


WESTWARD WINDS • BOOK 3



WITH  
AUTUMN'S  
RETURN  
A NOVEL

AMANDA  
CABOT



Revell

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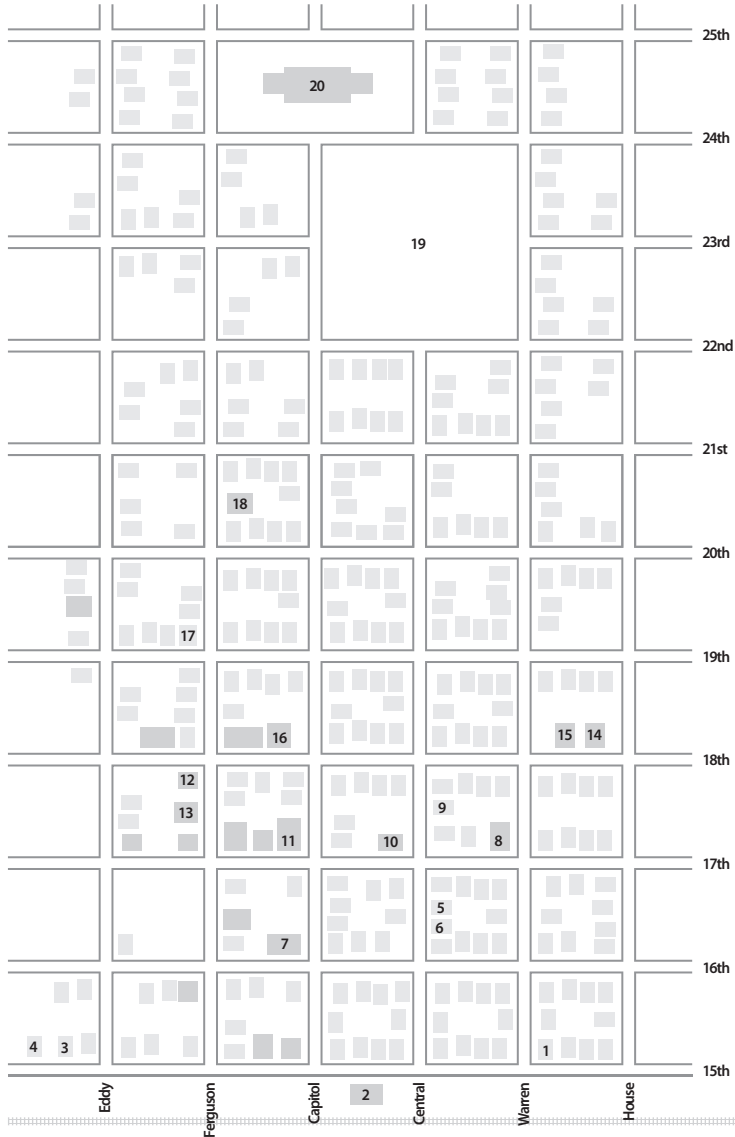
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For Judith B. Stumpf, my sister, my friend,  
and a woman who, like the fictional Elizabeth,  
is kindhearted and a skilled healer.

# Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory 1887



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*Italics indicate fictional locations.*

# 1

JUNE 1887

CHEYENNE, WYOMING TERRITORY

**A**t last! Elizabeth Harding grinned as she hung the sign in the window. Thirteen black letters. Four words. A simple message. If passersby noticed the wooden placard, and she hoped they would, they would have no way of knowing what those words meant to her, that they represented the culmination of a dream that had begun when she was only seven. They didn't need to know. All they needed was the message the sign imparted.

Once she was certain the board was perfectly straight, Elizabeth took a step back, then twirled around. It was silly perhaps, and some might call it undignified to be so excited, yet she couldn't help it. Today was the first day of her new life.

Yielding to impulse, she hurried outside and studied the

sign. "The doctor is in." Yes, indeed she was. And soon she'd be treating her first patient. The advertisements she had placed in the newspaper had alerted the city's residents to her impending arrival, and today's paper announced the official opening of her medical practice. It would be only a matter of minutes before the front doorbell tinkled, signaling the presence of someone needing her care. Everything was ready. Or was it?

Assailed by the fear that she might have forgotten something, Elizabeth hurried back indoors and began studying the rooms that comprised her office. The waiting room, with its two benches and four chairs, was spotless. The potted plant that her sister had somehow kept alive through the long Cheyenne winter was carefully placed on the low table, and though sun did not yet stream through the westward-facing window, the room was bright and cheerful. There was nothing amiss here.

Elizabeth moved slowly into the room that would serve as a combination office and examination room. Although it did not boast the fancy equipment she'd seen in Eastern hospitals, it was well-appointed. She had a cleverly constructed examining table with braces that allowed her to raise either the head or the foot. She'd even asked the carpenter to build a small stool so that shorter patients or children would be able to climb onto the table. The desk and chairs were new and matched the glass-fronted cupboard that held the supply of medicines that had been delivered only yesterday. She needed nothing more here.

A quick study of the modest infirmary on the opposite side of the hallway told her everything was in place. Though she hoped few patients would need to avail themselves of it,

its presence meant that Elizabeth could tend even the most seriously ill patient, and the small kitchen behind it would ensure that her basic needs as well as those of her patients would be satisfied.

Returning to the main room and sinking into the chair behind her desk, Elizabeth smiled. The sign was perfect. The office was perfect. Soon everything would be perfect, for soon she would have proof that the years of studying, of practicing, of enduring the snide remarks and blatant jeers of her male classmates were all worthwhile. Soon she would have her first patient, and then she—and the world—would know that Elizabeth Harding was a doctor, a real doctor.

Five minutes later, unable to remain seated, she wandered back to the waiting room and gazed outside, her eyes moving from bustling Central Avenue to the sky. Her sisters hadn't exaggerated when they'd claimed there was nothing that compared to the Wyoming sky. Though initially Abigail hadn't been impressed with much about the territory, even she had liked the sky, and Charlotte had been so in love with her first husband that she had declared everything about Wyoming beautiful.

Deep blue with only a tiny puff of a cumulus cloud floating by, the sky was magnificent, but even if it had been dismal and gray all the time, Elizabeth would still have chosen Cheyenne for her new home. Though it had yet to achieve statehood, Wyoming was a progressive territory. Not only had it been the first to grant women the vote, it even had women bailiffs and jury members.

Elizabeth's smile broadened as she thought of all that Wyoming had to offer. It wasn't simply the fact that both her sisters had settled here that had brought her to Cheyenne,

though she was counting the months until they'd be reunited. Even more important was the knowledge that she would face no old-fashioned prejudices about women's roles. Cheyenne wasn't like the East, where Elizabeth would have had to battle for acceptance. No one here would declare that she was nothing but a glorified midwife.

She cringed at the memory of one of her classmates making that very proclamation the day they'd both graduated, Elizabeth second in her class, the scoffing classmate close to the bottom. He had been offered partnerships with several successful physicians. She had received no such offers. Instead, she'd been advised to seek a position as a midwife.

Cheyenne was different. She'd be accepted for her skills. Central Avenue, one of the city's primary north-south streets, was busy. Women strolled by, intent on their purchases. Though on another day, Elizabeth might have made a game of guessing which of them were clad in gowns Charlotte had designed, she had no interest in games today. Men walked more briskly than the women, but while a few appeared to be headed toward her office, they detoured to the office next door, frowning when they saw that it was closed. Apparently the men of Cheyenne had a greater need for an attorney than they did for a doctor.

"It's the perfect location," Charlotte had written as she described the building she'd chosen for Elizabeth's office. Her oldest sister had been living in Cheyenne, serving as one of the city's premier dressmakers, when Elizabeth had announced her intention of moving West as soon as she finished school. In typical big sister fashion, Charlotte had volunteered to select an office for her. "It'll save you time," she had declared, pointing out how long the renovations to



her new husband's store were taking. "I'll have everything ready before you arrive."

The logic had been unassailable. More than most people, Charlotte knew how eager Elizabeth was to open her practice. That was why she and her husband had lent Elizabeth the money to outfit the office. Elizabeth's other sister Abigail had contributed a portion of her teacher's salary to pay for her schooling.

"There are two offices in the building," Charlotte's letter continued. "A young attorney has the other one. The best part is, he lives above his office, so you'll never be completely alone, even if you work late."

Though Elizabeth had hoped to have her residence above the office, Charlotte had been adamant that she live in Charlotte's former apartment with widow Gwen Amos and her child, at least until Charlotte and her husband returned from their extended trip East. "It'll be ideal," Charlotte insisted when she and Barrett had stopped in New York for a brief visit with Elizabeth on their way to Massachusetts. "Gwen's a wonderful cook, and you'll love little Rose. Besides, it wouldn't be seemly for you to live alone," she had added, "especially with a single man next door. I haven't met him, but I've heard that he's charming and handsome. Not as handsome as Barrett, of course."

In Charlotte's mind, no one could be more handsome than the man she'd married, but she'd made no secret of the fact that she believed both Elizabeth and Gwen needed loving husbands. That was one battle Elizabeth chose not to fight. As dearly as she loved her sisters, Elizabeth knew they would not understand that she did not care about handsome men, single or otherwise. When she'd first realized that being a

doctor was the plan God had made for her life, she'd had long conversations with Mama and Papa. Though they'd supported her aspirations, they'd both cautioned her that it would not be an easy life and that few men would be willing to marry a woman whose first calling was to her patients. It had not been difficult to accept that, for unlike Charlotte and Abigail, Elizabeth's dreams had never centered on a husband and children. She had come to Wyoming to heal bodies, save lives, and be the best aunt possible to Charlotte's son and any children Abigail might have. But Charlotte was in Massachusetts, getting the training she needed to open a school for the blind, and Abigail was still in Washington Territory while her husband finished his commitment to the Army.

Elizabeth stared out the front window, looking at the wagons and carriages that rolled by. Though she didn't wish ill on anyone, surely there was someone who required a physician's care. Children broke bones, and gastric distress affected people of all ages. But though the street traffic had increased, no one stopped at Elizabeth's door.

Perhaps she'd made a mistake, telling Gwen she shouldn't visit today. Elizabeth hadn't wanted to expose Gwen and her daughter to illness unnecessarily, but there appeared to be no danger of that. The only ailment they were likely to contract was boredom.

Refusing to open her watch and see how long she'd spent staring outside, Elizabeth returned to her desk and unfolded the morning newspaper. She had brought Mr. Taggart's *Telegraph* with her, planning to cut out the notice she'd placed in it, but she might as well read the news. There was nothing else to do.

“Verdict Likely Today.” Elizabeth shuddered at the article that held a place of prominence on the first page. According to Gwen, the Bennett trial was the most sensational of the year. Adam Bennett, a young rancher, had been accused of killing his wife in a fit of rage. What made the trial so sensational wasn’t simply the fact that murder had been committed, but the manner of death. Helen Bennett had been bludgeoned. Even in a city that had once been noted for its lawlessness, the crime was heinous, as was the thought that the man who had once promised to love and cherish Helen was responsible for her brutal death. Though he declared his innocence, Adam Bennett had been found with blood spattering his hands and clothing.

The citizens were divided in their opinion. Many agreed with Gwen that Adam Bennett was guilty, but his attorney, the man whose office adjoined Elizabeth’s, claimed otherwise, staunchly defending his client’s innocence. Elizabeth simply prayed that justice would prevail.

Closing the paper, she looked at the still-empty waiting room.



“Today’s the day.” Though Jason Nordling tried to control the enthusiasm in his voice, the glint in his client’s eyes told him he’d failed. Adam Bennett’s normally guileless blue eyes held a gleam that hadn’t been there a minute ago. “The prosecuting attorney and I will make our closing statements,” Jason continued. “Then the jury will decide.”

Bennett nodded. “And by the end of the day I’ll be free.”

Jason looked around the small room where his meetings with his client had taken place. Though not a jail cell, it

was scarcely larger, and it boasted no windows. The walls and floor were in sore need of repainting, the two chairs and table scarred. It might be fanciful, but to Jason the room always smelled of despair. No wonder Bennett was anxious to leave.

"I hope that's the case." Believing in his client's innocence, Jason had done his best to represent him. He thought he had a strong argument, but juries could be unpredictable.

"It'll happen," Bennett said with more confidence than he'd displayed during the trial. "People trust you. That's why I hired you. You can convince 'em."

"I hope so." Jason felt a surge of excitement flow through his veins. This was the reason he'd become a lawyer: to see justice done. While the three years of drafting wills, bills of sale, and articles of incorporation that had constituted his legal career thus far had paid his bills and given him a comfortable nest egg, it wasn't what he'd envisioned when he'd studied law. This trial represented everything he sought: to exonerate innocent men. "Just remember what I told you. Keep your eyes down, and no matter what happens, do not smile. You want the jury to know that you're a serious man."

Bennett nodded.

Half an hour later, Jason stood in front of the jury, carefully making eye contact with one man after another. They appeared to be listening intently, even the man who'd yawned so frequently during the various witnesses' testimony. Jason had spoken for six minutes; now it was time for his final statement.

"And so, gentlemen of the jury, you see that my client, Adam Bennett, was as much a victim as his beloved wife. We'll

never know why the stranger entered the Bennett home that night, whether he was intent on robbery or something else. All we know is that Helen Bennett is dead. The prosecuting attorney has tried to convince you that her husband killed her, but we know otherwise. Helen Bennett died at the hands of an unknown assailant, leaving her husband alone in this world, bereft of the woman he loved. The prosecuting attorney told you that my client had his wife's blood all over him. We do not deny that. You heard Adam Bennett's testimony. You know that he acted as any loving husband would. He gathered his wife into his arms, trying to save her. If I had a wife and had found her covered with blood, I would have done the same. So, I venture, would you."

Jason took a deep breath, pausing long enough to let his gaze move from one juror to the next. When he was satisfied that he had their full attention, he delivered his conclusion. "Adam Bennett is no more guilty of killing Helen than you are, and so I ask you to deliver the only possible verdict: not guilty."

As the jury filed from the courtroom into the adjacent deliberation chamber, Bennett caught Jason's eye and winked. A wink? The corners of his client's mouth turned up in what appeared to be a fleeting smirk, causing a knot of alarm to settle in Jason's stomach. Something was amiss, for that was not the reaction he had expected.

It took the jury less than an hour. When they returned to the courtroom, their faces solemn, not one looked at the defendant. That was not a good sign. Jason felt his palms begin to sweat, and when he glanced at Bennett, he saw the man swallow deeply. The smirk was gone. His client was as nervous as he.

For a moment, the only sounds were the shuffling of feet and an occasional cough. The judge stared at the jury. "Have you reached your verdict?"

The foreman nodded. "We have, your honor."

"And what do you find?"

The foreman handed a folded piece of paper to the judge. Waiting until the judge opened it, he confirmed the contents. "We find the defendant, Adam Bennett, not guilty."

As the words registered, exultation rushed through Jason, brushing aside the shards of doubt that had assailed him. It was over. He'd done it. He'd won his first trial.

At his side, Bennett cheered. "I knew it!" he cried. "I knew you could do it."

Though he frowned at the outburst, the judge declared that Adam Bennett was free and banged his gavel to dismiss the trial. The courtroom erupted into pandemonium as spectators reacted to the decision. The prosecuting attorney's grim expression left no doubt of his opinion. Jason would visit him later and tell him the truth, that he'd done an outstanding job of presenting his side of the case. But first Jason needed to talk to his client. His former client.

He turned to the man who'd sat beside him for days, intending to shake his hand, but something in Bennett's expression stopped him. Gone was the innocent look that he'd seen in those light blue eyes each time they'd met. In its place, Jason saw satisfaction and something else, something he would almost call evil.

"She deserved it, you know," Bennett said, not bothering to lower his voice. "She wouldn't listen to me. The Bible says a wife needs to obey her husband. She wouldn't, and so I had to kill her."

Bile rose in Jason's throat, and for a moment he thought he might be ill. The pride he'd felt over winning his first criminal case vanished, replaced by the realization that he'd been wrong, horribly wrong. It didn't matter that he'd been duped, that his client had lied to him. The simple, brutal facts were, Adam Bennett was guilty, and thanks to Jason, he was now a free man.

"Wait," Jason said as Bennett headed for the door. Perhaps there was something he could do. Perhaps he could persuade Bennett to give himself up, to accept the sentence he deserved.

Laughter echoed off the courtroom walls. "You can't do anything to me. Nobody can." It was as if the man had read Jason's mind. "I'm not guilty. The jury said so."

And I'm a fool, Jason reflected as he gathered his papers and prepared to leave. It appeared that Mrs. Moran had been right, after all. She'd taken him aside the day he'd announced that he wanted to study the law and had advised not setting his sights so high. He should have been a farmer. He should have spent his days growing things rather than trying to serve justice. Turnips weren't guilty of anything, and wheat didn't kill innocent women. But the pride the reverend had warned Jason about had made him believe he was destined for a different life. Look how it had turned out. Instead of preserving justice, he'd defended a criminal and helped a guilty man go free. At least the reverend wasn't here to witness his son's shame. If he were, he'd be thankful that Jason had never called him pa.

"Jason," one man called as he exited the courthouse. "What do you think?"

"Did you know?" another demanded.

Jason brushed them off, not wanting to talk to anyone. He needed to compose his thoughts; he needed to come to grips with what had happened; most of all, he needed to forget that today had happened. He'd been gullible, foolish, stupid. The adjectives bounced through his mind, each stronger than the preceding.

Normally he enjoyed the five-block walk from the courthouse to his office, but nothing was normal about today. Today was the day that Jason Nordling, the man who thought he was destined to be a prominent trial attorney, set a guilty man free. *Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.* The verse from Proverbs that the reverend had quoted so frequently reverberated in his brain. Jason had been proud that Adam Bennett had chosen him from all the attorneys in Cheyenne. He'd believed the man when he'd said that Jason was the only attorney for him. No wonder! No one else would have been so easily manipulated. Jason Nordling was a fool, an unmitigated fool.

By the time he reached his office, he wanted nothing more than to disappear through the doorway and never emerge. But as he approached the building, he noticed that the door next to his was open. This must be the new doctor's first day. Jason had seen workers entering the building as they constructed the interior rooms, and he'd seen the gold lettering that proclaimed it the office of E. M. Harding, MD, but he had not met the man. He might as well do it now. It was only neighborly. Besides, the day couldn't get any worse.

"Hey, Doc!" he called out as he walked through the doorway.





Elizabeth's breath caught as her heart began to pound. It had finally happened. Her first patient had arrived. This was what she wanted, but oddly, when she'd envisioned this moment, she had believed the first person to seek her services would be a woman. How silly. Men needed treatment as much as women, and there were more men than women in Wyoming. A patient was a patient, and this particular one was very, very welcome.

Taking a deep breath and forcing herself to walk slowly, as if this weren't the moment she'd been anticipating all day, Elizabeth entered the waiting room, her eyes making a quick assessment of her caller's condition.

"Good afternoon, sir. How can I help you?" He did not look ill. Far from it. If she had been asked to describe a man in peak health, it would have been this one. At least six feet tall, he was blessed with glossy dark brown hair, lightly tanned skin without the slightest hint of pallor or sallowness, clear brown eyes, broad shoulders, and a face that most women would find exceedingly attractive. His features were perfectly sculpted, and were it not for the square chin, he might be called beautiful rather than handsome. The chin gave him a look of determination, verging on stubbornness.

Dressed in a suit that appeared to have been tailored for him and an expensive hat held in his hand, he seemed a successful, healthy businessman. Elizabeth could not imagine why he was consulting her. Perhaps he had come on behalf of his wife, yet he exhibited none of the urgency she would have expected of a man with an ailing spouse. As she took a step closer, Elizabeth noticed that his eyes appeared filled with pain, and tiny lines had formed next to his lips. Perhaps the man was suffering from dyspepsia.

"I'm looking for the doctor." As if to underscore his words, he glanced at the open door to her office, as if he expected to see someone seated at the desk.

"I am the doctor," she said firmly.

"You?" A frown accompanied the question. "You're E. M. Harding, MD?"

Elizabeth tried not to bristle, though the man's attitude reminded her of her classmates. They'd given her the same incredulous look the first day. When that and their obvious disdain had not discouraged her, they'd resorted to other tactics, including attempting to sabotage her work.

"Indeed I am Dr. Harding, Elizabeth May Harding." She would not list her qualifications, for they had been clearly spelled out in the notices she had placed in the *Telegraph*. "Whom do I have the honor of addressing?"

He blinked, and Elizabeth knew there was no dust mote in his eye. The blink was an involuntary reaction, caused by his trying to accept the fact that she was not a man. When she'd worked in the hospital wards, some of her male patients had refused to let her treat them. Others had grudgingly agreed, but all had greeted her arrival with incredulity. This man was no different.

For a second, she thought he would not deign to respond, but then he said, "Jason Nordling."

Her neighbor. The handsome, charming man whose presence Charlotte claimed would keep her safe at night. The man whose defense of Adam Bennett made the front page of the paper each day. He was supposed to be in court, convincing the jury that his client was innocent. The trial might be over, but if that was the case, he certainly didn't look like a man celebrating a victory.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Nordling.” That was an exaggeration, but perhaps if Elizabeth pretended that she hadn’t noticed his discomfort at discovering her identity, this encounter might improve. After all, he was her neighbor, and if there was one lesson Mama had taught her daughters, it was to be polite to neighbors. And, though Elizabeth now believed it unlikely, there was still the possibility he was a patient. “Is this a social call, or do you require my professional services?”

One eyebrow rose, as if the question amused him. “I assure you, Miss Harding, that I have no need of your professional services today, nor will I ever.”

He took another step into the waiting room, his gaze moving slowly as he appeared to assess the furnishings. Elizabeth revised her initial impression. Jason Nordling wasn’t simply determined or stubborn; he was arrogant. He might not choose her as his physician, but there was no reason he should deny her the courtesy of addressing her as “Doctor.”

“Mr. Nordling, my name is Dr. Harding, and I assure you,” she said, throwing his words back at him, “that even the healthiest of men needs a physician occasionally.”

This time both eyebrows rose, and when he looked at Elizabeth, he gave the impression of looking down that perfectly chiseled nose. “If I needed a doctor, it wouldn’t be you.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, trying to release her anger even as she recognized that part of that anger was directed at herself. It appeared she’d been a fool to believe that Cheyenne was different from New York City, that its citizens would accept her as a doctor, despite her gender. *You can leave now.* That was what she wanted to say to the man with the supercilious expression, but the pain she’d seen in his eyes

stopped her. Her instincts told her there was more to this man than simple prejudice.

“And the reason you wouldn’t consult me is . . .” Perhaps she was inviting trouble, but Elizabeth wanted to be certain she understood the cause of his disdain. Perhaps he was disturbed by something else and she was nothing more than a convenient target for his frustration.

Her hopes were dashed when he studied her, his eyes moving slowly from the top of her head to her toes in what seemed an insolent appraisal. “I’m certain you know the reason.” Once again, his voice held a sarcastic note. “It’s the same reason you’ll find it difficult to attract other patients. Dr. Worland may be getting on in years, but he’s . . .”

As she had, Jason Nordling let his voice trail off, expecting her to complete the sentence. She did. “A man.”

“Precisely.”

A wise woman would demand that he leave rather than subject herself to more disdain, and yet she did not. Though she had never been able to convince the other students that she was as qualified as they, Elizabeth couldn’t prevent herself from hoping that this man would be different. Perhaps it was simply because today was her first day of practice, but Elizabeth could not shake the feeling that if she could change Jason Nordling’s mind, it would be an important step in being accepted by the community.

“Tell me, counselor,” she said, trying to keep her voice even, “have you had any experiences with a woman doctor, or are you speaking from hearsay or perhaps blind prejudice?”

His eyes narrowed, as if he were unaccustomed to being questioned. “I told you. I’m a healthy man. I’ve had little experience with doctors.”

Elizabeth tried not to sigh. “So it is prejudice.” She tipped her head to look him in the eye. Her next words were designed to provoke a reaction, and she didn’t want to miss it. “I must admit that I’m surprised. I thought that as an attorney you believed that everyone was innocent until proven guilty, yet it seems that you’ve condemned me without any evidence or a trial. Does the principle of presumed innocence apply only to men?”

Jason Nordling’s reaction was greater than she’d expected. Elizabeth had thought she might see a twinge of shame in his eyes. Instead, he flinched as if she’d struck him but kept his voice steely as he said, “Women have a designated place in society. Just like men, they have their roles, and those roles do not include practicing medicine.”

Perhaps it was petty of her, wanting to prove him wrong, but Elizabeth didn’t stop. Jason Nordling wasn’t different. Oh, he was more handsome than her classmates, but his attitude was the same. Though Mama had warned her of the dangers of a sharp tongue, Elizabeth took a step closer, her nose twitching as she inhaled the scent of starch and soap that clung to the handsome but bigoted attorney.

“Do the roles you would consider appropriate for women include those of a wife and mother?” she asked. Had her sisters been here, they would have smiled at the deceptively soft tone Elizabeth used. They’d told her it was as distinctive as a rattlesnake’s warning and that the sting that followed was as dangerous as the snake’s bite.

“Of course.” Jason Nordling looked at her as if she were slightly addled. Perhaps she was, to believe she could convince him of the error of his opinions.

“But practicing medicine is not.”

“That is what I said.”

He'd taken the bait. Elizabeth nodded, as if she agreed with him. When his eyes widened slightly, she continued. “Then if a child should fall and scrape his knee, his mother would be wrong to cleanse the wound and bandage it.”

Jason Nordling's eyes flashed with apparent disgust. “Of course not. That's what mothers do.”

Elizabeth gave him her sweetest smile. “If that is true, I don't understand your logic, counselor. Surely you understand that one aspect of practicing medicine is cleansing and bandaging wounds. You said it was all right for a mother to do that, and yet you distinctly told me that women should not practice medicine.”

Lines bracketed his mouth as he frowned. “You're twisting my words.”

“I don't believe so. What I believe is that your logic is twisted. Women have always been nurturers and healers. Why shouldn't they be dignified with the title ‘doctor’? Furthermore, the traditional roles you seem to espouse have no place on the frontier. Women are homesteaders; they defend themselves and their families. Why, Esther Morris was even a justice of the peace. Why shouldn't women be doctors?”

The man was angry. The rigid line of his neck and the scowl that marred his handsome face were testimony to that. So was the tone of his voice when he spoke. “It's one thing to care for a child, but no man would rely on a lady doctor. I hate to disillusion you, Dr. Harding”—Jason Nordling emphasized her title—“but your practice is doomed. My advice to you is to terminate your lease on this building and head back East or wherever it is you came from.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, wanting nothing more than

to vent her fury on him, to wipe that arrogant smirk from his face.

“That, Mr. Nordling, is advice I have no intention of heeding. Furthermore, if I did want legal counsel, I assure you that you’d be the last person I’d consult.”

The barb hit its target, for his face flushed ever so slightly. “At least we agree on one thing. You’d be the last person I’d want as a client.” Placing his hat back on his head, he turned on his heel and headed toward the door. “Good day, Doctor.”