

**What Others Are Saying About Vickie McDonough  
and *Whispers on the Prairie*...**

Vickie McDonough has another winner! Her knowledge of the Old West and the people who settled it shines in *Whispers on the Prairie*. With its well-drawn setting and cast of endearing characters, this delightful story will play tug-of-war with your emotions right up to the very last page.

—Carol Cox

Author, *Love in Disguise* and *Trouble in Store*

*Whispers on the Prairie* is a heartwarming historical romance with a great cast of realistic characters who will capture your heart from the first page. Charming, inspiring, and delightful—prairie romance at its best!

—Carrie Turansky

Award-winning author, *The Governess of Highland Hall*

Against a backdrop of the growing pains of the post-Civil War United States, Vickie McDonough weaves a tapestry of words depicting life on the plains and the changes that were quickly becoming the norm. Her characters leapt to life in my mind and my heart, and they stayed with me long after I finished reading this wonderful tale. Just the kind of book I will keep on my bookshelf.

—Lena Nelson Dooley

Award-winning author, *Maggie's Journey*, *Mary's Blessing*, *Catherine's Pursuit*, and *Love Finds You in Golden, New Mexico*

The story of Sarah Marshall and Ethan Harper tugged at my heartstrings, and it will echo in the heart of any reader who has ever yearned to belong and be wanted. *Whispers on the Prairie* is a title to cherish, and I eagerly await the next book in the Pioneer Promises series.

—Laurie Kingery  
Author, *Hill Country Cattlemen*

When you avoid loving the one God desires for you, watch out—just ask Sarah Marshall and Ethan Harper. This story of two people determined to go their own way had this reader engaged faster than jelly slides on peanut butter. With *Whispers on the Prairie*, McDonough begins this new series on such a strong base that I was left wanting the next book right away.

—Diana Lesire Brandmeyer  
Author, *Mind of Her Own, A Bride's Dilemma in Friendship, Tennessee, Hearts on the Road, and We're Not Blended, We're Pureed: A Survivor's Guide to Blended Families*

Vickie McDonough has created a wealth of intriguing characters in this heartwarming tale of brotherly conflict and family loyalties set on the Kansas plains. Combining just the right amount of romance, faith, and honest emotions, Ms. McDonough has penned another winner that you won't want to put down.

—Margaret Brownley  
Best-selling author, *Dawn Comes Early, Waiting for Morning, and Gunpowder Tea*

Gifted author Vickie McDonough blends authentic details of stagecoach stops, the hardships of the Santa Fe Trail, and the beauty of the prairie to give readers a heartwarming story of family, friendship, and true love.

—Amanda Cabot  
Author, *Waiting for Spring*

A good plot, good writing, and characters so real, it seems as if you know them—Vickie McDonough delivers all of that and more in *Whispers on the Prairie*. I especially enjoyed the way she handled the relationship between the three Harper brothers. I'm looking forward to future books in her Pioneer Promises series.

—Dorothy Clark

Award-winning author, the Pinewood Weddings series

Vickie McDonough paints a vivid picture of Kansas, 1870s style. Here is a wonderful story rich with emotional tension, lively characterization, exciting plot twists, and the perfect dose of spiritual teachings. Well worth every page-turning minute!

—Sharlene MacLaren

Best-selling author of three series: Little Hickman Creek, The Daughters of Jacob Kane, and River of Hope

From a setting that comes alive to characters who could have walked off the page, *Whispers on the Prairie* is an incredible story. It made me smile, laugh, and even tear up at times.

—Nancy J. Farrier

Author, *Painted Desert*, and coauthor, *The Immigrant Brides*

Author Vickie McDonough delivers a delightful tale in *Whispers on the Prairie*. Filled with high drama that tests the characters' faith, as well as their mettle, the story transports you back in time, right onto the Santa Fe Trail. Get those chores out of the way, set the DVR to record all your favorite shows, and don't start reading too close to bedtime, because you won't be able to put this page-turner down!

—Loree Lough

Award-winning author of more than 100 books



*Whispers*  
on the  
**PRAIRIE**

VICKIE  
MCDONOUGH



WHITAKER  
HOUSE

*Publisher's Note:*

This novel is a work of fiction. References to real events, organizations, or places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

**WHISPERS ON THE PRAIRIE**  
**Pioneer Promises ~ Book One**

Vickie McDonough  
vickie@vickiemcdonough.com  
www.vickiemcdonough.com

ISBN: 978-1-60374-841-4  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-60374-842-1  
Printed in the United States of America  
© 2013 by Vickie McDonough

Whitaker House  
1030 Hunt Valley Circle  
New Kensington, PA 15068  
www.whitakerhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McDonough, Vickie.  
Whispers on the prairie / By Vickie McDonough.  
p. cm. — (Pioneer promises ; bk. 1)  
ISBN 978-1-60374-841-4 (alk. paper)  
I. Title.  
PS3613.C3896W45 2013  
813'.6—dc23  
2013011103

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical—including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system—without permission in writing from the publisher. Please direct your inquiries to [permissionseditor@whitakerhouse.com](mailto:permissionseditor@whitakerhouse.com).

# Dedication

A very special thanks goes to Tim Talbott, director of the Mahaffie Stagecoach Stop & Farm Historic Site in Olathe, Kansas. Mr. Talbott took a good hour and a half to give my husband and me a private tour of his wonderful facility. I loved the Mahaffie Stagecoach Stop and its wealth of history, which sparked many ideas for this book. Thanks, Mr. Talbott, for your gracious hosting and for answering my many questions.



# Prologue

1868 • *Kansas*

**D**on't you love springtime?" Della asked as her horse approached a shallow brook. Rather than ride through it, she tapped her mare with her quirt and leaned forward. "C'mon, Jezebel. Let's go."

Ethan Harper clenched his jaw as the black mare deftly jumped the creek, and in spite of using that crazy-looking sidesaddle, Della sat the jump as well as any man riding astride. With her safely across, he relaxed, then reined in his buckskin to walk the gelding across the stream. Della knew no fear—and that made her far too reckless.

He surveyed the gently rolling hills covered in lush, ankle-high grass, still littered with patches of white from last week's snowfall. "Yep, spring is nice. Sure will be glad to not have to fork hay to the livestock anymore, at least not till next winter."

Della turned and rode back toward him. "I was talking about all the pretty wildflowers. Just look at them! Violet, yellow, snow-white, crimson, lavender..."

"Aren't violet and lavender the same thing?"

She giggled. "Of course not, you silly goose."

He didn't particularly care for his sister-in-law's name-calling, but he let it slide, like rain off oilcloth. Della could be childish at times, but his family tried to overlook that. "No one is perfect," his ma was fond of saying.

He decided to change the subject. "All that hard work sure built some muscles." He grinned and flexed his arm. "They're almost as big as Aaron's now, don't you think?"

She drew closer, reaching out to squeeze his upper arm. "Why, Ethan Harper! You'll be the belle of the ball."

He snorted a laugh and then shook his head. "I certainly hope not."

Grinning so wide that her dimples flashed, Della shrugged. "You know what I mean. Surely, you've noticed all the marriageable young ladies batting their eyes at you whenever you go to town." She cocked her head, her blue eyes glinting, and flapped her lashes like she'd been in a dust storm. "Why, Sally Ann, don't you just adore that Ethan Harper?" she gushed with a flippant flick of her wrist. "Isn't he the handsomest man in the whole county?"

He looked away, his ears warming, but Della reined her horse around to his other side.

"Why, yes I do, Minnie Sue! I've set my cap for him, so you best go find some other man to flirt with."

Ethan chuckled. "Your husband might take issue with that."

Della pursed her lips. "My husband? Whatever do you mean? My name is Sally Ann, and I've got my sights set on you."

Nudging his horse forward, he blew out a breath, tired of her pretending. Time was wasting. "I have chores waiting, and you have two children who are probably missing their ma right about now."

"Oh, pooh." Della tucked in her chin and pushed out her lower lip. "You and your two brothers sure can be spoilsports at times. Men down South enjoy a game of theatrics now and then."

"Well, this is Kansas, and men here don't have time for such foolish pastimes. We have work to do."

"Hmpf. I'm going to tell Aaron you were cranky today."

"Go ahead. He's your husband. He should be the one escorting you." Ethan generally enjoyed Della's vivid imagination and her vitality for life. Unfortunately, that same vitality often kept her from her mothering duties and, more often, her responsibilities at the stage stop. Every chance she got, she visited neighbors or spent her

time on some “important” cause in Windmill—any excuse to get her away from the stage stop. As the youngest Harper son, Ethan usually drew the short straw and was designated as her chaperone. During the winter, he got a reprieve since she hated the cold, but, come March or April, Della always had spring fever and had to get out. She was fun; he just wished she’d take more interest in her two young’uns and help his ma with the cooking and cleaning.

“Let’s race home, Ethan.” She reined her mare around and hunkered down, grinning wickedly.

“Huh-uh. I’m responsible for your safety. Aaron would have me tarred and feathered if anything happened.” He shook his head. “Plus, racing is too dangerous for the horses. The ground is still too soft.”

“You can be such a stick-in-the-mud at times. The ground is fine.” She swatted her mare with her quirt. “C’mon, girl!”

“Della, no!”

She flashed him a grin over her shoulder. “Last one home has to wash the supper dishes.”

Ethan’s gut clenched as painfully as if Aaron’s fist were squeezing it. He kicked his horse with his heels. “C’mon, boy.” Wrestling with what to do, he urged Alamo into a trot. His pa had drilled into him the importance of not taking any chances with the horses. They were valuable, and it was a man’s duty to care for his mount. But he’d also been charged with watching over Della, and people were more important than animals. Hunkering down over Alamo’s neck, he kicked him into a gallop. “Heyah!”

Della rode over the nearest hill and disappeared down the other side. Ethan kept to the road, hoping that the packed dirt would be solid enough, in spite of the recent snow. He crested the hill, and Alamo, a faster horse by far, quickly closed the gap.

Della’s jubilant laughter taunted him. “You won’t catch me that easily. I know a shortcut.” She reined the mare away from the road and across the open prairie.

“Della!” Foolish woman. Aaron never should have fallen for a city girl.

Ethan didn’t know whether to follow her across the damp fields or stick to the road. Obey his pa or keep his word to his brother.

A sudden screech jerked his gaze back to Della, and his heart leapt to his throat. The mare had stumbled and fallen to her knees. Della flew over the horse’s head and rolled several times across the new grass.

“No, no, no!” Ethan jumped off of Alamo and ran. He sped past the squealing, thrashing mare and stopped over Della’s still body, lying facedown in the wet grass. He dropped to the ground at her side, the dampness seeping into his pants. With a trembling hand, he brushed her hair away from her cheek. Should he move her? Leave her be?

He had to do something, or she wouldn’t be able to breathe. “Oh God, please...” *Please let her be all right.*

As carefully as he’d once held his brother’s newborn son, he gently rolled her over. Her head lobbed to one side, and she didn’t open her eyes. He yanked out his handkerchief and dabbed at the blood on her forehead. “C’mon, Della. Wake up.” He wiped the mud from her cheek, but she didn’t react at all. She’d be so upset when she awakened and discovered how dirty she was.

He shook her shoulders, tears welling in his eyes. “Della, wake up.”

She was so still. He squeezed his eyes shut. “God, please don’t take her. Aaron will never forgive me.”

With tears running down his cheeks, he gathered her in his arms and gave her another gentle shake. Her head hung back over his arm in an unnatural manner. No amount of prayers or wishing could bring her back. She was dead.

A deep, searing pain burned within his chest. He’d failed everyone—his brother, his father, his young niece and nephew. Della.

An agonizing squeal rent the quiet afternoon. Jezebel writhed in pain where she had fallen. Ethan gently set Della's body down among the wildflowers she had loved, and then he stood, feeling as if his own life was seeping away like the last of the snow in the warmth of the spring sun.

Things would never be the same.

He and his brothers had always been close, but never again. Aaron would hate him. Della may not have been the perfect wife, but Aaron had loved her from the first day he'd seen her.

Ethan marched toward the mare, angered at her for stumbling, even as he pitied her pain. He ran his hand down her swelling fetlock. Broken. Pulling out his gun, he aimed it at the mare, hands shaking.

If only someone could put him out of his misery.

# Chapter One

*March 1870 • Chicago*

The toddler's whimpers rose to an ear-splitting scream as the little girl pushed against the chest of the woman holding her captive.

"Here, let me have her, Abigail." Sarah Marshall reached for Mary, and her friend handed over the fussy child. The girl persisted in her cries, so Sarah crooned to her, swaying in time to a waltz playing in her mind as she rubbed circles on the toddler's back.

"I don't see how you can have such patience with her. That obstinate child cries more than all the others in this orphanage combined." Abigail bent down and reached for a handsome three-year-old boy, who came rushing toward her with a big smile that showed his dimples. "Personally," Abigail raised her voice over Mary's ruckus, "I prefer the quiet ones."

Sarah smiled. "I prefer the needy ones." She leaned her cheek against Mary's head. "All is well, little one. All is well."

After a few more minutes, the wails finally subsided, and the girl began to relax. She sniffled, her whole body shaking as she finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

"Poor little one." Sarah's heart nearly broke for the child, recently orphaned by the death of her mother. At least, at such a young age, she stood a chance to adapt more easily than Sarah had when her parents died. Though the accident that claimed their lives had happened over a decade ago, she still missed her father's big smile and her mother's comforting arms.

“You’ll make a good mother one day.” Mrs. Rayburn leaned against the door frame, looking tired. “Are you sure you don’t want to move in here?”

Sarah smiled. “If my aunt was in better health, you know I would take you up on your offer. And I do hope to be a mother someday. If I’m good, as you say, it will be only because I learned from the best.”

Mrs. Rayburn swiped her hand in the air, but Sarah could tell the comment pleased her. If not for the generous care of the well-to-do widow, the six orphaned children who resided under her roof would most likely still be out on the cold Chicago streets, begging for scraps to eat, working for some cruel taskmaster—or worse.

Abigail glided to the center of the bedroom that had been converted into a nursery, holding Tommy on her hip, and pretended to dance with him. “Sarah may take a giant step in the direction of motherhood this very night.”

“Abigail!” Heat marched across Sarah’s cheeks as she thought of Walt and how he’d hinted at proposing—again—at her birthday dinner tonight. “I don’t want that news getting out.”

“Why not?” Abigail spun the boy in a circle, eliciting a giggle. “You aren’t going to turn the poor fellow down again, are you?”

Sarah glared at her best friend, wishing she would learn when to hush. She hoisted Mary higher on her chest and carried her to the adjoining bedroom. Stopping beside Mary’s bed, she rocked the girl from side to side to make sure she was asleep. Though she would never admit it to Abigail, the toddler’s wails did grate on her nerves from time to time, especially when she hadn’t slept well the night before. Holding her breath, she lowered Mary into her bed and then pulled the small quilt over her.

Sarah kept her hand ready to pat Mary’s back, should she stir. Thankfully, she didn’t. Straightening, Sarah checked on the two napping babies. She then tiptoed across the big room to adjust the

blanket covering Ian, the six-month-old whose father had deposited him on Mrs. Rayburn's doorstep last fall. The poor man had lost his wife and couldn't care for an infant. Sarah's heart ached for each one of the youngsters. She knew how hard life could be without parents. Still, she counted herself among the lucky ones—she'd been taken in by family, though she hadn't lived in a house as fine as Mrs. Rayburn's mansion.

Bending, Sarah filled her apron skirt with rag dolls, balls, and other toys, then deposited them in the toy basket as the mantel clock in the parlor chimed two o'clock. She tiptoed out of the nursery and back into the playroom.

"Time for you girls to head home." Mrs. Rayburn crossed the room and clapped her hands. "Tommy, would you like to hear a story?"

The three-year-old lunged into the older woman's arms. She hugged him and then set him down. "My, but you're getting heavy."

"Too much porridge, I imagine." Grinning, Sarah turned to Abigail. "Are you leaving now, too?"

"Yes, Papa is sending his driver for me. See you tomorrow, Mrs. Rayburn." Abigail waved good-bye as she walked from the room. She stopped in the doorway and faced Sarah. "Do you want a ride to your uncle's shop?"

"Thank you, but I'll walk."

Tommy ran out of the nursery, lifted his little hand, and waved. Mrs. Rayburn followed him into the upstairs parlor and took hold of his hand. "I don't know how I'd manage without you girls and your friends who volunteer in the evenings. I fear I'm getting too old to manage so many young children."

Mrs. Rayburn had said the same thing for the past two years, and yet she hadn't turned Mary away when a neighbor had brought her last week. Still, Sarah couldn't help wondering if the day would come when the kind woman would feel it necessary to close her door to the orphans. What would happen to them then?

She and Abigail donned their cloaks and left the warmth of the cozy home behind as they stepped out into the blustery chill of March. The gusty wind off Lake Michigan whipped at Sarah's skirts, and the gloomy sky released a light drizzle. Abigail's driver stepped out from under the shelter of a nearby tree and opened the door of her carriage.

"Are you sure you won't let us give you a ride? It's a miserable day to be out."

"Thank you, but I'll be fine. I'm headed home, anyway, and that's the opposite direction for you."

"So, you're not clerking for your uncle this afternoon?" Abigail accepted her driver's hand and climbed into the buggy. "How did you get out of doing that?" She sat, leaning toward Sarah, her eyebrows lifted.

"I'm going home to help Aunt Emma get things ready for my birthday dinner." Sarah turned so the wind was at her back and wrapped her fist around the edges of her cloak to hold it closed. "You're still coming tonight?"

Abigail nodded, grinning. "I wouldn't miss seeing Walt propose again. I don't know why you don't just accept. Your uncle will probably throw you out one of these days, and then where will you be?" She motioned to her driver, who closed the door and scurried up to his seat.

Sarah walked quickly toward State Street. She hadn't missed how Abigail had poked her with her barbed comment about her uncle casting her out. That very possibility had been in the back of her mind. Uncle Harvey had barely tolerated her presence all these years. He'd never wanted children and wasn't happy when his wife's only sister died, leaving behind a daughter. It was a miracle the stingy man had agreed to let her live with them in the first place.

She blew out a sigh of relief at the sight of the horse-drawn trolley, just a block away. Hurrying to the middle of the street,

she waited until it drew near, then grabbed the rail and stepped aboard. The sides of the carriage blocked the wind, to a degree, but the chilly air still seeped inside, bringing with it the aromas of baking bread and roasting meat.

The rain picked up, and she was glad she'd decided not to walk home. She stared out the window at the Chicago city streets, teeming with horses and buggies, fancy carriages, freight wagons, and even a man pulling a handcart. Busy people bustled up and down the boardwalks. She loved this town and hoped never to have to leave it.

If she married Walt, most likely she wouldn't. Yet she struggled with the notion of being his wife. He was a good friend, yes, and she'd hate to disappoint him. Still, shouldn't a woman have stronger feelings than friendship for the man she married?

Her uncle would be beside himself if she turned Walt down again. Maybe she should just say yes this time. At least then she'd be assured of having a home of her own—and of freeing herself from the heavy sense of owing her uncle. One would think the hours she'd spent doing chores in his home and clerking at his watch repair shop would be sufficient to cover any debt she owed, but she could never do enough to please Uncle Harvey. Still, she was grateful to have lived in his home these last twelve years. She should be satisfied and not wish for more.

And yet she did. She longed to marry a man who made her laugh like her papa had, one whose broad shoulders were strong enough to protect her. But she hadn't yet met that man. Maybe she never would. Maybe she needed to give up on wishing and just be satisfied with Walt.



Sarah sat back and rested her hands in her lap, smiling in satisfaction with the meal. She stole a glance at the sideboard loaded with food she'd helped her aunt and the cook prepare—roast leg of

mutton and currant jelly, mashed potatoes, creamed spinach, fried parsnips, and glazed carrots. Just the thought of it all made her stomach ache, and they had not even served dessert yet.

Walt wagged a finger at the servant standing at attention.

The servant hurried to the table from his post in the corner of the room. "Sir?"

"Bring me some more of those parsnips."

Sarah winced at his commanding tone, then looked to the head of the table. Uncle Harvey was seated next to a stranger—Mr. Gibbons—who'd appeared at the door just before they'd sat down to dinner. The two were having a private discussion, but Sarah had overheard enough to know it was about the benefits of living on the western frontier. She couldn't imagine what anyone found interesting about the untamed prairie, with its wild Indians and abundance of dust.

At the other end of the table, Lizzie Monahan and Betty Phillips engaged her aunt in a lively chat about the latest styles in fashion, while Abigail sat infatuated with Howard Shibley, Walt's best friend, who babbled on about a recent report that the population of Chicago had reached 300,000. Sarah nearly rolled her eyes.

"What was that look for?" Walt dabbed his lips with his napkin.

Sarah leaned closer to him, so not to be heard. "If Howard has any hope of winning Abigail's heart, he should find a more interesting topic of conversation."

"I doubt romance has even entered his mind."

"Obviously." Sarah shook her head.

Walt rested his chin in his palm and caught her gaze, his hazel eyes gleaming. His ash-blond hair had been slicked down and combed back from his forehead. "Speaking of romance, are you ever going to agree to marry me?"

She sucked in a sharp breath and glanced around the table once more. Nobody cast an odd look her way, so she assumed that

no one had overheard the oh-so-unromantic proposal. She had pretty much made up her mind to say yes, but his casual manner of asking made her want to shake her head. Schooling her features and straightening her posture, she replied. “I don’t know.”

Walt blinked, obviously taken aback. Seconds later, he scowled, then glanced across the room and motioned to the servant again. The man rushed to his side. “I seem to be out of parsnips again.”

Why couldn’t Walt have just kept quiet? She liked him well enough, but his frequent proposals were producing the opposite of their intended effect; they made her more inclined to avoid him than marry him. She snuck a glance at Abigail, still trying so hard to get Howard to notice her, while the man, clearly oblivious, just kept spouting his knowledge.

Sarah peeked at Walt again. He wasn’t particularly handsome, but he wasn’t ugly, either. He would be a good provider, being the sole heir to his father’s shoe factory, but she had a feeling that life with him would be just as boring as their evenings together. She wanted to marry—to finally be free from her uncle’s overpowering presence and stern glare—but she wanted a man who thought she was the only woman in the world for him. Yes, Walt seemed to feel that way, but something held her back. Was there something wrong with her?

An hour later, she stood at the door to see Walt on his way. Everyone else had already gone.

Walt hung his head and twisted his hat in his hands. “I...uh, won’t ask you again.” He lifted his gaze to hers, pain evident in his eyes.

She’d hurt him, and that was the last thing she’d wanted to do.

“I’m twenty-nine, Sarah. I’m ready to marry and start a family. I need to know if there’s any hope that you’ll say yes one day.”

“And I just turned nineteen—today.”

He closed his eyes and exhaled a heavy sigh. “All right. I’ll give you a few more months to make up your mind.”

Sarah bristled. What if she still didn't have an answer? "And then?"

He stared at her with a serious, no-nonsense expression she'd never seen before. "And then I'll be forced to look elsewhere. I mean to be married before I turn thirty." He slapped his hat on his head and stepped out into the blustery evening wind.

She watched him jog down the steps with more purpose than usual. He wanted to get away from her, and that was just fine, as far as she was concerned. She shut the door. Some birthday party that had been.

The sound of raised voices drew her to the parlor. Her aunt and uncle rarely argued, mainly because Aunt Emma's chronic illness made her too weary to fuss over trifles.

"Harvey, please. You can't be serious about this."

Sarah held her breath, all manner of ideas racing through her mind.

"You might as well come in here, Sarah. I know you're out there."

She jumped at her uncle's stern command and was tempted to slither away, but her curiosity forced her to do as bidden. "I was just saying good night to Walt," she explained as she entered the room.

"Sit down. I have something to tell you."

Aunt Emma didn't look up from the sofa but anxiously wrung her hands.

Sarah sat next to her and laid a steadying hand over her aunt's.

Her uncle paced in front of the fireplace, where a cozy blaze heated the front half of the room. Still, a shiver clawed its way down Sarah's spine. Whatever news she was about to hear, it wouldn't be good, from the looks of it.

Uncle Harvey stopped in front of the hearth, rested one hand atop the mantel, and stared into the flames. "You met Gibbons tonight." He straightened and stared at her, an unreadable

expression in his brown eyes. "He's a wagon master. Been leading wagon trains down the Santa Fe Trail for the past twenty years."

Sarah's thoughts whirled. Again she wondered about her uncle's interest in such a rugged man as Mr. Gibbons. He hadn't even worn proper attire for a dinner party.

"Oh, dear. Oh, dear." Aunt Emma fanned her face. "I fear I'm not feeling well."

Sarah's uncle narrowed his gaze at his wife. "You may be dismissed as soon as I'm done."

Aunt Emma gave him a meek nod, keeping her head down.

Uncle Harvey cleared his throat, drawing Sarah's gaze again. "The truth of the matter is that my brother has written me from Kansas City to inform me that he's moving his family to the New Mexico Territory, by way of the Santa Fe Trail."

"New Mexico?" Sarah pressed her lips closed, knowing her uncle wouldn't appreciate her outburst. She sidled a glance at her aunt. Why was she so distraught? Turning her attention back to her uncle, she voiced the question that wouldn't go away. "Why would your brother want to move to such an uncivilized place?"

Uncle Harvey's nostrils flared, and Aunt Emma uttered a piteous moan.

"Because there is great opportunity there," her uncle insisted. "Bob says that one day, the New Mexico Territory will become a state. He has been to Santa Fe and plans to return to open a mercantile there."

Sarah blinked as she absorbed the information. The truth finally dawned, and she gasped, staring wide-eyed at her uncle. "Surely, you don't mean to go there, too."

He lifted his chin, revealing his wrinkled, white neck from its hiding place beneath his beard. "I most certainly do. Chicago has dozens of watchmakers. According to Bob, Santa Fe doesn't have a single one. I plan to set up shop next to his store. We'll build a

door between the two, so that we can assist each other when things get busy.”

Sarah could see her well-ordered life spiraling out of control. She’d already lost her parents. How could she stand to lose Aunt Emma, too? Sarah stood and started pacing the room. “You already have as much business as you can handle. And how could you expect Aunt Emma to endure such a difficult trip?”

“I’ve talked to the doctor, and he says the warmer climate will be much better for her. Lydia will be there to take care of her if she falls ill.”

*Falls ill?* Didn’t he realize his wife was nearly always unwell? She’d been sickly ever since she’d survived a bout of scarlet fever a year before Sarah had come to live with them. The sickness had left her frail and had robbed her of her hearing in her right ear.

Sarah doubted Aunt Emma could survive such a rugged journey. “Won’t you reconsider, Uncle?”

He shook his head. “My mind is made up.”

“And what about me?” Could she stay in this big house alone? He’d always expected her to pay her own way, and she could hardly afford a place as nice as this two-story brownstone.

He shrugged. “I expect you to marry Walt, and then you’ll be his responsibility. I’ve already sold the house, so you can’t stay here.”

Her aunt gasped and stood. “How could you do such a thing without consulting me?”

Sarah’s heart ached for her aunt. How could Uncle Harvey be so insensitive?

“Now, Emma. It’s my place to make such decisions. You’ll see once we arrive in Santa Fe that this move was for the best.”

Emma screeched a heart-wrenching sob and ran from the room, her dark green silk dress swishing loudly.

Sarah had never once stood up to her intimidating uncle before. This time, concern for her aunt stiffened her spine, and

she turned on him. “How could you be so selfish? Such a trip will probably kill Aunt Emma! Is that what you want?”

His nostrils flared. “She is no concern of yours.” He walked to the dark window and stared out through the panes. “I never wanted you to come here, you know. I never wanted children. They’re nothing but a nuisance. I will concede that you’ve been good for Emma, but she needs to learn to get along without you.” He turned back to her, his eyes narrowed. “Marry Walt. He’s a decent fellow.”

She’d always known her uncle hadn’t wanted her, but hearing the words spoken out loud pained her as badly as if she’d been stabbed in the heart. Out of respect for her aunt, she didn’t lash out at him as she wanted to. “I’m not ready to marry yet.” Uncle Harvey may have housed her all these years, but that didn’t give him the right to force her to wed a man she didn’t love. “I...I can find a boardinghouse to stay in.”

He smirked. “And how do you intend to pay for it?”

A wave of panic washed over her. She had a few coins her aunt had given her—nowhere near enough to live on, even for a short time. “I’ll find another job. Since I’ve worked for you for so long, I’ve honed my office skills and have plenty of experience.”

“Hmpf. What employer would hire a female clerk when he can so easily find a man to do the task?”

Sarah dropped back onto the sofa, realizing the truth of his statement. What would she do? Where would she live? How could she manage without her aunt’s loving guidance? The last time she’d felt as empty and confused as she did now was when she’d learned that her parents had died.

Quick footsteps sounded outside the room, and Sarah and her uncle both looked to the door. Her aunt had returned, her eyes damp, her face red and splotchy. With a trembling hand, she held a handkerchief below her nose. Sarah longed to embrace her aunt, but she would wait until her uncle left them alone.

"I see it's too late to change your mind," she said, her voice quavering. "You've wounded me deeply, Harvey. I hope you know that."

He started toward her, his expression softening, and took her hands. "Haven't I always taken care of you, darling? Have you ever lacked for anything?"

Her aunt didn't respond, but Sarah could tell by her expression that she didn't share her husband's perspective. Steeling her gaze, Emma stared up at him with rare determination in her eyes. "I won't go without Sarah."

"What?" Sarah and her uncle exclaimed at once.

"I won't go unless she goes, too." Emma hiked her chin.

Sarah didn't know what to say. This was the first time she had seen Aunt Emma stand up to her husband, and she couldn't bear to tell her that her efforts were wasted. But the last thing Sarah cared to do was leave Chicago and travel on a wagon train to Santa Fe.

Even marriage to Walt would be preferable to that.