

# CHAPTER ONE

April 1852

“Ouch, Mama, you’re hurting me!” Mama’s gloved hand tightened around her daughter’s fingers. “We must hurry, Emma. Captain Digby said the *Sally May* leaves promptly at noon.”

Mama tugged Emma around the wagons and carriages crowding the St. Louis wharf. A baggage van carrying their luggage and goods rumbled behind them. A Negro wearing a raggedy shirt strained as he pulled the heavy load.

Emma Wright looked over her shoulder. Licorice Twist, her black pony, was tied to the cart. His shiny mane bounced with each quick step. Soon Mama, Emma, and Twist would be boarding the steamboat

*Sally May*. They would travel up the Mississippi to the Missouri River, which would take them to Kansas City. There they would meet Papa and travel together to St. Joseph. Then they would go west to California. Emma could barely wait. She missed her dear father, who had been gone too long.

For weeks Mama and the servants had sorted their belongings, packing only what they would need for the journey. Mama had agonized over every picture frame and teacup. Some furniture had been shipped ahead. Most had been left behind. Emma chose only the essentials for life in the Wild West: her boots, her riding habit, her pony.

“No, Emma, Twist must stay in St. Louis,” Mama had said, her voice pinched. “One stubborn charge will be trouble enough on this journey.”

But Emma had been determined. For four days, she pushed her plate away at mealtimes, her food untouched.

Mama raised her eyes to the heavens.

For three days, Emma refused to speak.

Mama sipped Doctor John’s Sarsaparilla Tonic.

On the last day, Emma held her breath. Her eyes bulged and her cheeks grew purple.

Mama took to her bed.

Emma placed a cold cloth on her mother's forehead and whispered, "Please, Mama."

With a deep sigh, Mama had given in. Emma had already packed Twist's brush and bucket.

Mama stopped on the wharf, out of breath. "Oh, where could Doctor Burton be?" she fussed. Roustabouts, the men who loaded the cargo, swarmed around them. They pushed and pulled bales, barrels, and boxes. When they passed Emma, she crinkled her nose at their sweaty odor.

"Missus Wright!" A heavysset man wearing a wool waistcoat, silk hat, kid gloves, and patent leather boots strode toward them. Mama called him a *doctor*. Emma called him a *dandy*.

Mama waved. Her face was splotchy and she dabbed her cheeks with her handkerchief. "Doctor Burton! I was afraid you had forsaken us."

"Never in a thousand years." Tipping his hat, Doctor Burton bowed slightly. "Your husband entrusted me with your care on this trip. I aim to fulfill my duty."

Emma slipped to the back of the baggage van to check on Twist. The pony nuzzled her, hoping for a sweet. She pulled a sugar cube from the pocket of her pinafore. While the pony crunched his treat, Emma

stood on tiptoe, glimpsing the tops of the steamboats. Dozens of the large paddlewheelers lined the wharf, their chimneys jutting into the hazy sky.

“Look, Twist,” she told the pony excitedly. “The Mississippi River! Soon we’ll board the *Sally May*. You’ll have a big stall filled with fresh hay and water. Mama says in ten days we’ll be with Papa. Then we’ll travel west to find gold.”

“Emma!” Doctor Burton pointed his silver-handled cane at her. “Leave the beast and come with us. There’s no time to dawdle.”

Emma scowled. *Beast?* Twist was the most beautiful pony with the smoothest gaits in all of St. Louis!

“Twist will be fine, sweetheart.” Mama’s eyes smiled under her plumed hat. “Doctor Burton will see that your pony is brought aboard.”

Emma glared doubtfully at the doctor. A bell rang.

“That is our signal to board,” Doctor Burton said. “Come ladies.” Turning, he escorted Mama toward the steamboat, parting the scurrying roustabouts with swipes of his cane.

“You are not a *beast*.” Emma gave her pony’s silky neck a pat. “You are my dear friend.”

“Look, Emma!” Mama waved at her to hurry. “There she is.” The *Sally May* rose from the

Mississippi, as tall as a three-story building. The steamboat was white, with gold and black trim. Pendants and flags snapped in the breeze. Its name was written in red scroll on the paddlewheel housing.

Hand on her hat, Emma tipped back her head so she could see the top of the two chimneys. They belched thick smoke. Above the pilothouse, gulls dove and soared. Emma's heart soared with them.

"Now I see why Captain Digby calls his steamboat a giant wedding cake," she said. Captain Digby, an old friend of her father's, had often dazzled the family with tales of river travel.

"And did he also call it a floating coffin?" Doctor Burton asked. "Why, just last month, the *Caddo* sank. Five dead. And the *May Queen* burst into flames—"

"Oh!" Mama slumped against the doctor.

"Don't listen to him, Mama," Emma said. She wrapped her arm around her mother's bustle.

"I am so sorry, Missus Wright," Doctor Burton said. Holding her up with one hand, he fanned her with the other. "I should not have spoken of such horrors in front of a lady in your condition."

Emma had no idea what Mama's condition was. But she had noticed lately that it required smelling salts and billowy dresses.

“Thank you,” Mama said, righting herself. “These silly fainting spells last only moments.”

“Emma, take charge of your mother while I commandeer the roustabouts. They need to load your luggage.”

“Don’t forget my pony, sir.” Emma kept her arm around Mama. Doctor Burton hustled off, yelling orders and offering coins. Instantly the roustabouts surged toward the baggage van, grabbing valises, boxes, and trunks.

Emma watched as the men ran their goods on board the *Sally May*. On a second gangplank, other workers were loading mules and oxen.

“Git ’em loaded, yer jackdogs!” the first mate in charge bellowed as he hit a roustabout’s shoulder with a sturdy stick. “Faster, faster, yer slimy snails!”

Minutes later, the first mate untied Twist from the cart. “Take good care of him, sir!” Emma called. But as he led the pony toward the line of oxen, he raised his stick as if to strike. Emma’s jaw dropped. She ran over and planted herself in front of the first mate.

“Sir, that’s *my* pony. He is not livestock that can be mercilessly beaten onto the boat!”

“Aye aye, m’lady.” The mate saluted, his smile mocking her. Then he turned and growled, “Git up,

yer long-eared mule.” Using the end of the rope, he whacked Twist on the rump.

Emma grabbed the rope, furious at his rudeness. “I insist you treat my pony with kindness!”

The doctor bustled over. “Emma, let the man do his—”

“Doctor Burton,” Mama cut in, her tone steely. “Pay the man to load my daughter’s pony with care.”

Doctor Burton blew out a frustrated breath. The mate held out a grimy palm. The doctor placed a coin in it. Reluctantly, Emma let go of the rope.

“All who’s going to St. Joe get aboard!” the ship’s clerk called.

“No more time to waste,” Doctor Burton said. Grasping Emma’s and Mama’s elbows, he hurried them across the passengers’ gangplank. When Emma jumped onto the deck, she looked back at Twist.

The first mate was yanking the pony across the other gangplank. “Git up now, yer stubb’rn donkey of the royal family.”

Emma stamped her foot. *That wretched man!*

Suddenly Twist bolted forward, knocking into the mate. The man flew off the gangplank and landed in the river with a splash. The pony leaped nimbly on deck while the mate thrashed about in the shallow

water, yelping in rage. Emma hid a giggle as the roustabouts pulled the cursing man onto the wharf.

The *Sally May*'s whistle rang again as the last of the passengers scurried across the gangplank. Women carried hatboxes and parasols. Men consulted watches and tickets. A family wearing homespun carried bundles on their heads. Other passengers hung over the low railing, bidding farewell in many languages. "*Auf Wiedersehen! Au revoir! Good-bye!*" rang through the air.

Emma looked over the railing, too. Below her, the muddy Mississippi swirled like spilled coffee.

"Haul it, yer slimy frogs!" The dripping-wet first mate struck right and left with his stick, taking out his embarrassment on the deckhands. They heaved the gangplank onto the bow. Steam rose from the chimneys with a piercing hiss. The paddlewheels turned with a *thunk, thunk*.

Goosebumps prickled up Emma's arms as the *Sally May* backed away from the St. Louis wharf. The mighty river was taking her, Mama, and Twist to Papa, the West, and adventure!

## CHAPTER TWO

Quit dillydallying, Miss Emma,” Doctor Burton’s sharp voice cut into her thoughts. “We must get your mother away from this riffraff and into her stateroom.”

Doctor Burton speared his cane into the crowd to part the milling passengers. Emma lurched after him, pretending that she didn’t have her “sea legs” yet. She’d read about sea legs in the ocean tales section of one of her favorite books—*My Boys’ and Girls’ Magazine and Fireside Companion*. There weren’t any waves big enough to rock the boat, but she was enjoying herself, weaving back and forth.

She pitched into a lady carrying two baskets and a crying baby. A toddler clung to the woman’s grimy skirt. The little boy had dirty cheeks, and the baby’s legs were scabby.

“Pardon me,” Emma said, edging past them. A deckhand holding a coiled line bumped her. She toppled against a barrel, snagging her stocking. When Emma bent to inspect the rip, someone rapped her on the shoulder with the tip of an umbrella. “Move, miss,” a high-pitched voice ordered. When Emma straightened up, she was face-to-face with a small lady clutching a fuzzy white poodle. As the woman waltzed past, her wide skirts filled the pathway.

“Emma!” her mother called from a broad staircase. She was gripping Doctor Burton’s elbow with one hand and pressing her handkerchief to her nose with the other. “Hurry, darling.”

Emma sprinted for the stairway. She followed the doctor’s coattails up the steps that led to the cabin circle. Passengers milled around the clerk’s counter, waiting to register. Doctor Burton pushed to the front. When he came back he held up two keys. “This way.” He nodded toward a set of double doors.

They walked through the doors into a large room stuffed with ladies, gentlemen, and servants. Later, this area—the steamboat’s main cabin—would be used for dining and dancing. Now passengers scurried to and fro, trying to locate lost children, baggage, and staterooms.

“Your room is aft, toward the stern. That’s the back of the steamboat,” Doctor Burton explained to Emma. She wanted to retort that Captain Digby had already taught her the correct terms. Instead she quipped, “And are the gentlemen’s staterooms located *fore* toward the *bow*?”

Doctor Burton gave her an annoyed frown. Mama often scolded Emma for talking back like that. *Children should be seen and not heard*, she always said. But Emma had no patience with sayings like that.

The doctor halted in front of a girl in a gray dress and starched white apron, waiting in an open doorway. Her auburn hair was coiled in a knot and covered with a cloth cap. “Good day, Missus Wright. Miss Wright.” She spoke in an Irish brogue like Mrs. McEnery, the kitchen cook they’d left behind in St. Louis. “Me name is Kathleen.” The girl curtsied. “I’m at yer service.”

“Missus Wright requires hot tea and a cool compress,” Doctor Burton instructed. “She is in a delicate condition. You are to be at her service around the clock.”

Kathleen curtsied again, her eyes downcast. Gently she grasped Mama’s elbow to help her into the stateroom. Emma thought the new maid looked about

sixteen, her cousin Minna's age. They'd left Minna and her family behind in St. Louis, too.

Emma stepped inside. The stateroom was half the size of her bedroom at home. Light shone through glass panes in the exterior door. It led to the veranda, the walkway that circled the outside of the steamboat. A double-bed berth with a single over it took up the right side of the room. A stand with pitcher and washbowl were tucked in an alcove. Underneath the stand was a chamber pot. On the other side of the room was a small closet with hooks for their clothes.

"I'll wait here with you until your baggage is brought up," Doctor Burton said to Mama, who sank wearily onto the bottom berth. Kathleen began unpinning her mother's plumed hat.

Emma fidgeted, wanting to explore the steamboat and find Twist.

Even after Kathleen got Mama settled with tea, they waited. Outside the doorway, Doctor Burton passed the time chatting with other gentlemen. Finally a red-faced porter dragged a trunk into the room. A second porter staggered in behind him carrying a valise, some bags, and Emma's smaller trunk. Doctor Burton bid them good day and turned to leave.

"I'm coming with you," Emma said. "I must check on my pony."

"You will not do any such thing." Doctor Burton bent so close that his nose bumped her hat brim. "You are forbidden to go below. Your pony, Twitch—"

"*Twist*," Emma corrected him. "As in *licorice twist*."

"Whatever its name is, the animal will be well cared for. I'll make sure of it. The main deck is too dangerous for a scatterbrained child. Do you understand?"

*Scatterbrained child!* Emma bristled. *This man is not Papa, and I will not obey him*, she decided. She stood her ground and glared at Doctor Burton.

"Very well, then." The doctor straightened. "Your daughter will be safe with me," he told Mrs. Wright. "You must rest."

"Thank you, Doctor Burton." Mama fell back on the bed with a sigh. "Mind your manners, Emma," she called as Kathleen began unlacing her boots. "And obey Doctor Burton."

Muttering "I surely will not" to herself, Emma marched after the doctor. By now, most of the passengers had found their staterooms. Still, the gentlemen's end of the main cabin was packed. A group of

men stood by a bar. They were laughing and spitting tobacco juice into a brass spittoon, which stood on the floor like a plant pot. Other men huddled around tables, playing cards. Cabin boys bustled past, serving drinks from trays. Cigar smoke clouded the air.

Doctor Burton joined one of the tables of card players. Emma watched as he fanned the cards he'd been dealt. Around him, the other players tossed coins in the middle. One man spit a wad of chewing tobacco onto the wood floor. Another plopped his feet onto the seat beside him as he studied his hand.

"Emma, join the other children in the ladies' end of the parlor," the doctor said.

"Sir, I'm not a child," Emma protested. "I'm almost eleven."

Doctor Burton gestured to a thin young man, who hurried over. His brown hair was parted in the middle and slicked back with perfumed oil. He wore a starched white shirt with a nameplate identifying him as Arthur Jenkins, Third Clerk.

"Mister Jenkins, see to it that Miss Emma finds company her own age," Doctor Burton said, his gaze on his cards.

"Yes, sir," Mister Jenkins replied.

"And make sure she does *not* go below," Doctor

Burton added. To Emma, he said, "Mind the mud clerk, now. I'll find you in time for supper."

The mud clerk. Emma knew that was one of the lowliest workers on the ship. Even less chance she was going to mind him!

"Come, miss. Rules must be obeyed." Mister Jenkins nodded toward the wall. Signs dotted the red plush wallpaper: Gambling Strictly Forbidden. No Spitting. Boots off the Furniture. "I'm sure you'll find someone playing Tiddlywinks or Old Maid in the ladies' parlor," he added, pointing in the other direction. Then, opening a door marked "Clerk's Office," he left her.

*Old Maid!* With a humph, Emma clomped from the gentlemen's area. *If only Papa was here. He'd take me to see Twist.*

She crossed the midship gangway, a passage with doors at the end that led to the outside of the steamboat. A rainbow of dancing lights caught her attention. Above, the sun glimmered through skylights made of colored glass. Crystal chandeliers reflected the colorful beams, turning the area into a twinkling fairyland. Emma twirled a few times, pretending she was waltzing with Papa.

*Whack!* "Ouch!" Emma clapped a palm to her

stinging ear and glared into the narrowed eyes of the lady with the umbrella.

“Watch where you’re going, you muddle-headed girl!” the woman said. The poodle, still clutched in her arms, bared its needle teeth.

Emma backed away quickly, rubbing her ear.

The ladies’ end of the steamboat cabin was carpeted. Emma looked around, marveling at the brocade-covered sofas, candelabras, gilded mirrors, and a potbellied stove surrounded by rocking chairs. Smartly dressed matrons and fashionable girls gossiped, embroidered, played piano, and read Bibles. Chambermaids served tea and crumpets.

Emma grabbed a crumpet from a lowered tray. She settled onto a rocker, swaying to and fro as she chewed the powdery sweet. “Did you glimpse the heavenly blue of Professor Almond’s eyes?” one young lady said. “Why, he’s a poem!”

“And did you hear the gentleman who spoke with a British accent?” the other young woman fluttered. “His servant addressed him as *Lord* Highbatten. I was smitten!” With that, the two broke into a fit of giggling.

Emma rolled her eyes. As far as she could see, there was not a whit of adventure in the ladies’ parlor.

Stuffing the last of the crumpet into her mouth, she bolted for a door at the end of the parlor. *Dash the rules.* She was going to find Twist.

She swung open the door, only to find the ladies' retiring room. Sachets of rose petals dotted the washbowl stand and the toilet, a hole in a wooden seat. Holding her nose, Emma peered curiously into the hole. River water flashed far beneath. *Pee-uw.*

Emma quickly shut the door and hurried back to the midship gangway. She really needed to find Twist. For all she knew, the first mate had treated her pony as roughly as he'd treated the roustabouts.

She turned to go to the larboard, the left side, of the steamboat. Once outside, she peered over the veranda railing and watched the Mississippi flow past like melted chocolate. In the distance, she could see St. Louis. The late afternoon sun shone on the roofs of the town's shops. A pang filled her. Would she ever see her home again?

*No.* The river was taking her to a new home—and to Papa.

The sun was sinking and the afternoon was waning. Soon it would be supper time and Doctor Burton would come searching for her. She had to hurry.

Couples strolled along the veranda. "Pardon me,

pardon me,” Emma said as she bustled past them to the main stairway.

Hesitating on the top step, she stared down to the main deck. Squeals, cries, bellows, hisses, and clangs rose from below. A deckhand was tying a line. Another worker rolled a barrel closer to the wall and secured it in place. The smell of burning wood, rotting fruit, and sweating animals wafted upward.

*You are forbidden to go below. It is too dangerous...*

Emma was no stranger to rules. *Speak in turn. Walk with small gliding steps. Take dainty bites.* And she had broken many of them. But her disobedience had never put her in danger. *Maybe I should go back to our stateroom and look for Twist later,* she thought.

Then she pictured her beloved Twist among the oxen and hogs. Taking a deep breath, Emma started down the stairs. Step by hesitant step, she made her way to the forbidden main deck.