

Praise for Gabriel's Atonement

"Vickie McDonough gives readers a special treat as she blends her signature vivid descriptions of the prairie with fascinating details about the land rush. More than simply a tale of love and adventure, *Gabriel's Atonement* is a story of an important but rarely seen period in American history."

—Amanda Cabot, author of *At Bluebonnet Lake*

"Vickie McDonough is at the top of her game with *Gabriel's Atonement*. Historical facts are deftly woven into a plot that sings and characters that seem so real as to want to walk off the page. The exciting story of a young widow and rugged gambler set during an Oklahoma land rush was a delight to read."

—Margaret Brownley, bestselling author of
The Brides of Last Chance Ranch and Undercover Ladies series

"Vickie McDonough's brilliant storytelling shines in *Gabriel's Atonement*. Gabriel will capture your heart. The best 'bad guy' I've ever fallen in love with! And the best land run romance since *Far and Away*."

—Amy Lillard, Carol Award-winning author of *Caroline's Secret*

"I've long known about Vickie McDonough's interest in Oklahoma history, especially the Oklahoma land runs. She took the details of history and skillfully worked them into the lives of her characters, who leapt off the page and grabbed my heart. Using several plot lines that could have been ripped from the pages of Oklahoma history, she wove them carefully together to give an interesting and thoroughly satisfying tale. You won't want to miss this wonderful read."

—Lena Nelson Dooley, multi-award-winning author of
Catherine's Pursuit, book three of the McKenna's Daughters series

"Get out the popcorn. *Gabriel's Atonement* reads like a movie you don't want to end. The suspense of Gabe keeping his 'secret' and what the reaction of the widowed Lara will be is 'just right.' McDonough paints the setting with details that make the story come to life. Looking forward to reading more by her as she keeps getting better and better."

—Diana Lesire Brandmeyer, author of *The Festive Bride*,
A Bride's Dilemma in Friendship, *Tennessee*, and *Mind of Her Own*

“This delightful prairie romance brings together a handsome gambler, looking for a reason to change, and a lonely widow with a sweet spirit who just might provide the motivation. Their involvement with the Oklahoma land rush adds to the fun and adventure of the story. Vickie McDonough is known for her well-drawn characters, realistic settings, and heart-stopping romance, and she has done it again with *Gabriel’s Atonement*. Readers who enjoyed her previous books will love this new story.”

—Carrie Turansky, award-winning author of *The Governess of Highland Hall* and *The Daughter of Highland Hall*

“Guilt and regret can destroy a man or lead him into the arms of love. Hold on tight to the reins and prepare for a thrilling ride!”

—DiAnn Mills, bestselling author of the FBI: Houston series

“Once again Vickie McDonough delivers a great novel that comes sweeping down the plains to Oklahoma in the days preceding the land rush. Gabriel is seeking atonement for past sins and a new life in Oklahoma Territory. Lara Talbot desires a new home for her son, sister, and father. When they meet, sparks fly in a story that captures the spirit of the times and will keep the reader turning the pages.”

—Martha Rogers, author of the series *The Homeward Journey* and *Winds Across the Prairie*

“*Gabriel’s Atonement* is packed with action, romance, and suspense. I loved the characters, loved the setting, loved the historical detail. Thanks for another great read, Vickie McDonough!”

—Susan Page Davis, author of the *Prairie Dreams* series

“*Gabriel’s Atonement* tops my list of Vickie McDonough’s historical romances to date. What isn’t there to love about a handsome gambler in the Old West who’s trying to do the right thing and a lovely widow who’s struggling to make ends meet—with a love story that develops amidst action, adventure, intrigue, and a setting that comes to life on the page? Don’t miss this one—it’s a keeper.”

—Miralee Ferrell, bestselling author of *Blowing on Dandelions*

GABRIEL'S ATONEMENT

— Land Rush Dreams 1 —

Vickie
McDonough

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The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit. Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and before honour is humility.

PROVERBS 18:11-12

Chapter 1

*Kansas City, Kansas
March 16, 1889*

The cool metal of the Morgan silver dollar warmed as it rolled over Gabe's knuckles and between his fingers. One thing he'd learned in the last nine years was how to read people, and the cocky cowpoke at the bar looked ripe for the picking.

Like an early morning fog, hazy smoke floated in the saloon's tepid air. The cowpoke swigged back his drink and slammed his shot glass onto the counter, patted his pocket, and looked in the direction of the gaming tables. Gabe caught his gaze and nodded.

With a leering grin, the cowboy brushed past Trudy, one of the buxom saloon girls, and strode across the room toward Gabe. "I'm of a mind to double my money."

"Are you now?" He leaned back in his seat, one arm over the back of the chair, and waved a hand. "Have a seat," he hollered to be heard over the din of the crowd. He recognized the man from a month ago when he lost his paycheck at Tricky Dan's table. If he remembered right, the cowboy worked for Walt Whiteman, owner of the largest cattle ranch in the area—and the best paying one.

"The name's Tom Talbot." He nodded and pulled a pouch of coins from his pants pocket.

“Gabe Coulter. What’s your game?”

“Five Card Stud.”

Slim Trenton and Will McDaniels, two other regulars, pulled out chairs and joined them. The tinny music of the piano mixed with masculine laughter and chatter as men at each table talked loud enough to be heard over the racket. With his thumb and forefinger, Gabe slowly pulled his pistol out of his jacket holster as usual and laid it on the table—a sign that he brokered no funny business.

Two hours later, the cockiness had gone out of Talbot’s blue eyes, replaced by disbelief at the first hand he lost, and then simmering anger as he tossed the last of his coins into the pot. Gabe had seen that look many times in his years as a gambler, even felt it himself often in the beginning of his career. But he couldn’t tell whether Talbot was angry at himself or Gabe.

Talbot ran a shaky hand through his disheveled, curly blond hair and shoved away from the table. “That’s it. I’m broke.”

Slim pushed up from the table. “Guess that pretty wife of yours ain’t gettin’ no money again this month.”

Talbot grabbed the man by the collar. Gabe rested his hand on his pistol and watched. With a loud growl, Talbot heaved Slim backward into the wall. Then he turned and sidestepped, bumping into a barmaid, and wove his way to the exit. The double saloon doors banged and remained swinging as Talbot lurched outside.

“Come on, Will. Time to head back to the ranch.” Slim rubbed the back of his head where it had smacked the wall then bent and picked up his hat from the floor.

Will, the last cowpoke still seated, pushed upward, wobbled, and then grinned as he got to his feet. “I just need one more drink afore I hit the trail.”

Slim grabbed his arm. “You’ve had enough for tonight. Let’s go.”

Gabe watched them leave. He glanced around, knowing nobody was paying him any attention now that the action was over. He slid the glass of whiskey that had been sitting on the table most of the evening toward him, then dumped it down the knothole in the floor near the leg of the table. He couldn't stand the taste of liquor and didn't like what it did to a man, but in order to keep his table, he had to buy a few drinks now and then, as well as fork over a percentage of his earnings.

He pocketed the coins along with a scratched but decent pocket watch he'd just won. Then he stood and stretched. Long ago, he'd eased his mind over taking hard-earned money from businessmen and poor cowboys. He never forced anyone to gamble. Men played games of chance for fun and relaxation after a hard week's work, and if they wanted to risk their wages, who was he to deny them the opportunity? Occasionally he lost, but he read people so well now that he generally came out on the winning end. Stretching, he decided to call it an early night.

Selma, a pretty brunette saloon girl, sashayed over and nuzzled up to him. "How about some company tonight, Gabriel?"

He didn't miss the sensual way she purred out his full name, or her pouty lips and the pleading in her dull brown eyes. But he never indulged in women of the night. The memory of his mother—a kind and godly woman, a lady who smelled of flowers and fresh bread, not whiskey, cheap perfume, and smoke—kept him from compromising himself. That, and the promise he'd made his ma.

Gabe shook his head. "Not tonight, Selma."

She stuck out her lower lip as he set her aside. "It's never *tonight* with you." She turned and brushed up against one of the town's bankers, who leered at her then tugged her to him.

Gabe pushed through the doors, glad to be out of the smelly

building. He glanced up at the stars and breathed deeply, relishing the fresh air. Being outside at night reminded him of the days back on the farm when he rose before the sun to do the milking—before life had turned inside out.

He rolled his head, popping his neck, and headed toward his suite at the hotel. A smile crept to his lips at the thought of his ma scolding him for going to bed in the middle of the night and sleeping till noon. A day wasted, she'd have said.

Up ahead, a group of cowboys stood by their horses, preparing to return to the ranches where they worked. Gabe hesitated then ducked down the alley—a place he generally avoided. But right now, it provided a better alternative than being caught alone with a pocket of coins by a rowdy group who'd mostly lost their hard-earned money and had far too many drinks.

A full moon illuminated the path behind a doctor's dark office and one of Kansas City's many stores. Gabe's boots thumped out a soft thud in the dirt as he listened to the peaceful noises of the night. Crickets sang in the tall grass just past the edge of town, and the piano music and the saloon ruckus dimmed. A cool breeze swept past his sweaty neck, sending a chill down his back.

The crickets suddenly quieted, and a man stepped out of the shadows, his pistol pointed straight at Gabe.

Halting midstep, Gabe assessed the situation, his hand aching to draw his weapon. He'd known walking back here was risky, and now he wished he hadn't. Though he was a quick draw, he had no chance against a man whose gun was already drawn.

"You cheated me out of my money."

Gabe recognized Tom Talbot's voice and lithe form. The hairs on his nape rose. Was the man alone? Were his cohorts hiding in the shadows as Talbot had?

"I never cheat." Gabe growled out each word slowly as he attempted to gauge Talbot's soberness. Having concentrated on the card game, he hadn't noticed how much Talbot was drinking. A mistake he wouldn't make in the future.

If the man was inebriated and his reactions slowed, Gabe just might have a chance, even though the man's gun was already drawn. First, he needed to distract him. "I didn't force you to play. You knew the risk when you sat down at my table."

"My wife and boy need that money."

Gabe shrugged, tucking his jacket out of the way in case he needed to draw his weapon. He felt sorry for the man's family, but Talbot should have thought of them sooner. Gabe forced away the unwanted memory of a hungry, crying boy.

"Toss me my money, and I'll be on my way." Talbot stepped closer, moonlight illuminating his body.

"Can't do that. I won it fair and square. I wouldn't be in business long if I returned every sad cowboy's money."

"Talbot!" a voice in the distance called. "We're leavin'."

In the split second that Tom Talbot cocked his head toward the voice, Gabe whipped out his gun. Talbot turned and fired. Gabe's hand jolted as his Colt 45 blasted.

His opponent jerked and stared at him with disbelief. The weapon fell from Talbot's hand. He grabbed his chest with one hand and sank to his knees.

Instant regret flooded Gabe as he lowered his gun. What had he done? Holstering his weapon, he rushed to Talbot's side, wishing he'd handed over the money.

"S-sorry, Lara. . ." Talbot tugged at something in his shirt pocket then wheezed his last breath.

Gabe hung his head, remorse weighing him down. Things had

happened so fast. Too fast.

Moonlight reflected off the paper in Talbot's pocket. Gabe pulled it out. A photo. He cocked it toward the moonlight, and the picture of a pretty woman with sad eyes took shape. In her arms rested a baby. Lara—Talbot said her name was—and somehow it fit. Had Talbot loved his wife? The man sure hadn't been much of a provider from what Gabe had seen.

He squatted next to Talbot's body, once again gutted with guilt. He'd just made this woman a widow—and the baby, fatherless. Something he knew all about.

He flipped the photograph over and held it up to the moonlight.
Caldwell, Kansas. 1886.

Guilt ate at him like a bad case of food poisoning. He shoved to his feet as people ran his way. The sheriff pushed through the crowd and studied the scene. Gabe could only hope the man would believe his story.



Caldwell, Kansas
April 2, 1889

Michael tugged on Lara Talbot's skirt. "Mama, somebody's followin' us."

Lara glanced over her shoulder and her heart jolted. Sure enough, a man she'd seen in town was riding through the prairie grass toward them.

"Is it Pa?" A mixture of hope and yearning flashed across her four-year-old son's face.

"No, sweetie, it's not him." They hadn't seen Tom in over a year. His creditors, however, frequently knocked on her door.

Michael stared at the rider again, her son's golden curls dancing on the light spring breeze. "Maybe he's comin' to see Grandpa."

"Maybe." Lara's stomach swirled as she searched for a hiding place among the waist-high grass. But surely the rider had already spotted them. She couldn't tell Michael that she'd noticed this same man watching her in town. She hadn't thought much about it then, since men tended to stare at women, but if he had business with her, why hadn't he approached her in Caldwell?

She tightened her grip on her son's hand and quickened her steps, wishing she weren't a whole mile from town and another half mile till home. The large bundle of mending she'd picked up from Mrs. Henry's house weighed her down. If she dropped her burden, she could whisk Michael up and maybe hide in a gully by the creek, but she'd never be able to replace the expensive clothing should something happen to it.

"Slow down, Mama."

Michael's short legs pumped hard to keep up with hers. She slackened her pace and glanced back. The man was gaining ground.

Tom's debts were like a trail of bread crumbs leading to her door. Would this man be kind and compassionate or rude and demanding like most of the others?

Not that it mattered. She had nothing to give any of them.

The man must have realized she'd seen him, because he kicked his horse into a trot. Lara's heart stampeded. Most folks in the area were friendly, but there were always those unsavory scoundrels who yearned to catch a woman alone.

She shoved Michael behind one of the cottonwood trees that hugged the creek bank, dropped the load of mending, and grabbed the largest limb she could find on the ground.

"Stay there until I call."

Her son looked up with wide blue-green eyes and nodded. His curly blond locks sprang up and down in spirals across his forehead.

Lara sucked in a breath, tightened her two-fisted grasp on the branch, and stepped to the middle of the trail. As the horse neared, the animal's eyes widened and its nostrils flared. The rider soothed his mount then hoisted his stout leg over the horse's rump and dropped to the trail with a huff. On the ground, the short, portly man wasn't nearly as intimidating. From the cut of his clothing she could tell he was a city fellow.

He offered a stiff smile, lifted his derby, and swiped the sweat from his wide forehead. The horse lowered its big head and plucked the top off some nearby buffalo grass.

Trembling, Lara glanced up and down the dirt path, hoping someone would arrive to help her, but this lone trail led only to her home—and unless someone was purposely going to visit them, there was little chance for rescue. She peeked at Michael, relieved to see him obeying and hiding behind the tree.

Determined to protect her son, she tightened her grip on the branch and faced the stranger. "Why are you following me?"

He raised his palm in the air. "Now don't be fearful, Mizz Talbot. I don't mean you no harm."

Lara stiffened, and her heart galloped like a runaway horse. She lowered the branch and wiped each sweaty palm on her skirt. How was it this stranger knew her name?

"What do you want? If you're looking for Tom, I haven't seen him in over a year."

The man dropped the reins, removed his dusty derby, and twisted the thin brim with his pudgy hands. "Truth is, I *have* come 'bout your man."

Lara heaved a sigh and shook her head. This stranger would have

to get in line to collect his debt. *Oh, Tom, what have you done now?*

The stranger reached into his pants pocket. Lara tightened her grasp on the branch again, knowing how little help it would be if the man pulled out a gun. She swallowed the lump in her throat. If he did, she'd have to react fast.

Something crinkled in his fist, making Lara go weak in the knees with relief. Paper, not a pistol.

The stranger cleared his throat. "I have a letter for you from my employer and. . .uh, something else."

Keeping hold of the club with one fist, she held out a shaky hand, retrieved the damp, wrinkled missives and shook them open. As she stepped back, her gaze darted from the man to the letter. She scanned the brief, hard-to-read note asking her to come to a Kansas City hotel to collect some cash Tom left behind. She couldn't make out the scrawled signature. It made no sense. If Tom had money, he'd never leave it anywhere—except at the gaming tables. Her heart clenched as if squeezed through a wringer, and then she glanced at the second paper—a death certificate.

Tom was dead. *Oh my. . . How. . . ?*

He was only twenty-six years old.

Shot, the certificate stated.

What was he doing to get himself shot? And who pulled the trigger?

She waited for grief to overwhelm her. That's what happened when a woman lost her husband, wasn't it? She remembered how inconsolable Grandpa had been when Gram died. Of course, he had *loved* her.

Numb and dry-eyed, Lara stared at the stranger. She carefully worded her question because of Michael. "Where is he now?"

The sun glinted off the man's shiny bald head as he studied the

trail, fidgeting and wringing his hat half to death. “You’d have to talk to my boss ’bout all that, ma’am. My orders were to find you and fetch you back to Kansas City.”

“Kansas City! Why would I want to go there?” Lara blinked. Stunned at the news of her husband’s death, she had dropped her guard. She raised the club up between her and the stranger again, the papers crumpling in one fist around the limb. “I’m not going anywhere with you, mister.”

Would he force her?

The man scratched his head. “But the boss said I was to bring ya.”

Swallowing back her fear, Lara stood her ground. “How did you know where to find me?”

Shuffling his feet, the man avoided her eyes. “There was a picture—of you and the boy.”

“Mama?” Michael sniffed and rubbed one eye as he peered around the tree.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. Stay right there and guard the laundry for me.”

Michael nodded, looked around, and snatched up a little stick. She wanted to smile but returned her focus on the stranger.

“You don’t understand, Mizz Talbot. Your husband left some cash behind, and my employer insists you come to Kansas City and collect it yerself.”

“Why didn’t he send it with you?”

The man shrugged one beefy shoulder and grinned wryly. “Maybe he don’t trust me.”

“Then why should I?”

He opened his mouth and slammed it shut, looking perplexed. His gaze took in her ragged dress and bare feet. She tucked her toes back under her skirt. It was none of his business if she wanted to

save her only pair of shoes for cold weather.

"Looks to me like you and yours could use the money. Won't take long to ride the train to KC."

Lara sighed. "I knew my husband well, Mister. . .uh. . ." She lifted her brows and peered at him.

"Jones. Homer Jones."

"I am *not* going anywhere with you, Mr. Jones. My family needs me. Besides, Tom never had a pocket full of coins—ever. Much less enough to make it worth journeying to Kansas City."

"The boss ain't gonna be happy about this." The man slapped on his hat and snagged his horse's reins. The animal jerked its head and snorted. Mr. Jones muttered under his breath, "Nope, he won't like it one bit."

"That isn't my problem. Good day, Mr. Jones." As much as she wanted to hope Tom had left behind some money, she knew the truth. Her husband was a wastrel.

Lara tossed the heavy branch into a patch of the thick buffalo grass and wildflowers that battled the trees lining the creek for the precious liquid. "You can come out now." She held her hand out to her son. The boy jumped up and ran to her, burying his face in her skirt. Had he understood that his father was dead? Or had he been frightened by the situation?

She smoothed Michael's white-blond curls, so much like Tom's, then gave him a hug. A boy shouldn't have to grow up without a father, but then Tom had been home so few times since his son's birth that she wasn't even sure if Michael would have recognized him.

She hoisted the mending bundle over her shoulder and then reclaimed her son's hand. Together they tramped down the trail, leaving Mr. Jones alone to figure out how to remount his horse.

It was a strong statement about her marriage that all she felt was relief now that she knew Tom was gone. And guilt, because she wasn't grieving.

Tom had been so charming when she'd first met him when she was fifteen. He was so unlike the solemn, hardworking men she'd known before him. He'd made her laugh, and spending time with him helped her get through her tough days that held far too much burden and responsibility. Lara's papa and mama had died four years before she met Tom, and her grandma died just ten months after her parents, leaving Lara as cook and housekeeper on her grandpa's small horse ranch at only eleven years old. Maintaining the home while watching her troublesome sister was more than a little difficult. Her older brother Jack's anger and talk of leaving tore out her heart, and then he left, too. On top of everything, she'd had to cheer up Grandpa and help him see he still had a reason to live—she and Jo needed him desperately.

She clenched the mending bag tighter. Life seemed unbearable for a time. And then she met Tom at a town festival. And he gave her a reason to smile. At least for a short while.

"You've got to be the prettiest gal in all of Kansas," he'd said the first time they met.

She'd worn a faded calico and had just walked two miles in the scorching August heat. Lara knew she had all the appeal of a split tomato, but Tom still seemed enamored with her.

Once he turned the full power of his charm on her, she'd fallen fast for him. And look where it got her.

At least Tom would no longer be incurring debts that she was obligated to pay, nor would he show up out of the blue, expecting her to act like a loving wife who'd been pining for her husband.

A shiver charged through her. As hard as she'd tried, in their five

years of marriage, she'd never been able to get Tom to give his heart to God. Just like her younger sister, Joline, Tom craved adventure. He was always running off, searching for the next way to get rich fast. The remorse she felt was for a lost soul—for the man she had once loved so much that she'd gone against her grandfather's counsel to marry him. And most of the time since then, she'd regretted her decision.

She glanced up at the bright blue sky, hoping in Tom's final moments he'd cried out to the Savior. Birds chirped in the few trees along the trail. Prairie grass swished on the morning breeze, and the poppy mallows and prairie violets turned their colorful faces to the sun. God's world still looked the same, but hers had changed. At just twenty-one years of age, she was now a widow.

But then, hadn't she been living as a widow for a very long time?

Chapter 2

*Kansas City, Kansas
April 4, 1889*

Gabe slammed his fist down on his desk, rattling his coffee cup. “What do you mean she wouldn’t come?”

Homer shrugged one shoulder in his typical noncommittal way. “Said she don’t b’lieve that no-account man of hers left behind enough money to make it worth travelin’ all the way here.”

The chair squealed as Gabe pushed back from his desk and stood. He padded across the thick Persian carpet to the window and stared down on the streets of Kansas City. People ambled about their business, and a tired horse tethered to a rail across the street drooped its head and swished flies with its tail. A wagon pulled by a team of mules moseyed down the road as its driver waved to a man on the boardwalk.

Gabe rolled his head from side to side, trying to relieve the tension knotting his neck. Why hadn’t the woman been reasonable? Surely she needed the money.

He’d tried to do something good for someone else for once. . . . Now what?

Leaning his palms against the windowsill, Gabe rested his forehead on the cool glass. “Did she ask about the circumstances surrounding his death?”

“No, and I didn’t say nuthin’. She didn’t seem too overly upset about it, neither.” Homer wheezed a raspy chuckle. “You shoulda seen her swinging that branch at me like it was a club. Don’t know that I coulda overpowered her if’n I had to.”

Gabe turned and lounged against the windowsill, wondering what kind of woman wouldn’t be upset over her husband’s death. There were few respectable jobs for women, especially one with a child, so life was surely going to be more difficult for Mrs. Talbot. Any woman who would turn down a hundred dollars in gold coin intrigued him, especially a spunky one. But then she didn’t know how much he planned to give her. Talbot only lost his twenty-dollar monthly pay, but adding Gabe’s own funds to the kitty would help the widow more and ease his guilt over killing her husband. He still woke up most nights in a cold sweat when he dreamed of the shoot-out.

“She’s a purty little thang.” Homer ran his hand over his thick stubble, making a scratching sound. “Got the most unusual pale green eyes I ever did see.”

Green. The sad eyes that had haunted his dreams since the ambush in the alley were light green. An unusual color for sure. “Her hair?”

“Golden brown, like a glass of fine whiskey held up to the light—and curly, just like that boy of hers.”

“Boy?” So the babe in the photo was Talbot’s son.

“Cute little feller.” Homer yawned then smacked his lips. “Sure looked like they coulda used that money. Neither of ’em had on shoes, and their clothes was ragged. Found out Mizz Talbot’s been doin’ mending for some of the townfolk.”

Gabe sighed. He couldn’t stand the thought of a child going without basic needs. It was only April, and the ground still held

a chill. Neither mother nor son should be going without shoes so early in the year.

“You got somethin’ else you want me to do, Mr. Coulter?” Homer Jones wiped his nose with his sleeve.

Gabe could barely abide the uncouth man, but Homer was loyal and did as he was told for the meager pay doled out to him.

“That’s all for now.” Gabe pulled two dollars from his pocket, tossed it to Jones, then turned to face the window.

“You gonna be playing poker at the saloon tonight?”

“Where else would I be?”

“Now that I’ve got some money, maybe I’ll get in on the game myself.” The door latch clicked as Homer left the room.

Gabe shook his head and chuckled. Likely, those two bucks would be back in his pocket before long. Homer ought to know better than to gamble with a professional.

Gabe flopped down in his chair and stared at the bottom right-hand drawer of his desk. Next month he’d be twenty-five. The deathbed promises he’d made to his mother plagued him like a bad bout of influenza. He hadn’t been able to keep his first promise. “Read the Bible every day, Gabriel,” she’d said. “And become an honorable man like your father was.”

Too late for that. His dear mother would be so disappointed with how he’d turned out. But perhaps it wasn’t too late to keep the second promise. Was there any hope a gambler could become an honorable man? He snorted and shook his head. Not likely.

He glanced across the room to the framed picture of his mother and real father on their wedding day. They’d been younger than he was now.

It was odd that he could love his ma and her memory but still resent her for making him promise those things. Knowing he’d

committed to both read his Bible and become an honorable man had kept him from growing truly comfortable in his choice of career. And the closer he got to turning twenty-five, the edgier he grew.

Ma had no idea how badly his stepfather had mistreated him. He'd hidden all but the worst of the beatings he'd taken from the man he hated, and had explained the injuries away as falling off a horse or some other accident. But they'd taken their toll and had left him as crushed both emotionally and physically as a man who'd been run down by a herd of stampeding cattle.

He pulled the drawer open and stared at his mother's aged Bible. He touched the decorative leather cover then slammed the drawer closed with his boot, hoping to shut out the haunting memories.

Now what? His plans to soothe his befuddled soul by doing something noble had included seeing that the Widow Talbot received the money her husband left behind. Money Tom Talbot lost fair and square.

Gabe leaned his head back and closed his eyes, exhausted from the lack of sleep. Every time he tried to rest, he saw Tom Talbot's stunned expression as life quickly ebbed from the man's body. Talbot couldn't have been much older than he was.

And now the man was dead.

And a little boy was fatherless.

Sighing, he stared up at the decorative tin ceiling. Maybe the boy's mother would remarry—but having a stepfather could be far worse than having no father at all.

He looked around the classy hotel suite he lived in, with its stylish wallpaper and top-of-the-line furnishings he'd purchased. He had all a man could desire as far as fancy things and good food. So why did he feel so unsettled lately?

Was it because of the promises he'd made to his ma?

Or the blank look in Talbot's lifeless eyes?

He shook his head, trying to replace the image of Talbot with that of the man's wife. He pulled the photo out of his jacket pocket. A lean, pretty face stared back, albeit melancholy. Homer hadn't mentioned if she was tall or short. Those eyes haunted Gabe's dreams. And now they had color.

Lara Talbot sounded like a good woman, not swayed by money and ready to fight if need be to protect her son. His mother was the only truly good woman he'd ever known. If Mrs. Talbot was anything like his ma, he owed it to himself to make her acquaintance and to make restitution—if it was possible to make reparation for the life of Mrs. Talbot's husband.

This was a good time to get away. Other than to exercise the fine horse he'd won a few months back, he hadn't left Kansas City since he'd arrived ten years ago as a determined boy.

The town of Caldwell, on the southern Kansas border, wasn't all that far away. He could take the train, deliver the pouch of coins to Talbot's wife and son, and for once, be proud of something he'd done. He'd won Talbot's twenty dollars honestly, but it was blood money, and he needed to be rid of it.

Maybe after he made things right with the man's widow, he could journey down to Texas for his birthday. He'd always had a hankering to see the great state and to visit the Alamo.

He rose and walked to the window, his gut swirling with uneasiness. He couldn't forever put off the promise he'd made to his ma. His God-fearing mother was the only woman he'd ever loved, and he aimed to keep his word—just not yet. She wouldn't be happy knowing he made his living as a gambler in a fancy saloon. He could see her finger wagging in his face as she lectured him on the woes of gambling.

He blew out a loud breath.

Ma was long dead. She'd never know if he didn't keep his word.

But he would.

First he'd find this green-eyed widow and hand over the money.

Then he'd see about reforming his life.

For the first time in years, excitement surged through him.



As Lara approached the sod shack that sat on the acre of rented land where her family lived, she slowed her steps. Her trio of nanny goats bleated to her and stuck their heads over the short fence, hoping for a handout. Michael plucked a dandelion and stuck it out, giggling when the billy goat snatched it with his big teeth.

She had kept the information she'd learned yesterday a secret while she examined her feelings and tried to comprehend that she'd never see her husband again.

How would the news affect her grandfather? Would he share her relief, mixed with the sadness of a life snuffed out at such a young age—a mostly wasted life?

Five years ago, she'd been so eager to get help for her grandfather that she had gone against his wishes and married Tom with the hope that having another man around would ease her grandpa's workload. But they'd lost the ranch after Tom went off searching for riches and adventure. Many times over, she'd regretted marrying him. Lara remembered something a woman at church once muttered when a local farm girl ran off with a traveling peddler. "*Marry in haste, repent at leisure.*"

Lara sighed. That sure was the truth.

The sun glistened off the top of Joline's head as her sister ducked down and stepped through the low doorway of the soddy. Jo looked