

WESTWARD WINDS • BOOK 2



AMANDA
CABOT


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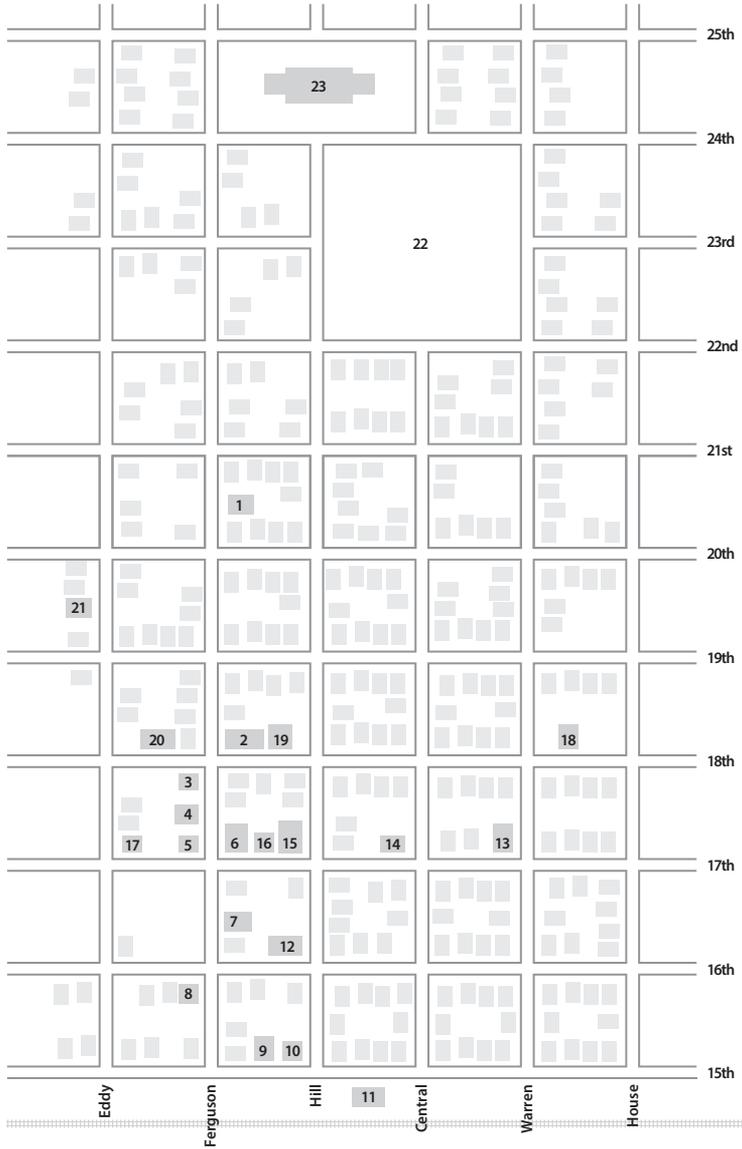
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For Suzanne “Betty Boop” Dawson, whose faith and friendship have enriched so many lives, including mine. Thanks, Suzanne. I’m so glad you interrupted your birthday celebration to attend one of my book signings.

Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory 1886



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CHEYENNE, WYOMING TERRITORY, OCTOBER 1886

It was only the wind. Charlotte Harding wrapped her arms around her waist, trying to convince herself there was no reason to tremble like a cottonwood leaf in a storm. The creaks that had wakened her were simply the building shuddering from the force of the wind. That was all. No one had broken in. No one had found her. She and David were safe. But the brave thoughts had no effect. They never did.

With a sigh, she fumbled to light the lamp. As the soft yellow flame chased away the darkness, she slid her feet into slippers and padded across the room. Perhaps it was foolish. She could see that the intruder had been nothing more than a figment of her imagination, the product of her fears. Her bedchamber was empty, except for David. Sweet David. The love of her life.

Charlotte stood at the side of his crib, looking down at the red hair so like his father's. Other than his eyes, which were the same shade of brown as hers, her son was the image of his father. The trembling that she'd managed to quell returned as thoughts of David's father and the fears that always accompanied those thoughts assailed her once again. Taking a deep breath to soothe her ragged breathing, Charlotte shook her head. She had to stop this worrying. It had been almost a year since she'd moved to Cheyenne, and no one had come looking for her and David. She had done everything she could to ensure that no one would know she had once lived at Fort Laramie as the wife of First Lieutenant Jeffrey Crowley. What she feared most would not happen. The baron would not find them.

Though the lamp that she held over the crib did not disturb him, David stirred, perhaps alerted by the sound of her breathing or the scent of her toilet water. "Mama," he murmured as he held out his arms.

Charlotte smiled and set the lamp on the floor. She knew what her son wanted. Slowly, she stroked the length of each of his arms, then let him grasp her hands. "Yes, David, Mama's awake, but you need to go to sleep." Crooning softly, she moved his arms back to his side and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Sleep now."

As his breathing became regular, Charlotte's smile faltered. Today was her son's first birthday. Though she intended to celebrate only that wonderful event, she could not forget that today was also the anniversary of Jeffrey's death and the day her life had changed forever. Pampered, coddled Charlotte Crowley was gone, replaced by Charlotte Harding, a woman who had learned that while life could be more difficult than

she had thought possible, it had many rewards. Though this year had been far different from her dreams, Charlotte could not regret what it had brought. She had new friends and a new life in a new city. She had learned that she could be self-sufficient. Best of all, she had kept her son safe. It was worth the lies.



“Gentlemen, I call this meeting to order.” Barrett Landry used his fist to rap on the table. His visitors looked up in surprise.

“A meeting?” Warren Duncan lit his cigar, taking a puff before he continued. “I thought it was simply an opportunity to sample some of Mrs. Melnor’s fine food.” The older of Barrett’s two guests, Warren was a distinguished-looking man with steel-gray hair, light blue eyes, and a nose that would have made a hawk proud. Though he confided little about his background, other than his graduation from an unspecified law school, his cultured accent led Barrett to believe that he was originally from the East, perhaps even Boston. But Barrett did not pry. If there was one thing he had learned since arriving in Cheyenne, it was that a man’s past was best left in the past. He certainly had no desire to advertise many aspects of his own.

Richard Eberhardt leaned forward, his keen brown eyes sparkling. “Does this mean you’ve come to your senses and decided to take our advice?”

“It does.” Barrett smiled at the man who was almost a decade older than his own thirty. Rail thin and an inch or two under six feet, Richard was not a man anyone would call handsome, and yet his confident gait told onlookers that he

was not to be overlooked. The combination of his shrewd mind and what some called his Midas touch had turned Richard into one of the city's wealthiest merchants.

"The trip to Rawlins was the final step," Barrett told his advisers. The convention had confirmed what Richard and Warren had claimed, that the political power brokers were looking for new blood and that Barrett had a good chance of winning their approval. If everything went the way he hoped, even the residents of Northwick, Pennsylvania, would have to admit that Barrett Landry was an important man.

"And so, gentlemen . . ." Barrett paused when a soft knock announced the butler's arrival. Only when Mr. Bradley had placed the tray of coffee and cinnamon rolls on the low table and closed the door behind him did Barrett complete his announcement. "You're looking at a man who hopes to have a future in governing this fine territory."

"Hallelujah!" Warren raised his cigar in a salute. "This calls for a round of brandy." Barrett's lawyer was nothing if not predictable. He let out a melodramatic sigh at the sight of coffee before taking another puff of his cigar. Less inclined to imbibe strong spirits, Richard poured himself a cup of coffee.

The three men were seated in what the architect had called the morning room of Barrett's home, perhaps because it was situated at the back of the house and faced east. This morning the sunshine that seemed to be a Cheyenne staple was strong enough that Barrett had drawn the heavy velvet draperies half closed, leaving the room bright but not blindingly so.

"Brandy?" Barrett stirred a spoonful of sugar into his coffee. "You know you won't find any strong drink in my house, and before you reach for the flask I know you carry

with you, consider that we need our wits about us if we're going to plot strategy."

Richard settled back in the leather upholstered chair, balancing a plate on his knee. "What strategy? It seems to me you have everything Wyoming will need in a senator. You have plenty of money and a nice house for entertaining when you're not in Washington. You're not too hard on the eyes." Richard shrugged his shoulders. "The only thing you're lacking is a wife."

Warren nodded. "I agree."

Their reaction was not what Barrett had expected. His friends had been encouraging him—haranguing him was more like it—to enter politics, claiming that when Wyoming became a state, its citizens would need a man like him representing them in Washington. He had invited them here this morning, rather than meeting at the club, because he wanted their discussion to remain confidential. It seemed he shouldn't have worried. There would be no discussion, at least not of anything important.

"Doesn't either of you think that political views and plans for the state—assuming we can convince our citizens and Congress that Wyoming should become a state—are important?" he demanded.

Warren raised an eyebrow, deepening the wrinkles that half a century of living had carved in his forehead. "Do you really believe that voters listen to that? Especially with women voting, what's important are appearances."

"And that means you need a wife," Richard interjected.

"Exactly," Warren agreed. "You've got the trappings. Now you need a good woman to stand at your side and convince voters that you're a family man."

This was definitely not going the way Barrett had planned. He'd imagined discussions of platforms, politics, and public appearances, not matrimony. His friends' advice was enough to make him reconsider the whole idea. "Why are you so focused on a wife? I don't see either one of you enjoying marital bliss."

"True." Richard drawled the word. "We're also not attempting to convince the citizens of Wyoming that we'd serve them better than F.E. Warren or Joseph Carey."

Warren and Carey were the primary reasons Barrett had convened the meeting here. Both were prominent members of the Cheyenne Club, and he hadn't wanted any mention of their names to be overheard.

"What chance do you think I have of defeating either one of them? Carey's been a popular mayor, and Warren—the other Warren," Barrett said with a nod toward his friend, "was territorial governor. I'm a virtual unknown compared to them."

"They both belong to the other party," Warren said after another puff of his cigar. "We need a change. That's where you come in. You're a fresh face. You've got good ideas. I heard you address the cattlemen's association, and you're as convincing as F.E. You're what we need."

Richard nodded. "I agree with Warren. You're what the territory needs. Your ideas are fine, but you need more than that." He took a sip of his coffee, keeping his eyes fixed on Barrett, as if waiting for his reaction. "Voters like family men. They believe they can trust them. That's why you really ought to be thinking about marrying. Besides, a pretty lady at your side will help draw in the crowds." Richard raised an eyebrow. "It's not just for the campaign. A wife would make

your life better. Think about it. You don't see F.E. or Carey living alone."

Barrett didn't live alone. Not precisely. He had a cook and a butler, both of whom had quarters in the house, and assorted other servants who spent the day making certain that the house was in impeccable condition. But he had no wife. That was true.

"I've been thinking about it," he admitted. It wasn't only his friends' admonitions that had triggered the thought. It started with a letter from his brother Camden, saying that he and Susan Miller would be wed by the time Barrett received the news. Though two years Barrett's senior, Camden had claimed that he would be the last of the three Landry boys to marry. Now it appeared that he would be the first, for Harrison had shown no sign of romantic entanglements.

"What do you think of Miss Taggart?" Barrett asked. Of all the women he'd met in Cheyenne, she was the only one he could envision marrying. That was why he'd been spending more time with her lately, even though they were not officially courting.

"Miss Miriam Taggart?" Richard's voice sounded strained.

Barrett nodded. "I believe she is the only Miss Taggart in Cheyenne."

Warren snuffed his cigar as he nodded vigorously. "It's a brilliant choice. She's blonde; you're dark. You'll make a striking couple. Plus, having her father's newspaper behind you will help sway undecided voters. I don't always agree with Cyrus Taggart's views, but there's no doubt his editorials are powerful." Warren rose and laid a hand on Barrett's shoulder. "I knew I was right to support you."

Leaning back in his chair, Barrett gave his attorney a wry

smile. “And the fact that I pay you handsomely for legal work and that there will undoubtedly be more work if I run for office didn’t influence you?”

Warren shook his head. “Not for a minute.”

It was a lie. “Be careful, Warren. You know how I feel about liars.”

His friend wrinkled his impressive nose. “How could I forget? You’re this generation’s Honest Abe.”

The slightly mocking tone made Barrett want to wipe the smirk from Warren’s face, but before he could speak, Richard crowed, “That’s it. Warren, you’re a genius. We’ve got our campaign slogan: Landry Never Lies.”



“I’m so glad Barrett’s coming.” Miriam Taggert gasped as Charlotte tightened the corset strings. Though Charlotte had advised her friend and best customer otherwise, Miriam had insisted that the gown she was about to don be made with a waist an inch smaller than any of her other dresses. “Men like small women,” she had informed Charlotte, “and since no one could call me small . . .” With a laugh, Miriam gestured from the top of her carefully coiffed head to her elegant shoes, a length of five feet eight inches. “One part of me needs to be tiny.”

Though some might quibble that Miriam was not beautiful in the classical sense, with a mouth a bit too wide and eyes a bit too small, she was a striking woman who’d used her slender form and her father’s wealth to make herself one of Cheyenne’s fashion leaders. And thanks to Miriam’s patronage, Élan, Charlotte’s dressmaking shop, had become the most popular in the city for wealthy ladies under the age of

thirty. The older women either ordered their gowns directly from Paris as Miriam's mother did or joined the city's less affluent citizens in frequenting Miss Smith's establishment. That knowledge assuaged many of Charlotte's fears. With *Élan* catering to a wealthier clientele, it was less likely that one of the officers' wives from Fort Laramie would discover that Charlotte now resided in Cheyenne. She'd known she was taking a chance by not leaving Wyoming, but the feeling of peace she'd experienced when she'd stepped off the stagecoach in Cheyenne had told her this was where she was meant to live.

"Why is Mr. Landry coming?" she asked. Few men entered *Élan*, and those who did were normally husbands.

Miriam chuckled. "I told him I wanted him to see the color, but the truth is, I want you to meet him. We've been seeing each other a lot, and Mama thinks he's going to court me. She and Papa believe he'd be the perfect son-in-law, but . . ." Miriam winced as Charlotte gave the corset strings a final tug. "I'm not so sure. I want your opinion," she said when she could breathe again. "Sometimes I think you know me better than my parents do."

Though they saw each other only within the confines of Charlotte's shop, the two women had become friends as Miriam enlivened fitting sessions with tales of her mother's matchmaking attempts. "She's convinced I'm an old maid at twenty-four," Miriam said with a rueful smile. "How old were you when you married?"

"Twenty-four."

"And was your mother worried you'd die an old maid?"

Charlotte shook her head as she removed Miriam's gown from its hanger. "She was so ill the last few years of her life

that I think she was glad I wasn't married then. A husband might not have been happy that I spent all my time nursing her." Jeffrey wouldn't have been pleased. Charlotte tried to dismiss the thought. She didn't want to think about Jeffrey now. There would be time later to mark the anniversary of his death.

Turning back to her customer, Charlotte smiled. "Is this gown for a special occasion?" When she'd ordered the silk, Charlotte had had Miriam in mind, knowing that the deep forest green would highlight Miriam's blonde hair and draw attention to her striking green eyes.

Miriam nodded. "We're going to a concert." The smile that lit her face turned Miriam into a beautiful woman, if only for an instant. "The symphony's playing Beethoven's Ninth. That's one of my favorites."

"Mine too. My mother used to sing 'Ode to Joy' while she was working."

Miriam stretched her hands above her head as Charlotte prepared to slide the dress onto her. "Before she was so ill, was your mother a modiste like you?"

Though Miriam couldn't see her, Charlotte shook her head. "No. Just a wonderful mother." While she was confident that Miriam would never knowingly betray a secret, Charlotte was careful about the stories she told her. There was no reason to tell Miriam—or anyone—that her mother had been a minister's wife and that her work had involved visiting infirm parishioners and making some of the best jams and jellies in Vermont. To deflect attention from herself, Charlotte spoke while she arranged the demi-train behind Miriam. "I imagine your mother enjoys music as much as you do. The newspaper always lists her among the who's who at every event."

An unladylike snort greeted Charlotte's words. "Don't tell anyone I said this, but my mother is tone deaf. It's my opinion that she attends concerts only because it's expected . . . and because it gives Papa something to write about. He's always saying that the paper needs to include information that will appeal to ladies, even if it is boring."

And ladies, despite the fact that they'd been given the vote and had even served on juries in Wyoming Territory, weren't deemed intelligent enough to care about politics. It was, Charlotte knew from the conversations she'd overheard, a common enough opinion.

"You needn't worry. Your secret's safe with me." Charlotte had become a master at keeping secrets, her own and others'. "What about Mr. Landry? Does he enjoy music?"

Miriam shrugged, then grimaced as a pin scraped her shoulder. "I don't know. He might be like my mother."

Charlotte suspected that was the case. Though she had never met Barrett Landry, enough of her customers had mentioned him that she had formed a picture of the cattle baron who'd moved to Cheyenne five years ago. Rich and ambitious, he owned one of Cheyenne's finest mansions. Though only three blocks farther north on Ferguson Street from the building that housed Charlotte's shop and her living quarters, the Landry residence was a far cry from the simple brick structure where she plied her trade. It might not possess a ballroom, as some of the neighboring houses did, but Barrett Landry's home was clearly designed to impress. Having seen it, Charlotte did not discount the rumor that he was planning to enter politics. The mansion would be an ideal place to entertain the territory's most influential men, including Miriam's father. Charlotte tried not to frown at the thought that Cyrus Taggart

might be part of the reason Barrett intended to court Miriam, if indeed that was his intention. She hoped that was not the case, for Miriam deserved a man who loved her for herself, not for the votes her father could deliver.

The bell that Charlotte had positioned on the front door tinkled.

“That’s probably Barrett.” Color rose to Miriam’s cheeks. “Go on out. Molly can help me finish dressing.”

“Are you sure?” Charlotte asked as she moved toward the dressing room door. It was true her assistant could button the three dozen pearl buttons that decorated the back of the gown.

Miriam nodded. “I want your opinion. Your honest opinion.”

“Of course.”

When she entered the main part of her shop, Charlotte found Molly staring. It was no wonder. The man who stood inside *Élan* was more handsome than even the most breathless rumors had claimed. At least six feet tall, he boasted dark brown hair, blue eyes, and a face that was saved from perfection by the small bump in the middle of his nose. Though he was not as muscular as the farmers Charlotte had known at home in Vermont, his finely tailored coat left no doubt that this man possessed his share of brawn, and yet that brawn was so beautifully packaged that the overall impression was of a gentleman. An important gentleman. Barrett Landry was a man no one would ignore.

“Mr. Landry?”

He nodded. “You must be Madame Charlotte. I beg your pardon, but Miriam never told me your full name. She simply described you as Madame-Charlotte-who-makes-the-most-

beautiful-gowns-in-Cheyenne-better-even-than-Mama's-Paris-originals.”

Charlotte chuckled. “Miss Taggert exaggerates.” Though Mr. Landry had given her the opening to reveal her surname, she did not. When she’d opened *Élan*, Charlotte had deliberately chosen a French name for the shop and had called herself Madame Charlotte, though she possessed not a drop of French blood. Not only did most of her clients prefer the illusion that they were buying gowns with a connection to France, but by using the title with her first name, Charlotte avoided hearing herself referred to as Mrs. Harding. It was true that she’d signed the bill of sale for *Élan* as Charlotte Harding, but she still cringed whenever someone called her Mrs. Harding. She’d been Miss Harding, then Mrs. Crowley, never Mrs. Harding. Perhaps she should have chosen another name altogether, but Papa’s sermons about the dangers of lying had led Charlotte to use the name she’d had for most of her life.

“Please, have a seat. Miss Taggert will be ready shortly.” Charlotte gestured toward one of the gilded chairs that flanked a small table. It was here that customers waited, occasionally perusing the fashion magazines she carefully arranged on the table. The room—indeed her whole shop—was designed for women. Perhaps that was why she felt so uncomfortable having Barrett Landry here. As for the mission Miriam had given her, to form an opinion about the man who might or might not plan to court her friend, Charlotte could hardly begin a conversation by asking him if his intentions were honorable.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?”

Mr. Landry shook his head before walking toward the shelves laden with bolts of fabric. To Charlotte’s surprise, he fingered several pieces.

She bit back a smile as she thought of the report she would give Miriam: *Your gentleman caller was the only man to take an interest in a piece of silk.* At least in that regard, Barrett Landry was not what Charlotte had expected.

The object of her thoughts turned back toward her. “You have very fine merchandise. If I’m not mistaken, that’s China silk.” He gestured toward the display of bolts that stood on end rather than being stacked as the less costly fabrics were.

“It is, but I’m surprised you recognized it.” Many of the women who patronized Élan could not distinguish between silk and satin, and not one would recognize the difference between silk from India and China. Barrett Landry wasn’t merely breathtakingly handsome; he possessed unexpected facets.

As if he sensed her thoughts, he grinned, the self-deprecating smile only making his face more appealing. “I haven’t always been a cattleman. Before I moved here, I worked in my family’s mercantile in western Pennsylvania. We didn’t normally carry silk, but my father ordered it occasionally.”

The mystery was solved. The cattle baron who might be entering politics had a logical reason for being knowledgeable about fabric.

“Nothing else drapes quite like silk,” Charlotte said. “That’s why I enjoy using it for evening gowns.”

Mr. Landry turned back to the bolts and touched one. “This green is particularly attractive. It would complement Miriam’s eyes.”

Keeping her expression impassive, Charlotte gestured toward two others. “Then you would prefer it to the sapphire or the apricot.” When Miriam had commissioned the gown, Charlotte had suggested either the sapphire or the forest

green, but Miriam had been drawn to the apricot, perhaps because it was similar to a shade Charlotte had been wearing that day.

“Yes.” Mr. Landry’s reply was unequivocal. “The orange—er, apricot—would suit you far more than Miriam.” He was right. The apricot would complement Charlotte’s dark brown hair and eyes far more than Miriam’s coloring. It appeared the scope of Barrett Landry’s knowledge was wider than simply recognizing fabric.

He turned at the sound of the dressing room door opening. “Ah, there you are,” he said as Miriam emerged.

She revolved slowly, letting him see the gown from all directions. “What do you think?” The sparkle in her eyes when she glanced at Charlotte suggested that Miriam viewed this as some sort of test. Perhaps she was trying to learn what kind of husband he would be, whether he’d care about her clothing.

“It’s a nice dress.”

Though Charlotte suspected that Mr. Landry was teasing Miriam, her friend pursed her lips as if she were annoyed. “The color, Barrett. What do you think about the color?” She took a step closer to him. “Don’t you think it makes me look like a Christmas tree?”

“No, it does not. It makes you look absolutely beautiful. I’ll be the envy of every man in Cheyenne.”

Charlotte tried not to stare. Though Mr. Landry did not resemble Jeffrey physically, the tone of his voice and the words he’d chosen sounded like Charlotte’s former husband. The casual, friendly tone he’d used when discussing the silk had changed, and the sincerity she had thought she’d heard when he’d told her his color preference had disappeared. The

changes were subtle, but to Charlotte's ears, the words he'd spoken to Miriam rang false.

Afraid that her friend was making a mistake, Charlotte waited until Miriam returned to the dressing room before she said, "I've heard rumors that you're considering entering politics."

Barrett Landry leaned against the counter, his blue eyes sparkling. "I am. Don't tell me you disapprove. I was counting on your vote."

His smile was engaging, and Charlotte did not doubt that he was accustomed to charming women with it. She would not succumb to that charm.

"It's too soon for me to know whether I approve or disapprove," she told him. "I am curious, though, about your reasons for running for office." In Charlotte's experience, too many men were like Jeffrey, seeking fame or fortune or both. For Miriam's sake, she hoped Barrett Landry was not one of them.

"What would you consider a valid reason?"

Charlotte noticed that he had not answered her question but had instead turned the tables. "I've always believed that each of us was put on Earth to make it a better place. We can't change the past, but if we make the present the best it can be, we can influence the future. Whatever we choose to do with our lives should be done with that in mind." Now she was sounding like Papa, preaching a sermon. That wasn't what she had intended. She was supposed to be learning more about Barrett Landry, not telling him her deepest beliefs.

He was silent for a moment, absentmindedly rubbing the bump on his nose while his eyes remained fixed on her face as if he were assessing her sincerity. "I have no doubt that the

citizens of Wyoming would be better off if we were a state instead of a territory. We could elect our governor, not have some crony the president appointed running Wyoming. We know how to manage our resources, especially water, better than a man who's never set foot in the territory. The politicians back East don't understand how scarce water is or how lives depend on its being managed wisely."

He was not a dilettante or a man out for only personal gain. The passion in his voice convinced Charlotte of his sincerity about running for public office. "And you believe you're the man to change Washington?"

Barrett Landry shook his head. "Not alone. But with the right advisers, yes, I believe I could make a difference."

Charlotte heard the sound of muted laughter coming from the dressing room. Whatever Molly and Miriam were discussing, it was lighter than her conversation with Mr. Landry.

"What about you, Madame Charlotte?" he asked, his lips quirked into a semblance of a smile. "Do you believe that sewing fancy gowns for wealthy women is making the world a better place?"

Charlotte blanched as his words registered. She was doing what she could to provide for herself and David, but she wasn't improving the world by dressing women like Miriam. She should never have introduced the subject. "No, I don't," Charlotte admitted. "I guess that makes me a hypocrite. I apologize, Mr. Landry." She forced herself to keep her gaze steady, though she longed to duck her head.

To Charlotte's surprise, Barrett Landry shook his head. "I'm the one who should apologize." The sparkle faded from his eyes. "My mother would have washed my mouth out with soap if she'd heard me. If there was one lesson she drummed

into us boys, it was that a gentleman is never rude to a lady. I was, and I'm sorry."

"You were only being honest with your question."

"Honest. Indeed." Though there was nothing remotely amusing about her words, once again Mr. Landry's eyes betrayed a hint of mirth. "May I ask your opinion about something? Your honest opinion." He stressed the adjective.

Charlotte nodded, trying not to reflect on the irony that this was the second time in less than half an hour that someone had asked for her honest opinion. What would Miriam and Mr. Landry think if they knew that she had begun the day reflecting on her own deception? She was still undecided what she should tell Miriam about this man, and now he was asking her opinion. She could only hope it did not concern Miriam.

"My advisers tell me I need a campaign slogan."

Not Miriam. Thank goodness. "They're probably correct."

"Since we're agreed on that, what do you think of 'Landry Never Lies'?"

Charlotte swallowed, trying to dissolve the lump that lodged in her throat at the memory of all the lies and half-truths she had uttered.

"It has a nice cadence to it," she said at last. "You could turn it into a jingle. You know, like 'Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too.'" Though it had been more than forty-five years since that campaign, Charlotte knew the words to the song that had helped William Henry Harrison and his running mate John Tyler gain the White House. All three Harding sisters had heard the story of their maternal grandparents' one serious disagreement and why their grandmother would croon the song only when Grandpa was not home.

Mr. Landry chuckled. "I'd forgotten about that and fer-

vently hope that my advisers have too. If I have to sing a song, I'll lose every last voter. Bullfrogs are more melodic than I am." He wrinkled his nose before turning serious again. "Ignoring the musical possibilities, what do you think about it as a slogan? Do you think voters will like it?"

Not wanting to dwell on the idea of lies, Charlotte forced a smile. "I do, Mr. Landry. Indeed, I do."

2

You brought the carriage.” Miriam tightened her grip on Barrett’s arm as her face lit with pleasure. It seemed he’d done something right today. There were times when Miriam’s mood was difficult to read, when he felt as if he were playing a role, trying to coax her into a smile, but the sight of his cabriolet with the top folded down seemed to have chased away her pensive mood. She’d been unusually quiet when she’d emerged from the dressing room, and he’d had the impression that he was intruding, keeping her from a private conversation with Madame Charlotte. That was absurd. Miriam had asked him to meet her at the shop. She wanted him there. He’d done exactly what Miriam had asked, and she’d seemed miffed. But now, fortunately, she was smiling again.

“I thought we might go to the park,” he said when he’d helped her into the carriage. It was a perfect October day, the sky a deep blue that seemed unique to Wyoming, highlighted by a few fluffy cumulus clouds. The sun had warmed the air

enough that strolling through the park would be pleasant, and though the trees the schoolchildren had planted were still saplings, providing little shade, that was not a problem, for Miriam had brought her parasol. “You can show off your new hat,” Barrett told her as he tightened the reins.

Miriam wrinkled her nose, the look she gave him indicating he’d done something wrong. Again. “This is not a new hat. You’ve seen it before. Everyone has seen it.”

“It still looks very nice. You look very nice.” Barrett could have kicked himself. Compared to women, cattle—even the ornery ones that tried to hide during roundup—were the most agreeable creatures on the face of the earth. It appeared that he shouldn’t have said anything about the hat, but Camden had claimed that ladies wanted to be complimented on their appearance. His brother had neglected to mention that a man had to be careful about referring to a specific piece of clothing. As he considered his words and Miriam’s reaction, Barrett realized he should have simply said that he wanted the privilege of having her, the loveliest lady in the city, on his arm when he strolled through the park.

Were all women this prickly? Barrett doubted that Madame Charlotte was. She hadn’t seemed that way. She wasn’t the most beautiful woman Barrett had ever seen. Other women had dark brown hair and eyes the color of Mr. Ellis’s best chocolate. Other women wore skirts that whispered when they moved, attracting a man’s attention even though the fabric covered practically every inch of skin. Other women wore soft floral perfume that hinted at a summer garden. But no other woman Barrett had met had displayed the same intriguing combination of confidence and vulnerability.

When Madame Charlotte walked around her store and

spoke of the silks, she was the consummate shopkeeper: knowledgeable, helpful, seemingly genuine in her interest in Barrett, even though he was not a customer. She'd even forgiven him for embarrassing her with his question. Question? It had been little more than a taunt. She had challenged him when she'd asked about his motives, and he'd felt the need to retaliate. Barrett wasn't proud of that, any more than he was proud of the fact that his initial motivation for seeking office had not been as pure as he'd claimed. When Richard and Warren had first suggested he run for public office, he'd seen it as a way to prove he could do something his brothers hadn't. It hadn't been easy, growing up in Harrison and Camden's shadow. They'd been big and strong, whereas he'd been small for his age, not reaching his full height until he was almost eighteen. When his brothers had called him the runt of the litter and refused to include him in their games, he'd retaliated by playing pranks and had soon earned a reputation as a mischief maker. Though he'd outgrown that and had mended his relationship with Harrison and Camden, he'd never felt completely at home in Northwick. That was one reason he'd left as soon as he could.

It had been a challenge, building a new life in Wyoming, but he'd succeeded. He now had wealth and a social position far beyond his brothers'. Running for office would be the final proof that he was no longer the runt of the litter.

The urge to prove that was powerful, but the more Barrett learned about his adopted home, the more he realized that he could make a difference in Wyoming—a positive difference. And so he'd told Madame Charlotte that, not his earlier selfish motive.

She had appeared to believe him. It was only when they'd

discussed his slogan that she had seemed to retreat into herself. Her demeanor had changed, reminding Barrett of the porcupine he and Camden and Harrison had found when they'd been wandering through the woods back in Pennsylvania. The instant the animal had spotted them, it had curled into a ball, its fiercely sharp quills protecting its soft underbelly, and though they'd stood there for what felt like hours, waiting for the porcupine to straighten out, it had not.

Madame Charlotte was protecting something, perhaps a daughter. Though Miriam had said nothing more than that Madame Charlotte was a widow who lived above the shop, he had heard a young girl's voice coming from upstairs. A child lived there, in all likelihood Madame Charlotte's child. Barrett could understand that she might want to shelter her daughter, but that didn't explain why she'd seemed so disturbed by his slogan.

"Turn here." Miriam tapped Barrett's arm.

He blinked, surprised when he realized they'd reached the corner of 22nd Street. The park was only one block east. Somehow, he'd traveled four blocks without being aware of it.

"I'm sorry," he said honestly. "My mind wandered."

"You should be sorry." Miriam's normally sweet voice was laced with asperity. "You've practically ignored me since we left Madame Charlotte's."

Madame Charlotte. Did the woman have a surname? Of course she did, even if Barrett had never heard Miriam refer to her any other way. Though the question of the lovely dressmaker's name teased him almost as much as her protective air had, Barrett knew better than to ask his companion. Speaking of another woman, even if it was only the one who created

her dresses, was no way to treat a lady, especially one he was considering courting.

“I’m sorry, Miriam. You didn’t deserve that. I assure you that you have my full attention now.”

The look she gave him told Barrett she was still skeptical. “What were you thinking about?”

It would be sheer folly to tell her the truth. Instead, Barrett changed the subject as they approached the four-block expanse of City Park. “Has your father said anything about beef prices dropping again? I’ve heard stories that some of the other cattlemen are selling more head than normal because they’re fearful of a harsh winter.”

Miriam shot him another look, as if to say she recognized his deliberate evasion. She wasn’t simply an attractive woman, Barrett reminded himself. She was also intelligent. That was one of the reasons why she would be an ideal wife. Even if he never learned to love her, he could at least respect her.

Twirling her parasol in what might have been a flirtatious manner, Miriam nodded. “Papa mentioned something, but you know Mama doesn’t like him to talk about business at dinner. She says it’s not good for the digestion.” Miriam waved at a friend on the other side of the street before she added, “He did say someone reported that beavers were making bigger dens than normal. It’s a silly story, if you ask me. What do beavers know about weather?”

Her expression intent, Miriam laid her hand on Barrett’s arm and waited until she was certain she had his full attention. “Tell me the truth, Barrett. Are you certain green is the right color for my gown?”



“It’s beautiful.” Tears sprang to Charlotte’s eyes as she looked at the two-layer cake with its carefully swirled icing. Though the frosting was chocolate, Gwen had piped a white border around the top and at the base. She had even placed multicolored candies on the sides and had used them to outline a *D* on the top. It was a work of art, a great deal of effort to expend for a boy who could not see it. “This must have taken you hours.”

Charlotte gave her son another hug, then placed him back on the floor, handing him the gourd rattle that had been his favorite toy for the past week. He’d been waiting for her as he did each day, sitting on the floor of the room that served as kitchen, dining room, and parlor, his head turning in her direction when she opened the door, his face lighting with a smile that made the day’s minor annoyances fade. This was her son, and today was his birthday. Though she doubted he would remember it when he was older, Charlotte had been determined that it would be a special one. Tonight she wouldn’t worry about the baron. She wouldn’t let her mind wander toward Barrett Landry. She wouldn’t even wonder what the future held. Tonight was for David.

Charlotte smiled at the woman who shared the small apartment. “Thank you, Gwen. For the cake and everything.”

The other woman shrugged, as if the effort of preparing a fancy cake while she cared for two rambunctious children had been insignificant. That was Gwen. Ever since she and her daughter had come to live with Charlotte, Gwen Amos had done more than expected, brushing off Charlotte’s thanks as unnecessary. “I’m glad to help” was the normal refrain from the heavyset woman who watched over David while Charlotte was in the shop. Shorter than average, Gwen would never be

considered beautiful, even though her light brown hair was smooth and glossy, the envy of many, and her blue eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. She was a jolly woman who appeared to enjoy life, and for that alone, Charlotte felt blessed. It had been Gwen's optimism that had helped Charlotte through the dark days when she'd learned that her son was blind.

"Rose and I told David what we were doing, didn't we?" Gwen smiled at her daughter.

The three-year-old nodded vigorously. "I and David taste the candies." She smacked her lips. "I and David like them."

"I'll bet you did." Charlotte smiled at Rose, then hugged Gwen. "Every day I thank God for bringing you into my life. I don't know what I'd do without you."

When Jeffrey had been killed, Charlotte had been forced to make an honest assessment of her talents. There were only two—a clear soprano voice and the ability to design and sew fashionable clothing. Since opportunities to earn money by singing were limited, her best chance of making a living for herself and David was to open a dress shop. Though there was no question of remaining at Fort Laramie, once she'd arrived in Cheyenne, Charlotte had realized that the growing capital city could support another dressmaker.

Finding and stocking the store had been relatively simple. Juggling work with caring for David and their apartment was a far greater challenge. Fortunately for Charlotte, Gwen had been shopping at Yates's Dry Goods the day Charlotte had introduced herself to the man whose building adjoined hers, and she had heard Charlotte tell Mr. Yates that she needed a housekeeper who could also care for her son. Half an hour later, Charlotte had the best housekeeper she could imagine.

“You were the one who helped us,” Gwen countered, “but let’s not be maudlin. Especially not tonight. Supper’s ready.”

Charlotte moved to the dry sink. “Did you hear that, David? It’s time to wash our hands. Come to Mama.” She watched, a proud smile on her face as he crawled toward her. Other children his age were starting to walk, but for David, crawling had been a major accomplishment.

“You know what comes next.” David giggled before raising his arms so she could lift him onto the counter. “Now, give me your hands.” When she positioned them over the pail, he giggled again. Getting wet was one of David’s favorite parts of the day. “Okay, rub,” Charlotte said when she’d poured water over her son’s hands. “Now we’ll dry them.” She gave him a towel. Though he hadn’t quite mastered the art of drying his hands, he seemed to enjoy the texture of the cloth. “Off to your chair now.”

It had seemed strange at first, narrating every step she was planning to take, but when Charlotte had blindfolded herself and tried to imagine what David’s world was like, she had realized how important it was to compensate for his lack of sight by stimulating his other senses. David’s hearing appeared to be acute, and he would often sniff, wordlessly telling Charlotte he had detected an odor she had not.

The meal went well. David enjoyed eating, once he knew where the foods were placed, and though he made a mess of the cake, smearing it all over his face, his grin left no doubt that he’d savored it.

When she had washed her son’s face and hands and tossed his bib into the laundry basket, Charlotte settled him on her lap and reached for the first of the packages Gwen had laid on the now clean table. “David, your aunts sent presents for

you.” She handed him a box wrapped in heavy brown paper and tied with a coarse string. “This is from Aunt Abigail. Feel the tie.” She moved his fingers over the twine, showing him how it circled the box. “We need to pull it loose.” Handing him one end, Charlotte encouraged her son to tug on it. When it came undone, he crowed with delight. “Feel the box now. The string is gone.” She guided David’s fingers over the package. “Let’s open the box.” When she’d slid the paper off it, Charlotte removed the top. “Oh, it’s a book.” A book her son would never read. Elizabeth’s gift was another book with beautiful pictures, the perfect gift for most one-year-old boys but not for David. Though he’d enjoy hearing her read the stories to him, only the richly textured blanket Gwen had made was something Charlotte’s son would fully appreciate.

“You need to tell them,” Gwen said when the children were in bed and she and Charlotte had returned to the sitting area of their main room. Furnished with a horsehair settee and two tapestry-covered chairs, it was large enough for the four of them and accommodated the few visitors the women had. Charlotte lit an oil lamp. Although the apartment had electricity, there were times when she preferred the softer light of the lamps.

Gwen’s expression was solemn as she set her empty teacup on the small table positioned between the two chairs. “Your sisters deserve to know that David is . . .” She hesitated for a second before saying, “Special. You should have told them at the beginning.”

It was a familiar argument. “I didn’t realize he was blind when I left Fort Laramie.” Though Gwen was reluctant to voice the word *blind*, Charlotte was not. “Even if I’d known, I’m not certain I’d have told Abigail.” It was only after she’d

moved to Cheyenne that Charlotte had noticed that David's eyes never followed her. "Probably not. I couldn't disrupt my sisters' lives. Elizabeth would have postponed her medical studies, and Abigail and Ethan would have interrupted their honeymoon to be with me. I couldn't let that happen."

At the time that Charlotte had learned about David's blindness, Abigail and Ethan had been back East, paying a brief visit to Elizabeth while Ethan made the final decisions about his inheritance. Though both he and Abigail were confident that he'd been right in renouncing all claims to the fortune his grandfather had amassed, leaving it instead to a distant cousin who shared the grandfather's passion for railroads, if Ethan had known that David was handicapped, he might have made a different decision. Charlotte could picture Ethan sacrificing his own happiness in order to provide for her and David, and she could not allow that to happen. David was her son. She alone was responsible for him.

And now? It was difficult to explain when she didn't fully understand it herself. Charlotte had always been reluctant to let her sisters see her life as less than perfect. That was why she hadn't told either Abigail or Elizabeth the truth about her marriage. She hadn't even mentioned she was expecting a child, for fear they'd visit her and discover that the man she'd believed to be her knight in shining armor was troubled.

Gwen poured herself another cup of tea, shaking her head when Charlotte refused a second piece of cake. "You think because you're the oldest you should be the strong one. Abigail and Elizabeth are grown women now. They could have helped you. You don't always have to be strong."

"I wasn't." Charlotte closed her eyes, remembering.



Her legs quivered as she tied her bonnet under her chin and smoothed on her gloves. Though she could blame her weakness on recent childbirth, it was fear that made her tremble like a sapling in the wind, fear that she would be unable to do what she must.

“I’ll go with you, if you like.” Abigail, who had spent the summer with her, put her arms around Charlotte’s shoulders and squeezed gently. “You don’t need to go alone.”

But she did. “Only I can forgive her.” And that was best done alone.

If the soldiers who’d drawn guard duty were surprised when Lieutenant Crowley’s widow asked to visit the prisoner, they were too well trained to show it. They offered to accompany her to the cell but seemed unfazed when Charlotte refused. “If you need us, ma’am, we’ll be right outside,” they said as they resumed their pacing in front of the guardhouse. It was a routine day for them, but an anything but normal one for Charlotte.

She could hear the hesitation in her footsteps and forced herself to walk briskly.

The woman who’d been captured two nights before glared as Charlotte approached her cell. “Who are you?” she demanded in a drawl that suggested she had been raised in the South. Before Charlotte could answer, the prisoner narrowed her eyes. “You must be the wife, the nosy one’s sister.”

Ignoring the slur to Abigail, Charlotte said simply, “I’m Charlotte Crowley. I came to tell you that I forgive you for your part in Jeffrey’s death.”

For a second, the woman stared at Charlotte, as if in disbelief. “I didn’t kill him.”

“I know that, but if it hadn’t been for you . . .”

The woman with the graying brown hair interrupted. “I don’t need your forgiveness. It won’t help me, anyhow. I know where I’m going when I leave this world, and there ain’t nothing anybody can do to change that.”

When Charlotte started to speak, to tell the prisoner that there was hope, the woman held up her hand. “Save your breath and listen to me. Listen good, because I’m only going to say it once. The baron knows that Jeffrey found Big Nose’s stash.”

Charlotte gasped. Even though he had met his fate at the end of a hangman’s noose several years before she had come to Wyoming Territory, Charlotte had heard of George Parrott, better known as Big Nose. The notorious outlaw had been famous for his robberies, and with his death, speculation about the large shipment of gold that had never been recovered had only increased. Now it appeared that someone named “the baron” thought her husband had it.

“The baron is a mighty determined man,” the woman continued. “He won’t rest until he finds the gold, and you’re the only link. Watch your back, missy. You don’t wanna cross the baron. He kills folks the way you’d swat a fly.”

The next morning, the fort was buzzing with the news that the prisoner was dead. Somehow, someone had snuck into the guardhouse and slit her throat. Though there were no clues, Charlotte was certain the baron was responsible . . .



“I know it’s David’s birthday.” Gwen’s voice brought Charlotte back to the present. “But I have a gift for you. For both of us, really.” She handed Charlotte an envelope. “I know how much you love Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and I thought

maybe you and I could go together.” Gwen’s habitual smile faded slightly, as if she feared Charlotte’s reaction. “Molly will watch the children. I already asked her.”

Charlotte turned the envelope over in her hand, gazing at her name, inscribed by Gwen’s untutored hand. “I don’t know what to say. This is so generous of you.” Though she paid Gwen a salary in addition to providing food and lodging, theater tickets were a luxury Gwen could barely afford.

The heavyset woman shook her head. “This is a thank-you for giving Rose and me a home. I didn’t want to tell you at the time, but I was desperate. I had only enough money for another week. Once it was gone, I didn’t know what I’d do. I’d looked everywhere for work, but no one wanted a widow with a small child. I was afraid I’d wind up at Sylvia’s,” she said, referring to the brothel next door to the boardinghouse where Gwen and Rose had taken refuge after her husband’s death. “It was a miracle that you and I were in Mr. Yates’s store at the same time.”

Charlotte shook her head. “Not a miracle, but the hand of God. He put us together for a reason.”

“Then you’ll accept the ticket?”

Perhaps it was the fact that the memory of the woman’s warning was so fresh. Perhaps it was only because this would be the first time she’d appeared at a large public gathering. Charlotte didn’t know the reason. All she knew was that fear assailed her. The baron could be anywhere, even at the Cheyenne Opera House. If he recognized her . . . Charlotte swallowed deeply, reminding herself of what had become her favorite Bible verse. She didn’t have to live in fear. Joshua 1:9 promised that the Lord would be with her wherever she went, even to the opera house.

Slowly, she nodded.



His mother used to say that envy was a sin. Warren Duncan tugged off his boot, placing it carefully next to its mate. No matter how annoyed he might be—and he was mighty annoyed—there was no reason to damage good shoe leather by not caring for it properly. That would be foolish, and he was not a foolish man. Far from it. But he was an envious one.

Warren did not doubt that envy was a sin and that his mother would have been displeased if she'd lived long enough to know of it. He reached for the blacking and began to polish his boots. Ma would turn over in her grave if she knew that he'd been guilty of other, far more serious, sins. Those Ten Commandments she was so fond of spouting also said, "Thou shalt not steal" and "Thou shalt not kill." But words, whether written on the pages of Ma's Bible or carved on stone tablets, hadn't stopped him from relieving more than one person of his valuables. They hadn't stopped him from slitting his partner's throat, and they most definitely were not doing anything to lessen his envy.

He wanted what Barrett Landry had: more money than any one man needed, a position within Cheyenne society, a future in the nation's capital, and soon a wife. Barrett had it all. It seemed as if the man hardly lifted a finger and everything fell into place. That was what Warren envied most of all: the ease with which Barrett had transformed himself from a former shopkeeper into one of Wyoming's leading cattle barons.

It hadn't been that way for Warren. He'd had to struggle for everything after the doctor and the sheriff had shunted his ma off to the asylum. They'd claimed she was having delusions, just because she'd raced down Main Street in her nightgown, shouting that her husband had risen from his grave and was

chasing her with a meat cleaver. It was that quack of a doctor who was crazy. Sure, Ma had spells. Everyone did, only some folks hid it better than others.

Warren frowned at the memory of the simpleton who called himself a doc saying Warren would grow up to be like his ma. It hadn't been easy, but he'd proven him wrong. He'd managed to finish law school, albeit at the bottom of his class. The sheepskin they handed him was supposed to be his golden ticket. Unfortunately, it hadn't turned out that way. Oh, he'd found a position with a law firm, but the partners hadn't seen his potential and had refused to promote him. Instead, he'd been stuck drafting memoranda for the senior members of the firm, never getting credit for his work. All that on a salary that barely put a roof over his head and food in his mouth. He deserved more, much more. That's why he'd headed West.

Warren studied the first boot, ensuring that he had blackened each inch before beginning to buff it. Though he hadn't been in the military, his boots outshone those of the officers who entrusted their legal affairs to him. That was one good thing about Cheyenne. There was no shortage of men who needed him. He had a good-sized clientele, and he no longer worried about paying rent. Perhaps he ought to be satisfied, but Warren had never been one to be easily satisfied. Ma had told him to dream big, and he had. The problem was, those dreams hadn't come true . . . yet.

He was fifty-one years old, and he still didn't have what he deserved. He lived in two rented rooms, not an opulent home on Ferguson Street; he had no wife; and the only time he entered the hallowed halls of the Cheyenne Club was as someone's guest. His membership application had been re-

jected. The sour-faced man who'd delivered the verdict had told Warren he wasn't the caliber of man to be admitted to the club. Absurd! He was as good as Barrett and the other members.

Warren laid his carefully polished boots on the floor and strode to the window, considering the excuses the membership committee might have invented to deny his application. Eddy Street wasn't as prestigious as Ferguson, where Barrett had his mansion. It couldn't compare to the blocks of 17th Street where F.E. Warren lived and where other cattle barons were planning to build their homes, but it wasn't a seedy area either. Come spring, the lilacs that his neighbors had planted would be blooming. For a few weeks, they'd brighten the yards, and if he opened his windows, they would bring in a pleasing scent. It seemed that wasn't enough. All right. He'd build himself a house. A big house that would impress the committee. But what if even that didn't satisfy them? What else could he do?

He glanced down at the street, his eyes narrowing when he saw a young couple strolling along the opposite side. Maybe Richard was right. Maybe it wasn't only Barrett who needed a wife. If a wife could convince voters to support Barrett, surely one could convince the old men on the membership committee that Warren should be admitted to the club.

Warren grinned, imagining the day when he would enter the hallowed building on 17th Street as a full-fledged member. A house and a wife. He could do that. He would do that. Come spring, Warren Duncan would have a new house and would take a wife, and directly on the heels of those accomplishments, he would be admitted to the Cheyenne Club.

All it required was money. Lots of money. Fortunately, it was there, waiting for him. The money Big Nose had hidden, the money Jeffrey Crowley had found, would be his. Soon.