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AGAINST  
*the* WIND



*secrets of*  
SWEETWATER  
CROSSING

AMANDA  
CABOT

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*secrets of* SWEETWATER CROSSING • 2



A G A I N S T  
*the* W I N D



A M A N D A  
C A B O T



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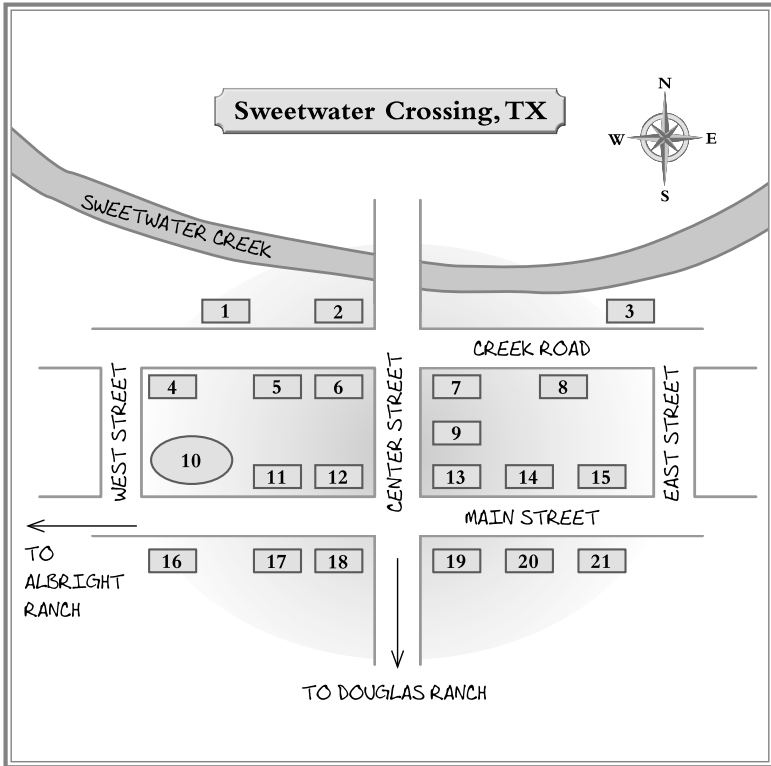
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|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 – Mrs. Sanders’s Home          | 12 – School                    |
| 2 – Cemetery                     | 13 – Church                    |
| 3 – Finley House                 | 14 – Mayor’s Home and Office   |
| 4 – Saloon                       | 15 – Mercantile                |
| 5 – Mrs. French’s Home (empty)   | 16 – Livery                    |
| 6 – Mrs. Locke’s Home (empty)    | 17 – Sheriff’s Home and Office |
| 7 – Parsonage Annex              | 18 – Ma’s Kitchen              |
| 8 – The Albrights’ Home          | 19 – Doctor’s Office           |
| 9 – Parsonage                    | 20 – Post Office               |
| 10 – Park                        | 21 – Dressmaker                |
| 11 – Alice Patton’s Home/Library |                                |

## *Chapter*

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# One

**MONDAY, MARCH 12, 1883**

“Louisa Vaughn, you’re a fool to go back.” Phoebe Sheridan propped her fists on her hips and glared as she repeated the words Louisa had heard half a dozen times since she’d announced her decision. “You have no future there.”

Though Louisa couldn’t deny the truth of her best friend’s accusations, she wasn’t going to admit how much she dreaded returning to Sweetwater Crossing and seeing the changes her oldest sister had made to their home. Instead, she continued folding the clothing she planned to take with her and said as mildly as she could, “You know your mother can’t travel by herself. We’ll be back as soon as she takes care of matters.”

There was no reason to remind Phoebe that her father had died under what were euphemistically called difficult circumstances and that Louisa didn’t want Mrs. Sheridan to be alone if she faced scorn or pity. After all, fear of the townspeople’s reaction was the reason Phoebe refused to accompany her mother. “I won’t give them a chance to laugh at me,” she’d declared when Mrs. Sheridan had read the telegram to her. “I won’t.”

Louisa abandoned her packing and crossed the room she and Phoebe had shared for more than half a year to wrap her arms around her friend's waist and draw her close.

Though no one would call Phoebe beautiful, Louisa had always envied her blond hair and what Mama had called Phoebe's patrician nose. They were so much more distinguished than Louisa's medium brown hair and ordinary nose.

"But your eyes are prettier than mine," Phoebe had told her when they'd both been finding fault with their appearance. "Yours are like dark sapphires; mine are faded blue."

Right now, Phoebe's pale blue eyes were filled with apprehension, her need for reassurance evident.

"I doubt anyone will laugh," Louisa said softly. "Besides, going for the funeral doesn't mean staying there. We'll be back in a week." The journey would take two days each way, and surely three days would be enough to bury Doc Sheridan and close his office. "I wish you'd come with us." As heartbreaking as it had been, Louisa knew she would have regretted being absent when her father was laid to rest.

Phoebe shook her head. "I am never, ever going back to that town, and you shouldn't, either. You know Cousin Jake would accompany Ma, so don't use that as an excuse."

But Mrs. Sheridan hadn't asked Cousin Jake to drive her. She'd asked Louisa, and Louisa could not refuse, not after Mrs. Sheridan had helped Louisa escape Sweetwater Crossing.

"I know you want to help my mother." Phoebe wrinkled her nose. "You always want to help people, but you know you don't want to go back there."

Louisa wouldn't argue with Phoebe, not when she was right. "I don't, but I must."



"It's a good idea, Zeus. I know it." Joshua Porter tugged his hat lower. Though it wasn't officially spring yet, the Texas sun

was bright enough that he was forced to squint unless the brim shaded his eyes, and when he squinted, he had the uncomfortable feeling that he was missing something. Traveling alone, he could not afford to miss anything, especially when the nearest town was miles away and hazards like poisonous snakes and javelinas were present.

“Don’t you agree?” Josh wasn’t surprised when his horse failed to respond. There were times when the black gelding with three white socks and a star would neigh or toss his head as if he understood, but Josh knew the horse that had carried him halfway across the country was responding to the tone of his voice, not the actual words.

Still, he continued, because speaking helped the miles pass more quickly than merely letting the thoughts bounce through his brain. “Grandfather will agree that a room featuring American foods is a good way to celebrate P&S’s centennial.” And a way to ensure that Josh’s father’s dream came true. That was one thought he wouldn’t voice, even though there was no one other than his horse to overhear him. Some things were too important to be shared.

“It’s a good idea.” As he repeated the words, Josh wondered whether he was trying to convince Zeus or himself. The pickled eggs, the molasses pie, the maple-cured ham, the pumpkin bisque, and the dozen other foods he’d deemed special enough for the American Room of what Grandfather called the New World’s answer to Fortnum & Mason were delicious, and unless Josh was greatly mistaken, they’d appeal to Porter & Sons’ customers.

He’d traveled north, south, and now west, sampling foods, watching how they were prepared, and requesting recipes. Until this morning, he’d been certain that his idea was the right one, that Grandfather would agree that his concept was better than his cousin’s. But now . . .

Josh stared at the scenery of what locals called the Texas

Hill Country. The combination of rolling hills with limestone outcroppings, verdant meadows, vivid blue skies, and more cactus than he'd seen anywhere appealed to him in ways that none of the other places he'd visited had. There was something different about this part of the Lone Star State, something that made his heart sing. Unfortunately, though his heart was singing, his brain was telling him his plan lacked something.

“What is it, Zeus? What am I missing?”

For a second, there was no response. Then the horse neighed and stopped abruptly, flinging Josh forward. *Protect your head.* His father's instructions echoed through his brain, but it was too late. As he hit the ground, excruciating pain radiated from Josh's skull down his spine, and he heard a bone crack just before the world turned black.



“It's only another ten miles.” Louisa tried to sound encouraging, but the way Mrs. Sheridan was worrying a pleat in her skirt told her the older woman was even less anxious to reach Sweetwater Crossing than Louisa. Normally Phoebe's mother would no more have disturbed the lines of a garment than allow her graying blond hair to be anything but perfectly coiffed. Mrs. Sheridan was wrinkling her skirt and seemed oblivious to the strands that had escaped from her bun. Even more telling, she refused to meet Louisa's gaze, instead keeping her eyes—the same shade of blue as her daughter's—fixed on her lap.

Fortunately, the journey was approaching its end. They'd gotten an early start this morning, so unless the horse threw a shoe or one of the buggy's wheels broke, they should arrive by early afternoon.

“I appreciate your coming with me.”

Louisa had done more than accompany the doctor's widow. Though they'd planned to take turns driving, Louisa had held

the reins for the entire distance once she realized how distraught Mrs. Sheridan was. Louisa had insisted that the widow drink warm milk after supper in hopes that it would help her fall asleep in the unfamiliar bed of the inn where they'd spent the night. She'd been the one who'd insisted on eating a good breakfast and stopping every two hours, ostensibly to let the horse rest, but mostly because she wanted Mrs. Sheridan to relax by walking for a few minutes.

Relaxation, Austin Goddard had told Louisa the first day that she'd accompanied him on a house call, was essential to the healing process. And Mrs. Sheridan needed to heal, even though she had sustained no physical injuries. The emotional toll a loved one's death took could be as dangerous as a broken bone. Louisa hadn't needed Dr. Goddard to tell her that. She'd had firsthand experience with the effects of grief.

"You've been so kind to me," Mrs. Sheridan continued, raising her hand from her skirt to fidget with her hat ribbons. Though the doctor's wife had smiled more often in Cimarron Creek than Louisa could recall her doing in Sweetwater Crossing, perhaps because she'd been surrounded by family, she was not smiling now.

"It was the least I could do. If it weren't for you, I'd still be living in Sweetwater Crossing." *In my sisters' shadows, never managing to measure up to them, no matter what I did.* Though Louisa did not utter the words, the thoughts had been her companions for far too many years. Her sisters had mastered whatever they attempted. Louisa had failed countless times.

She fixed her gaze on the road, nodding when she realized there were no curves on this stretch and the horse would need no guidance. Turning to look at her passenger, she managed a small smile. "Cimarron Creek is wonderful."

Not only had the town's doctor and midwife helped her realize her dream, but there'd been no expectations to overcome. For the seven months she'd lived there, she'd simply been Louisa

Vaughn, not Louisa, the youngest daughter of Pastor Vaughn, the girl the parishioners had called the plain one.

“I always liked it,” Mrs. Sheridan said, “but I also liked Sweetwater Crossing. Now I’m afraid of what’s waiting for me. What are people saying? How will they treat me?”

Louisa knew the feeling. When it had appeared that her father had taken his own life, some of the townspeople had shunned her and Emily. That was one of the reasons she’d been so grateful when Mrs. Sheridan had invited her to accompany her and Phoebe to the town where Phoebe had been born. It was there Louisa had met the people who’d changed her life.

“You might be surprised. Everyone in town likes you.” The doctor and his wife had been pillars of the community, both respected and liked by the other residents.

“But that was before Roger . . .”

“Died.” Louisa completed the sentence, choosing the least offensive word to describe what had happened, though the actual events had been scandalous. “You’re his widow. You deserve their sympathy.” Just as Louisa and her sisters had deserved sympathy after Father’s death.

Mrs. Sheridan brushed away the tear that had slid down her cheek. “I hope they’ll understand, but even if they do, I know one thing: I won’t stay there. Phoebe’s all I have left, and you heard her. She won’t leave Cimarron Creek.”

Louisa couldn’t blame her. Cimarron Creek was safe. Sweetwater Crossing was . . .

Uncertain how to complete the thought, she tried to dismiss her own worries about the reception she’d receive from Emily. If her sister was hostile, it was no more than Louisa deserved after the way she’d treated her. If the house where she’d grown up no longer felt like home, it wouldn’t matter, because she’d be there only a few days.

As much to encourage herself as Mrs. Sheridan, Louisa said, “We’ll be back in Cimarron Creek soon.”

The widow nodded, then rested her head against the seat-back. “I hope you won’t mind if I close my eyes for a bit. I’m tired.”

Suspecting that dread rather than a lack of sleep was causing Mrs. Sheridan’s fatigue, Louisa nodded.

*Take a deep breath*, she told herself when she felt her hands tighten on the reins. *Stop worrying*. How many times had Father preached about the futility of worry? Louisa had lost count, but she hadn’t forgotten the way Father had insisted it was important to count blessings instead of fears. It was time to do that. She might not be able to escape what was ahead, but she could and would enjoy the rest of the drive.

The sight of ancient live oaks growing next to a small stream, their branches providing what would be welcome shade during Texas’s hot summers, and the sound of two hawks greeting each other as they soared above made her smile. As Father used to say, God had given the Hill Country an abundant share of beauty, a reminder of the beauty that awaited them in eternity.

“Oh, Father, I miss you so much!” The words escaped before Louisa could control them. “I may not have been your favorite, but I know you loved me.” She blinked away the tears that threatened to fall, then blinked again when the normally placid horse whinnied, apparently alarmed by something Louisa had yet to see.

She stared at the road, trying to determine what had startled the horse. There was nothing. A few seconds later, Louisa’s breath caught at the sight of a dark form on the side of the road. Surely it wasn’t . . . But it was. The horse had spotted a man. A man who wasn’t moving.

“Whoa!” She stopped the buggy and leapt down, her heart pounding while she tried to remember everything Austin had taught her about serious injuries. If only she wasn’t too late. As she ran toward the stranger, Louisa offered silent prayers for the man’s safety. *Please, God, let him still be breathing. Grant*

*me the skill to help him.* She didn't want to consider the alternative, for there'd been far too many deaths in the past year.

She knelt at the man's side, relief flooding through her when she saw his chest moving. Her first prayer had been answered. He was still alive. Alive but in desperate need of care.

The man's hat was nowhere to be seen, perhaps blown away, and his blond hair bore as much dirt as his obviously expensive garments. Unlike many men who favored muttonchop whiskers or large moustaches, this man's cheeks had only a light stubble, telling Louisa both that he was normally clean-shaven and that he'd been here at least overnight. Under other circumstances, she would have found him handsome. Now her primary concern was the extent of his injuries.

Though he might have heard her approach, her patient kept his eyes closed, giving Louisa an opportunity to catalogue his symptoms without distractions. The parched lips, flushed skin, and rapid breathing indicated he was suffering from dehydration, possibly heatstroke. The unnatural angle of his left leg told her he'd broken it, but he was alive. Blessedly alive. And, if her prayers were answered, he'd be coherent enough to answer a few questions, because before she could move him, she had to learn more.

"What happened?" she asked as she laid her hand on the injured man's forehead, confirming the fever she'd feared. "I'm Louisa Vaughn, and I want to help you. What's your name?"

"Zeus."

Though the reply surprised her, because Louisa had never met a man named Zeus, she was relieved that he'd understood her question and responded.

"All right, Mr. Zeus. Can you tell me what happened?"

The man's eyelids flew up, revealing vivid blue eyes. "I'm not Zeus. I'm Porter. Gotta find Zeus." His words were slurred, evidence of the severity of his condition, but at least Mr. Porter was coherent. "Help me stand."

Louisa shook her head. Even if he wanted to walk, it would be difficult with his broken leg. “First, let’s get you some water.” The leg could wait; his dehydration could not.

Mama had taught her daughters that ladies never ran, but this was no time for etiquette. Louisa raced back to the buggy and pulled out the jug of water she’d filled this morning, surprised that despite the unexpected stop, Mrs. Sheridan was still asleep.

When she returned to her patient, Louisa sat next to him and helped him raise his head, noting as she did that his shoulders were broader than many men’s. “Just a sip now,” she said as she held the jug to his lips. The water might help reduce his fever as well as quench his thirst.

Though it was clear that Mr. Porter wanted more, he followed her instructions. “That’s better.” His voice sounded better too. “Where’s Zeus?”

“Is he your horse?” Louisa held the jug to his lips again, watching as he swallowed another mouthful of water. He’d need far more than the two swigs, but if he drank too quickly, his stomach would rebel.

“Yes.” Mr. Porter looked around, searching for the missing animal. The horses Louisa knew would have stayed close to their riders, but Zeus had not.

“Something spooked him. He threw me off. Next thing I knew, I was here.” Her patient rubbed the top of his head, drawing Louisa’s attention to the lump that had formed on it.

She took a deep breath and offered another prayer. Austin had warned her about head injuries, saying they could be dangerous, but he’d given her little advice on how to treat them. She’d have to hope that this one was not serious. When she reached Sweetwater Crossing, she’d see what Doc Sheridan’s medical books said. But first she had to get Mr. Porter there.

“You’ve broken your leg,” she told him. “It needs to be set, but I can’t do that here. We need to get you into the buggy.”

When she glanced that direction, Louisa saw that Mrs. Sheridan had wakened. She beckoned her over, knowing it would take both of them to support the man's weight and help him climb into the carriage.

"I need your assistance, Mrs. Sheridan. As you can see, Mr. Porter is injured. I'm going to take him to Sweetwater Crossing."

When the widow nodded, Louisa's patient shook his head, then winced at the pain that must have shot through him from the sudden action. "I can't leave without Zeus and my saddlebags."

Louisa gave thanks that his speech was no longer slurred and that he was forming complete sentences, telling herself that the head injury was not as serious as she'd feared. Unfortunately, she could not reassure Mr. Porter about Zeus. "There's no sign of your horse."

This time his face registered dismay as well as pain. "There must be. I can't lose him or those saddlebags." Those eyes, as brilliant as the summer sky, beseeched Louisa to say she was mistaken, that the horse was grazing only a few yards away. "I can't lose them," he repeated. "Especially the bags. They're worth more than Zeus."

Louisa's optimism about Mr. Porter's condition faded with his insistence on finding his possessions. The head injury must have been more severe than she'd thought if he was so worried about saddlebags. Unless he was carrying gold or jewels, even finely tooled saddlebags weren't worth more than a horse.

"What's in the bags?" she asked as she helped him to his feet, draping one of his arms over her shoulders, the other over Mrs. Sheridan's.

Mr. Porter frowned. "My future."