pie. "I believe I'll have a slice of the heaven these two are enjoying and some coffee." He gave Tilly a broad grin, which she responded to with a blush and a swat of her towel to Gabriel's shoulder.

Gabriel's antics amused Isabelle since she had just learned from Tilly that she was in her fifties and happily married to the same man for over thirty-five years. During the exchange, Isabelle allowed herself a quick perusal of Gabriel Gallagher, beginning and ending with his startling blue eyes. It took Isabelle a moment to realize that Gabriel said something to her and she turned, flushed a little, and shifted her focus away from his admirable features.

"My apologies, Mr. Gallagher."

Gabriel grinned privately and repeated his question.

"Oh, the cottage is wonderful. Reverend Phillips kindly informed me that I have you to thank for it."

Gabriel was unapologetic. "Does that bother you?" he asked as Tilly set a slice of cherry pie and a steaming cup of coffee in front of him. The aromas of both made him silently thank the talented chef who first created pie.

"It shouldn't bother me, so I won't let it."

Gabriel thought that was an odd way to put it and turned his attention to the boy.

"What about you, Andrew? How do you like our town?"

Isabelle was amazed that her brother showed no shyness around this stranger, but he had been kind, giving Andrew no reason not to trust him.

"I like it." Pie interfered with the boy's speech, but Gabriel caught the meaning.

"Don't speak with your mouth full, Andrew."

The boy apologized and continued speaking. "I've never seen so many horses in one place. Does everyone have a horse, Mr. Gallagher?"

"Well you may call me Gabriel, and yes, I suppose just about everyone in these parts has a horse or two."

Andrew appeared to be considering something Gabriel said. "Why can I call you Gabriel, but Ibby has to call you Mr. Gallagher?"

"Quiet, Andrew."

"Well your sister is more than welcome to call me Gabriel if she chooses." Gabriel left it at that and consumed the last two bites of his pie.

Andrew finished his off and followed it with a big swallow of milk, then turned to his sister. "Ibby, do you think I could ride a horse?"

Isabelle saw the excitement and pleading in her brother's eyes and wanted to tell him yes, but they could hardly afford a horse. She was about to explain to him when Gabriel spoke up.

"Tell you what, Andrew. If it's acceptable to your sister, you can come out to the ranch sometime and ride one of our horses."

Andrew's eyes opened so wide, Isabelle nearly laughed. He begged her with the best manners a five-year-old could summon when faced with such an offer. Grateful for the offer and seeing no reason to turn it down, she nodded in agreement.

"When Mr. Gallagher says it's convenient."

“Oh, any time is fine. In fact I happen to have time this afternoon if you’d both like to come out. I know Mabel would love to meet you.”

“Mabel?”

Gabriel grinned. “My one and only love if she’d ever say yes.”

Isabelle’s back stiffened, and her eyes drew closer.

Gabriel chuckled. “Mabel’s our housekeeper, though she’s more of a mother to me and my siblings.”

Isabelle’s face became warm and she cleared her throat, grateful that Gabriel turned his attention back to Andrew.

“Can we go now, Gabriel?” Andrew’s pleading eyes drew a smile from Gabriel.

“Ask your sister.”

“Ibby, can we go now?”

Isabelle looked from the boy to the man, and her own heart lurched in her breast. They shared a few similarities between them. Both possessed aristocratic-like features, expressive eyes, and a full mouth. She’d never seen her brother at such ease with a man before, not even their father, and she wasn’t sure what to make of it. The pleading pathetic looks they both wore drew a genuine laugh from her.

“Oh, very well, we may go now, but we can’t stay too long.” She directed her statement to Andrew but looked directly at Gabriel.

He raised his hands in defense. “I promise I’ll have you back here the moment you tell me to.”

With a nod of agreement, she reached for her change purse, but Gabriel beat her to it.

He shrugged when she looked at him. “I never learned how to let a woman pay for a meal if I sat at the same table.”

It was all he’d offer, and Isabelle decided to graciously accept with a soft thank you.

“Oh, I almost forgot. The storekeeper is holding our supplies for us.”

“We can pick those up and drop them off at the cottage on our way out of town.”

Isabelle raised her brow up at that. “Exactly how far out of town do you live?”

“About an hour.” He shrugged, figuring that the distance wouldn’t make her back out. He already learned that she would do almost anything for her brother.

“I concede.”

“Very wise.” That comment only got him a hard stare. He smiled back.

Gabriel made quick work of loading her two baskets of supplies into the back of a wagon already filled with large bags of oats and helped them into the seat. When they pulled up in front of the cottage a few minutes later, Isabelle noticed a small wagon off to the far side of the cottage by a corral and small enclosed shed that she hadn’t noticed before. A lovely blond horse nickered at the fence of the corral.

Gabriel nodded toward the corral. “The horse and wagon, remember? I had one of the hands drive it in earlier.”

Not knowing exactly what to say, Isabelle absently placed her hands on Gabriel’s shoulders, and he hoisted her down from the wagon.

She stared at the horse and wagon while he collected her baskets from the back of his wagon. “I can’t accept them.”

“You don’t have to. I’m loaning them to you. Though come to think of it, I’ll probably need to give you a lesson in hitching a wagon, but that can wait until tomorrow.” With a flourish he followed her into the cottage and set the baskets down on the kitchen table.

He took a quick look to see what needed to go into the icebox. He put away the meat and eggs and scooted her back outside.

Isabelle didn't care for being manipulated and nearly said so. However, when she stepped outside, she saw her brother sitting in the wagon with the biggest smile she'd ever seen. Every difficult or uncomfortable decision she'd made since their arrival had been for the best.

Gabriel deftly helped her back into the wagon and set the team in motion on the road going out of town.

"Weren't you in town yesterday for supplies?" She motioned to the boxes in the back of the wagon.

"Yes."

He wasn't in the habit of explaining himself but chose to make an exception. "I didn't have enough room for everything and rather than hire an extra wagon for the night, I decided to come back into town today." Gabriel left out that he could have sent one of the hands into town, but he wanted a chance to see Isabelle again.

Isabelle had no response and was content to let Gabriel and Andrew talk for the duration of the ride. Gabriel explained a little about the area and the different trees and plants that Andrew asked about. He wanted to know about the eagle they saw soaring above them and the name of the small animal he saw crawling into a hole in the ground. When her brother asked Gabriel if he'd ever seen Indians, Gabriel laughed and told him he'd only seen them twice and they'd been fairly friendly. Andrew's disappointment in this didn't stop the questions. It wasn't until a group of wood and stone structures came into view that her brother quieted down.

His eyes opened wide with amazement, and he turned to look up at Gabriel in awe. "Is this all yours?"

"Yes, but there's also Ethan, my older brother, and Eliza, our younger sister."

Isabelle looked at him in surprise, and Gabriel wasn't sure what to make of that.

"It's just a ranch, Miss Rousseau. We work just as hard as anyone else wanting to carve a life on the frontier."

Once they reached the house and he secured the wagon, Gabriel helped them both down, but Andrew looked as though he wanted to bound for the corrals. An ornery mustang was being worked, and Andrew watched in glee as the wild animal bucked the rider into the air, but he managed to fall back into the saddle.

"Don't worry, Andrew, we'll get to that. For now, I'd like you to meet Mabel." Gabriel guided them up the wide front porch and opened the door to let them in. Isabelle took in her surroundings while a familiar recognition washed over her. For all of his rugged ways and comfortably worn clothes, Gabriel Gallagher belonged to a wealthy family. A family much like hers had been at one time, except here there appeared to be no pretenses. Gabriel didn't wear his wealth as a badge of honor but rather as a man who felt comfortable with his accomplishments.

A shout came in from the kitchen followed by a tall, black woman chasing a sleek, black cat through the hall with a rolling pin. She stopped immediately upon seeing them and used her free hand to smooth down her white apron.

"Well saint's alive, Gabriel. Don't you boys ever bring women home the proper way?"

Isabelle thought the comment rude, and made even more so when the older woman studied her the way someone might when buying something at an auction. But the woman

held out a strong hand and offered Isabelle a kinder outreach of friendship than she ever expected. "I'm Mabel. Welcome to Hawk's Peak."

End of Excerpt

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