

## What Others Are Saying About Dawn Crandall and The Hesitant Heiress...

The Hesitant Heiress features a rich cast of characters set in a fastpaced world of intrigue, faith, and drama. Dawn Crandall is a new author to watch!

> —Elizabeth Camden Author, Into the Whirlwind and Against the Tide

Like the petals of a lovely flower, the secrets in Crandall's debut novel slowly unfold as the romance blossoms. If you enjoy reading inspirational romance, you'll love *The Hesitant Heiress!* 

—Melanie Dobson

Award-winning author, Chateau of Secrets and Love Finds You in Mackinac Island, Michigan

A love story to savor, *The Hesitant Heiress* is a gentle Gilded Age courtship that delightfully teases, taunts, and takes the heroine—and the reader—by surprise with a tale of mystery and true love revealed.

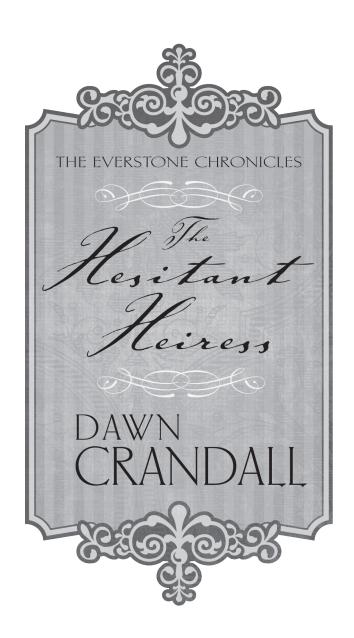
—Julie Lessman

Award-winning author of three series: The Daughters of Boston, Winds of Change, and Heart of San Francisco

Dawn Crandall's debut novel is a heart-stopping work of art. The first chapter was all it took to captivate this eager reader. Watch this up-and-coming author. I truly believe she's about to take us on some pretty exciting adventures, so let's buckle our seat belts!

—Sharlene MacLaren

Award-winning author of four series (Little Hickman Creek,
The Daughters of Jacob Kane, River of Hope,
and Tennessee Dreams) and two stand-alone titles
(Long Journey Home and Tender Vow)





#### Publisher's Note:

This novel is a work of fiction. References to real events, organizations, or places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

## THE HESITANT HEIRESS The Everstone Chronicles ~ Book One

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Dedication

This is for my husband, Jonathan, who never failed to believe in me from the moment he found out about my secret dream of writing a book...even if he might have felt a little sorry when what ensued for years was my talking his ear off at every given moment about my characters and plotline.

Eleknowledgments

his book is for and because of so many people—which seems strange to me now, since I started writing it solely for my own enjoyment while my husband was busy working full-time and earning his MBA. But now that it's gone this far, I have so many wonderful people to thank—so many who have helped me in the last four years as I learned my way through writing and self-editing a book. Much to my chagrin, my husband began bragging about me to my friends from church—"Dawn's writing a book, and I'm sure it will be good enough to be published." I didn't dare believe him, but it was certainly good to hear. After those friends began to read what I had written, they jumped on the bandwagon of encouragement, as well. Not that I believed them, either. They were my friends—they were obligated to tell me they loved it. Well, Narissa, Beth, Lisa, Amy, Susie, and Lindsey…here it is. I suppose you must have been telling the truth, after all.

On top of encouraging friends, it also took my joining the American Christian Fiction Writers and their Scribes e-mail critgroup to really start getting my story/writing up to par. Within months of joining, I signed with my ever-encouraging agent, Joyce Hart, but still didn't have a critique partner. I prayed and searched for "the one" and finally found her when she e-mailed me and admitted to having followed my story on Scribes for all those months, even though she'd been too busy to submit anything. I don't know what I would have done thus far without Susan Tuttle,

a writer who, despite writing the opposite of me in almost every way, is my perfect match.

There are so many others to thank—too many to name—who have spurred me on through the different stages of waiting these last few years. Most of all, I want to thank God for creating this desire in my heart back in high school, before I was even His.

### ONE

# Claudine Abernathy's Boston

"Beauty is not only a terrible thing, it is a mysterious thing.

There God and the Devil strive for mastery,

and the battleground is the heart of man."

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

#### February 16, 1890 · Boston, Massachusetts

iss Brigham, may I have a word with you?" Professor Silvious strolled down the aisle toward the stage of The Boston Conservatory of Music's auditorium.

I'd just finished playing Chopin's *Raindrop*, a favorite of mine. I'd long been in the habit of taking every chance I could get to play the grand piano at the center of the stage in the auditorium, but I never could rid myself of the nerves that doing so created in the pit of my stomach.

"Yes, sir."

Professor Silvious always had a frown on his face, ever since the moment I'd met him over three years before, so it didn't surprise me to see it there now.

He stopped short, evidently deciding that the central aisle of the empty auditorium was as good a place as any to tell me what was on his mind. "Miss Brigham, I received a letter today concerning you." The tone of his voice was sharp, as if I'd somehow offended him by forcing him to receive said letter. He stood stoically, both hands behind his back, as I walked the remainder of the way to stand before him.

"Was it from my Aunt Claudine?" I could not imagine who else would have bothered. She was the only one who wrote me anymore, the only person who seemed to care I even existed. My cousin Lawry had been a faithful correspondent for a few years, but after his graduation from Dartmouth, his letters had stopped.

"No, it was not from your Aunt Claudine. If you indeed have an Aunt Claudine, that is."

"Claudine Aberna—"

"Yes, I know who Claudine Abernathy is, Miss Brigham—it's her connection to you I highly doubt. And the letters you say you've received from her while she's been conveniently out of the country these last three years."

"I have every one of them, if you'd like to see them." I'd saved them all, rolled up and tied together with a black ribbon, hidden in my hollowed-out version of *Great Expectations*.

"This letter is the only one I need to see, Miss Brigham. And from what it tells me, you are not the kind of young woman we at The Boston Conservatory wish to be affiliated with...no matter your talent."

I swallowed hard. "Whoever sent the letter is obviously lying." It was unheard of to speak back to a professor in such a manner, but who else would defend me if I did not defend myself? There was no one.

"There's no contest when it comes to my judging the truth of this letter. You are a young woman with an unknown past, no relatives, and now a very trustworthy account from Bram Everstone against you."

It took only a moment to understand what was happening. The professor would, because of some slanderous letter, believe the worst of me.

Me-Amaryllis Brigham, whose most fervent desire was to be good.

"I am the epitome of self-control and perseverance, Professor Silvious. There can be no truth—"

"So says you. But we know absolutely nothing of your life before the age of fourteen. You seem to have appeared out of the woodwork, which is where you will return. We cannot have someone of your ilk contaminating the good standing of our institution."

"You mean—"

"I mean, Miss Brigham, from this moment on, consider yourself expelled from The Boston Conservatory without references."

"But I—"

"It matters very little what you think or what you say. The decision is final."

March 14, 1890 · Back Bay, Boston, Massachusetts

My stomach churned with anxiety as I stood just inside the formidable leaded-glass doors of one of the largest mansions in Back Bay—Hilldreth Manor—waiting.

Within the hour I would meet the closest relative I had—a great-aunt.

Claudine Abernathy.

Her letters from Europe over the last three years had made mention of my coming to live with her once I finished my extensive schooling. Little did either of us know back then that it would turn out to be the other way around.

I watched as a couple walked slowly down the Pedestrian Mall at the center of Commonwealth Avenue.

Commonwealth.

Such a strange name, but it was fitting for the street where I'd been sequestered for weeks on end. I'd never been one to notice all of the intricate architectural designs upon the buildings in Boston before, not until I'd found myself tucked away and hidden in the virtual castle built by my Landreth grandparents. All I'd been able to think about for years was my dream and how I would accomplish it.

With the piano.

In all the years since leaving Washington, it was all that had mattered.

And what had it all come to?

A month of solitude piled directly atop a mountain of questions.

In that last month, not once had I been outside to walk down the street. Not once had I even taken my horse, Truelove, out for a ride. And not once had I ventured past the front door since seeking the comfort of having it close behind me, shutting out the world.

Until now.

I emerged onto the front portico, knowing my time had come. With Claudine back from Europe, there was little hope of being able to stay hidden for long. I would be stuck with her and her life of social affairs and Boston Brahmins as much as she was stuck with me.

When a smart black carriage drove up and parked in front of the house, I hid in the corner of the porch, peeking around the edge of the massive brick wall. A fashionably dressed elderly woman climbed out and strode up the cobblestone walkway. Right away, I noticed the tautness of her face, much like the way my mother had always looked...so solemn. But then, when Aunt Claudine saw me, she charged straight toward me, exclaiming indistinct words disguised in high squeals.

I came out from my hiding place but halted before descending the steps. Was this gregarious old woman indeed my somber mother's aunt Claudine?

"Amaryllis!" Her light brown eyes took me in, and at once, all my fears of being hated and rejected vanished.

I nodded, and the woman raced up the steps, reaching her arms out to me and taking me in a surprisingly strong embrace. I wasn't used to hugging anyone, especially virtual strangers, so I hardly knew what to do but stand there and awkwardly endure it.

"Amaryllis! Amaryllis! Oh, that's the coat I sent you from Paris, isn't it?"

There was no doubt she was happy I'd decided to stay.

And suddenly, so was I.

"It is." I smiled. "And thank you. You really didn't need to do such a thing."

I'd never had a coat like it—brown velvet with strands of black braided silk loops down the front to fasten the buttons. I still couldn't believe she'd bought it for me without having first met me. It must have cost a fortune.

"Buying you a coat was only the beginning, Amaryllis!" She took hold of my jaw and turned my face toward hers for inspection. "You do have the Abernathy nose, just like your cousin Lawry... and your dear mother, of course."

My smile faded a bit, despite the fact I'd grown into my nose over the years.

"And your father's bluish-green eyes...."

I was about to ask how she knew what my father's eyes looked like when I recalled the many times I'd been told as a young child that Aunt Claudine had been the one to escort Mother on her Grand Tour, where they'd met my father and his family.

"How has Higgins been treating you? I don't call him the Keeper of Hilldreth for nothing, you know." Claudine pulled me through the front door into the house, all the way to the back parlor, disregarding that we were still in our coats.

She took a seat on the settee and motioned for me to sit beside her.

"Have you heard anything from your father's lawyer?"
"No."

Claudine responded with a wide-eyed stare. Obviously she, too, thought this odd. And it was. My father had been dead for three weeks, burned in his home during a fire that had ultimately taken out his entire horse farm in Maine only a week after I'd arrived at Hilldreth.

A loud thud announced the arrival of Aunt Claudine's trunks being unloaded into the house through the back door.

"Well, regardless of what happens with your father's land, I have news of another matter that I'm certain will lift your spirits. You see, Mr. Harden has been rather strict concerning everything, dear, and I wasn't allowed to mention a single word until now. Are you ready?"

"Of course." I liked the way she spoke with such honesty. Not a common attribute in most women I'd met, no matter their age.

"Amaryllis, I wanted to tell you years ago, but your grandmother's will strictly stipulated I wait until you were finished with your schooling. And what young lady, besides you, would rather attend college twice than be presented to society?"

"I didn't dare pass up the scholarship to attend The Boston Conservatory, Aunt Clau—"

"Simply call me Claudine, Amaryllis. We're both adults, are we not? And, dear, none of that matters now." She kneaded her hands together in her lap. "What I mean to say is that you've been cited as the sole inheritor of the Landreth fortune."

Shock tingled from the back of my neck all the way to my toes.

"Was I not disowned along with Mother?" I asked. "I never even knew them. How—"

"Your grandparents were good people, Amaryllis. Your greatgrandfather, Jasper Landreth the Third, was a shipping merchant and an early investor in Back Bay land. He purchased large areas of the undeveloped tidal flats prior to the district's being filled and developed. He built this house during the Civil War—a mansion among town houses." She took my hand in hers. "Your inheritance is a great sum of money and includes both Hilldreth Manor and Truesdale Cottage on Mount Desert Island. You'll be set for life."

I sat back against the plush cushions and stared evenly at her. "You must be jesting."

"No, I'm not." She stared at me blankly and seemed genuinely confused by my reaction.

"Do you know what this means?"

It meant it didn't matter that I'd been expelled from The Boston Conservatory with no references. And it meant absolutely nothing stood between me and my desire to return to Washington. I would have the freedom to found my own academy of music.

For with that much money, anything was possible, wasn't it? "I know it means you'll be provided with a sizable dowry."

That awful word hung in the air between us as I comprehended just what all those two syllables entailed. "A dowry?"

"Yes, a dowry, Amaryllis." She gave me a sideways smile. "Your grandmother made the will very specific, dear. In order to claim the inheritance, you must be married within the year of finishing your schooling. Which means you'll have until February sixteenth of next year to find a suitable husband."

"Husband?" I practically stumbled over the distasteful word. "Is that the only way?"

"It will hardly be difficult, Amaryllis. You're even more beautiful than your mother, and that's saying something. You do have a photograph of her, don't you?"

"No, I don't."

She rummaged through the reticule still in her hand and passed me a close-up photograph of two women. They stood on a rocky beach, barefoot.

"That's her with her friend Grace. Those two were almost like sisters once..."

I really did look just like my mother. We shared the slight bump at the bridge of our nose, thick black hair, and small stature. Was that the reason Father had abandoned me after her funeral? Had it simply been too much for him to look at me?

On the back of the photograph was scribbled, "Elinorah and Grace, Bar Harbor."

"Lawry will be here soon and will be of some help, dear. I'm so happy you've decided to quit The Boston Conservatory. I wrote to him as soon as your plans were confirmed."

"Is he using his law degree alongside Uncle Edward in Bar Harbor?"

"He does work for his father—only here in Boston. But he also travels for his father, in the name of research. He's on his way back from an extensive trip, primarily to Washington State."

I forgot all about the photograph in my hand as the deep longing to return to the West Coast burned in my chest.

"How long has he been gone?"

"Oh, let me see...I suppose it's been nearly two years. He's always insisted that he'd eventually return home. Never mind that it took having you and me in Boston at the same time to make him follow through with it. You see, Lawry never forgot how much you loved the West Coast, Amaryllis. He told me all about your letters full of plans to go back someday to build a music school, if I remember correctly." By the tone in her voice, I could tell she thought such an idea to be silly and perhaps even childish.

Though the short and often funny letters Lawry and I had exchanged throughout the years had begun to dwindle about seven

years earlier, I could not blame him. He was four years older than I and surely had better things to do than write letters to me. It seemed odd, though, that he'd never informed me he planned to someday head west. Surely he knew I would have been thrilled for him. Perhaps he thought I would have given up my opportunity at The Boston Conservatory to join him.

If only I had.

"Nathan Everstone has been traveling with him, of course."

Everything about that particular gentleman's father rushed to mind—the vindictive letter, his hatred for me and my mother, and the nightmares I'd had since the day I'd met him almost eleven years earlier.

"And a gentleman named Mr. Crawford, whom I don't think I've had the privilege of meeting. He was recently acquired by the Boston Inland Mission Society and is in search of a wife to take back to Washington with him."

"Is that what Lawry and Mr. Everstone were doing in Washington? Mission work?"

"Heavens, no! Lawry's interested enough in attending church, but I daresay he has little interest in becoming a missionary. And Nathan? Absolutely not. He would be a very sad candidate, indeed. Lawry likely had to persuade him to let Mr. Crawford aboard his private railcar. Can you imagine a poor missionary being escorted across the continent in such style, and in the company of an Everstone?"

"Are the Everstones so entirely wealthy?" I tried to seem as uninterested as possible. For all I knew, Claudine might expect me to be friends with him.

"My dear, Nathan Everstone's father owns a massive chain of resorts and hotels that extends from Maine to Florida, as well as the Greaghan Lumber Company. They're one of the wealthiest families in the region."

"Oh." A shudder ran down my spine.

"Now, Amaryllis, about Nathan—he'll likely still want to spend much of his time with Lawry. He visits us quite often, you know."

"How often is 'quite often'?" I dreaded the answer.

"Almost on a daily basis. It is surprising, is it not? One of New England's most eligible bachelors choosing to spend his evenings at Hilldreth instead of at the endless supply of parties and dinners to which I'm certain he's always invited."

The more I learned, the less happy I became. With every additional word, I realized I'd placed myself in the very heart of the Marriage Market of Boston's most elite society.

Was all this part of God's will for my life? Did He care about my inheriting the Landreth fortune? My thoughts again dwelt upon the horse farm on Whidbey Island where I'd spent the first fourteen years of my life. Wanting to begin again after my mother had died, I'd long supposed that Father had sold it, permanently robbing me of the only home I'd ever known.

It was my stubborn belief that God would make a way for me to return to Washington, even if I wouldn't be able to have my Brigham Shires of Bruckerdale on Whidbey Island again. God knew my heart better than anyone and knew that my being trapped in the gilded cage of Claudine Abernathy's world was not what I wanted...or needed. Especially in light of how closely she seemed to be associated with Bram Everstone and his family.

"It is best you know from the outset, Amaryllis, that Nathan's as charming as God ever made a man, even when he's being disagreeable. I'm certain he could have any young woman he wanted, and at times, he acts as if he has no qualms about flirting with all of them. You'll have to take care with that one. He—"

"Oh, have no fear, Aunt Clau—Claudine. Inconsistent men hold no appeal for me whatsoever." The mere fact that he was Bram Everstone's son was more than enough reason for me to steer clear of him. "Such a smart girl, but don't think for one minute I say these things because you couldn't snag such a man's attention. You could, without a doubt. Just look at you. However, Nathan claims, much as Lawry does, that he's hard-pressed to find any young female truly worth being serious about. Both of them insist that most of the young ladies they know are merely done-up packages of ribbon and silk, full of nothing more than fluff and manners."

"I cannot blame them," I muttered under my breath. Most of them were indeed.

"And the man barely gives a girl the chance to prove herself otherwise. Though, I must say, it did seem that before he left in such a hurry all those years ago, he was on the verge of forming an engagement with Nicholette Fairbanks. But everyone knows it was his father who desired the match."

I unbuttoned my coat. I was getting rather warm.

"You see, Amaryllis, Nathan stands to inherit his share of the Everstone's twenty-million-dollar inheritance upon his thirtieth birthday next February. And rumor has it that Bram threatened to withhold it from him until he marries her."

"Twenty million dollars!" I tried my best not to get involved in the love triangles Claudine was obsessed with, but it proved to be far too engrossing.

"And if you ask me, Nathan can hardly tolerate the girl."

"Would his father do such a thing? Would he leave his own flesh and blood penniless, for the sake of—"

"There's no telling what Bram will do, Amaryllis, though I doubt there's any danger of Nathan ever being left penniless, no matter what the outcome of this forced engagement is." She shook her head. "Fortunately for Nathan, his father is still in Europe and will not be back for some time."

That tidbit of information was the best news I'd heard from her yet.

I sat up with a start, still shaken, my knees bent and my face in my hands. The nightmare always played out the same, no matter how long it had been since the last time I'd dreamt it.

All of the excitement and, yes, even the joy from meeting Claudine was gone.

My eyes adjusted to the dim moonlight, and I took in my surroundings—my mother's bedchamber at the end of the hall on the second floor at Hilldreth. As soon as my feet hit the thick, carpeted floor, I was again reminded of the drastic turn my life had taken in the last month. Anyone else in my predicament probably would have considered such a turn of events to be a blessing.

I stood and walked around the massive cherry four-poster bed and across the room to the oversized bay window overlooking the corner of Commonwealth Avenue and Berkeley Street. I sat upon the burgundy velvet sofa and ran my fingers over the intricate detail of the lace covering the windows as the moon shone through.

Turning my attention back toward the chamber, I again marveled at the size of the room and wondered what my grandmother could have been thinking to will everything to me after treating me as if I didn't exist the one and only time I'd ever seen her—at my mother's funeral. Had I been her last, delusional hope of restoring what was left of her family to Boston's most prestigious aristocratic circles? Or had she truly regretted disowning my mother all those years ago?

Whatever the reason, I already knew it wouldn't work. I was certain my inheritance would only attract the most desperate of opportunists. Who was I compared to the elegant young debutantes who'd circulated through the balls and banquets of Boston already this year?

But no matter how much I could use the inheritance, I could not use a husband. Unless perhaps the missionary was interested....

I put a stop to that illogical thought immediately.

What did I know of men? They were controlling. Insensitive. Undependable. Inconsistent. And liars. Just like my father—and just like Bram Everstone.

But surely a missionary wouldn't have such irredeemable qualities—would he?

With those two little words, I realized I'd actually allowed myself to consider something I had never imagined I would.

Marriage.

But even that unpleasant subject wasn't enough to fully take my mind off the nightmare. I stared for a long time at the moon's reflection upon the now-familiar flourishing crimson swirls of the silken wallpaper, trying to forget the pain the nightmare had trudged up.

For eleven long, lonely years, I'd taught myself to fight against the unwanted feelings it produced, but my efforts always proved pointless. In the midst of the dreams, I always remembered my mother.

And the reason she was gone.