

A
Daring
VENTURE

ELIZABETH
CAMDEN



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Prologue

Connecticut, 1890

You and your brother are to go to the music room, close the door, and don't come out until I say you can."

It was strange for the maid to be ordering Rosalind around, but nothing had been normal since Mama and Papa got sick.

"But I'm thirsty, Flora."

The maid grabbed Rosalind's arm and tugged her up from the floor where she'd been working on a puzzle with her brother, Gus.

"We're all thirsty," Flora said brusquely. "Come along and behave yourselves. After Dr. Morris leaves, I'll try to find something for you to drink."

All it took was the words *Dr. Morris* to make Rosalind's ten-year-old heart beat a little faster. Dr. Morris was so handsome that she secretly liked looking at him whenever he paid a visit.

She obediently went to the music room with Gus and closed the door just like Flora had ordered, but when Dr. Morris arrived, she cracked it open to peek at him. The doctor looked tired as he shuffled toward the sickroom. To her disappointment,

he wasn't carrying his medical bag. That bag always fascinated Rosalind. It was plain leather, but when Dr. Morris opened the flap, it was a portal into a huge and magnificent world brimming with possibility. The mysterious tonics and instruments fired her imagination with dreams of someday understanding the world of science.

Maybe Dr. Morris had run out of medicine, because it seemed the whole town was sick. At first it was just two families, and Dr. Morris made them go live in the pest house because cholera was a "stinking awful mess," and he didn't want it to spread. Then other people started getting sick, and now the pest house was full and anyone who got sick had to stay at home and promise not to go out.

Rosalind heard him leaving the sickroom after only a few minutes, and she went to sneak another peek through the cracked door. What she saw was so strange that it didn't make any sense. Dr. Morris and Flora were lugging Papa down the hallway, his body stretched between them. He wore only a nightshirt, and Flora carried him by his bare ankles.

"What's wrong with Papa?" Rosalind asked, opening the door a little wider.

Flora startled and dropped Papa's feet, but Dr. Morris held on. Papa's head lolled to the side, revealing a face all purple and shriveled in like a raisin. His eyes were open and his lips were black. Rosalind gasped and looked at Dr. Morris.

"Your Papa didn't make it," he said, pity radiating from his kind eyes. "We need to take him to the carriage house so your Mama can get better. It's going to be a while before a proper burial can be arranged. I'm sorry, Rosalind."

Did this mean Papa was dead? It didn't seem possible, but she'd never seen anything as awful as that darkened face.

Gus bumped into her from behind, trying to nudge through so he could see. She shoved him backward and slammed the door.

“But I want to see,” Gus said, his eight-year-old voice full of curiosity.

“No.” Rosalind wished she hadn’t seen. Papa’s terrible face was burned in her brain, and she had to protect Gus from seeing it. She’d do anything if she could wash it out of her mind.

For the next two days, they stayed mainly in the music room. After Rosalind broke the rules and accidentally saw Papa, she had been following Flora’s orders to the letter, which meant staying away from the sickroom and keeping Gus out of trouble. But they were so thirsty.

There was nothing left in the house to drink. Dr. Morris said that cholera spread through the water, and Flora had them put bowls outside to collect rain, but they’d already drunk what little they had. They’d opened the vegetables that had been put up for the winter and drunk the water from the jars of peas and asparagus. They even drank the vinegar from the pickled onions and cucumbers. Now there was nothing left in the entire house to drink.

The last time Flora had checked on them, it looked like she might be getting sick too, and it had been forever since they’d heard any sounds from the sickroom. If Flora was sick, someone else needed to go take care of her and Mama.

“Rosalind . . . I’m thirsty,” Gus said, curled on the sofa, his voice scratchy.

She was too, but complaining wasn’t going to make things better. And someone had to check on Mama.

Rosalind opened the door of the music room and crept down the hallway toward the sickroom. She’d been warned repeatedly to stay away, but she didn’t know what else to do. She and Gus would die of thirst if they kept waiting for Flora, and no one lived nearby to ask for help.

The paint on the sickroom door was cold against the side of her face as she pressed her ear against it to listen, but she

heard nothing. Maybe they were sleeping? She didn't want to go inside. Everything warned her against it, because even from here, the smell was bad.

She twisted the knob, recoiling at the stench. "Mama?"

Flora and Mama both lay on the bed. Their skin looked just like Papa's had, dark and shriveled. Their lips were black. Rosalind's face crumpled up. She was pretty sure they were dead, but the only way to tell for certain was to touch them. She held her breath, stepped forward, and did what she had to do.

They were dead.

What was she supposed to do now? It seemed everyone in the village was sick, and there had been no sign of Dr. Morris in days. Maybe he was sick too.

She didn't want to see Gus yet, because she would have to tell him that Mama and Flora were both dead, and that she was scared and didn't know what to do. She ran to the parlor, curled up on the floor, and cried.

Her eyes didn't shed any tears. Was that normal? Maybe she was so thirsty there wasn't anything left in her body for tears.

They would have to go to Grandpa Werner's house. He lived two miles away, but maybe people there weren't sick and he would have something to drink.

Gus wasn't in the music room when she returned. He wasn't in the kitchen or dining room either.

"Gus?" Her voice echoed in the house, and there was no answer. A horrible thought struck her, and she ran for the back door. He was in the yard, kneeling in front of the pump and gulping from the jets of water.

She knocked him away from the pump. "You can't drink that!"

Gus started to cry, but he didn't have any tears left either. Every cell in her body longed to fall to her knees and catch the trickle of water still dribbling from the pump, but she didn't want to turn sick and shriveled like the others.

“We have to walk to Grandpa’s house,” she said. “Maybe there will be something to drink there.”

“I’m too tired.” His white-blond hair, so like her own, tumbled into his face, but she could still see the exhaustion in his eyes.

“It doesn’t matter. Get up. We have to go.” If Gus went back inside, he might see Mama and Flora, and that would be awful. They had to leave now.

Rosalind took his hand and started walking down the path toward the lane. The glaring sunlight shone in stark contrast to the fear inside her. It was two miles to Grandpa’s house with nothing but pine trees on one side and cranberry bogs on the other. She always liked visiting Grandpa Werner, even though he could barely speak English and Rosalind’s German wasn’t so good.

After a half hour of walking, Gus wanted to sit down. “I don’t feel good,” he said.

“I don’t either, but we can’t sit down until we get to Grandpa’s house.”

“I think I have to use the privy.”

They were still on the woodsy part of the road, and there wasn’t a house in sight. “Wait until we get to Grandpa’s.”

“I have to use the privy *right now*.”

She sighed. “Then go behind those trees.”

Gus took a few steps but didn’t make it. He sank to his knees, pulled his pants down, and fell as the diarrhea hit. Oh no—oh no, that was the first sign. But she mustn’t panic. This was going to be okay. She wouldn’t let herself think anything else.

“I’m sorry,” Gus said, starting to blubber, because he probably knew what this meant too. “I shouldn’t have drunk that water,” he sobbed. “I’m so sorry, Rosalind.”

There was nothing they could do about it now. Gus had a few more hours before things got really bad. That meant they had to keep moving, and they had to move fast.

“Stand up,” she ordered, wishing she didn’t have to sound so mean, but they didn’t have much time. “Stand up and start walking.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“Stand up and get moving. We’re not giving up.” She hauled him upright, even though it made her head ache to tug that hard. “Don’t you dare sit back down!”

“But, Rosalind, I don’t think I can keep—”

“Then don’t think, just keep walking.”

Because they didn’t have any other choice.



Chapter
ONE

Jersey City, New Jersey
June 1908

Dr. Rosalind Werner adjusted a dial on the microscope, and the tiny organisms beneath the glass slide zoomed into sharp clarity. *Salmonella enterica*, the bacteria that caused typhoid, was surprisingly pretty, its midnight-blue shade clustered into graceful, blooming colonies. Her mission in life was to figure out a way to kill it.

The door to the laboratory opened, but she didn't look up until she had finished counting the number of live cells on the slide. Most were already dead, which was good. It meant their solution was working.

"I have news," Dr. Leal said as the door clicked shut.

She looked up from the slide, alarmed at the despair in his voice. For a man as endlessly optimistic as Dr. John Leal to sound dejected was alarming, especially since there was only one thing they both feared. She stood, gazing at him across the laboratory tables and holding her breath.

"The judge has issued his ruling. We lost."

She didn't move a muscle. The monumental, two-year court case they'd been waging was a fight against backward and antiquated beliefs. Powerful forces and millions of dollars had been invested on both sides. She and Dr. Leal had been hired as consultants by the defense counsel, but they were more than hired experts. They were crusaders fighting for a cause. They knew how to eradicate disease from the public water supply so that everyone could have clean, pure water. They had dedicated their lives to the quest.

There was only one thing to do.

"I'm not giving up," she said quietly.

The corner of Dr. Leal's heavy mustache twitched as he smiled.

"Me neither," he said, strolling deeper into the lab where they'd been feverishly working to prove they had the ability to purify drinking water quickly and effectively.

Dr. Leal had begun his career as a medical doctor after earning his degree here in America, while her degree in biochemistry came from Germany. They were unlikely players in the lawsuit between Jersey City and a private company that had built a massive new water supply system. A fortune had been invested in twenty-five miles of pipeline to bring water from rural New Jersey into the city, but now the government refused to pay for it. They claimed the water wasn't pure and had sued the private company for breach of contract. The struggling company had hired Rosalind and Dr. Leal to present an inexpensive and effective technique to purify drinking water.

"What are we up against?" she asked.

Dr. Leal pulled up a lab stool and set a thick stack of papers on the counter. "The judge has ordered the water company to build an additional filtration plant, plus upgrades to the sewer systems throughout the rural and metropolitan region."

His voice was flat. The order would bankrupt the company,

which had already sunk millions of dollars into this project. Of more concern was the fact that the filtration plant wouldn't work. Rosalind knew exactly what they needed to do to ensure a clean drinking supply, but it was a new and frightening idea few people welcomed.

“Can we appeal?”

“Absolutely. The company is already gathering funds, but the judge gave us a single lifeline. He doesn't know enough about our research to dismiss us out of hand. He's given us a ninety-day deferment to make our case.”

She plopped back down into her laboratory stool. “That's what we've been trying to do for the past two years!” They'd run dozens of clinical tests and delivered stacks of research papers proving that chlorine killed waterborne diseases.

But nobody wanted chlorine in their drinking water. It was an alien concept people instinctively rejected. Plenty of scientists believed it would work, but no city anywhere in the world had authorized it. She wanted Jersey City to be the first.

“I propose using a new tactic,” Dr. Leal said. “Instead of focusing our efforts on the judge, perhaps we can start working on the opposition's consultants. If we can get a few of them on our side, it might deal a body blow to the city's case.”

“Which consultants did you have in mind?”

“Nicholas Drake.”

She repressed the urge to roll her eyes. Nick Drake was the epitome of the type of man they'd been battling for years. He was opinionated, brash, and unwilling to compromise. They had never met, but she'd been in the courtroom when he testified on the city's behalf. He'd been wearing a flawlessly tailored coat, vest, and starched collar, but he seemed too restless to be comfortable in a formal suit. Like a wild stallion dressed up in Sunday clothes.

“Why him? He doesn't seem like a natural ally.”

“That’s why I want him. Plus, rumor has it he’s about to be appointed as the next commissioner of the State Water Board of New York.”

She was aghast. “They would never do that! He’s got no qualifications.”

“He’s got money, power, and influence. And he’s been acting commissioner ever since the last one was fired six months ago. From what I hear, the governor wants to make it official.” Dr. Leal began pacing, weaving in and out of the series of black slate laboratory tables. “All of our work will come to nothing if we can’t convince the judge, but I don’t think the proof is going to come from within this laboratory. We need to get out in the field and wage this battle person by person.”

And apparently he thought Nicholas Drake was a logical place to start.



The mansion ballroom was crowded. It seemed every lawyer, engineer, and financier in Jersey City was here celebrating the court ruling that had been announced that morning. Knowing the judge’s decision was imminent, Nick Drake had left his home in Manhattan to join the Jersey City officials and lawyers at the town hall for the announcement. After all, he was the plaintiff’s lead witness and had fought hard on behalf of the city. He had staked his professional reputation on this case and hadn’t accepted a single dollar in payment. He was no hired gun. Nick had chosen this fight for the principle, not for money.

No one rejoiced louder than he when the ruling was handed down. While the stuffy lawyers merely smiled in relief, Nick unleashed a war whoop of victory, pumping the air with both fists and giving bear hugs all around. The cost-cutters on the other side had lost, and the ordinary people of New Jersey were the winners.

While he would have rather returned to Manhattan to scoop his daughter into a hug and sleep in his own bed, it was important to attend the celebratory dinner. Plus, he had a favor to collect on his way out the door.

A waiter approached him with a tray of caviar on tiny crackers.

Nick eyed the tray skeptically. “Do people really enjoy this stuff?” he asked. “Raw fish eggs?”

“Some people do,” the waiter said.

That meant Nick would choke it down, because that was what people at fancy black-tie gatherings were expected to do. In the past five years, he had learned to pick his battles carefully. He might be the most unwelcome person at this evening’s celebration, but he had earned his place here. He wore a custom-made tuxedo, had sat for a shoeshine in the lobby of his hotel, and even submitted to a manicure. A manicure! He’d been appalled when he first learned that rich men actually paid to have someone trim and buff their nails, but he started doing it as soon as he left his old job. It had taken months for the final traces of plumber’s grease to disappear from beneath his nails, then another year for the last of the calluses to be buffed away. Now he looked as polished and groomed as any of the other blue bloods here this evening.

That didn’t mean he would ever be welcome in their ranks. But he didn’t care about being welcomed, he cared about getting appointed to the State Water Board of New York. Only then could he ensure that poor people and immigrants got the same quality of water that rich people took for granted.

He made his way to Mayor Jenner’s side.

“Mr. Drake!” the mayor said in a hearty tone, pumping Nick’s hand with vigor. Obviously the hefty contribution Nick gave to the mayor’s reelection campaign had not gone to waste. “Welcome to my home. You remember my wife, Adelaide?”

Mrs. Jenner wore a pearl choker that probably cost more than

a typical plumber earned in a year, but she had a kind smile as she greeted Nick. “Congratulations on today’s victory! My husband says your testimony was key in persuading the judge to see reason.”

That was because Nick spoke in plain English, not like the witnesses on the other side, whose scientific blather and chemistry tomes could bore the paint off the walls.

“How’s that charming daughter of yours?” the mayor asked in a booming voice. “She must be, what, eight? Ten?”

“She turned three years old last month.”

“Oh yes, I remember now. Charming girl. Sally?”

“Sadie.”

“That’s right! Sadie! And her mother is doing well, I hope?”

This probably wasn’t the time to explain that Nick’s wife had died two days after giving birth to Sadie. Most politicians were masters at remembering the names and family details of their supporters, but it appeared Mayor Jenner had imbibed too much celebratory champagne, and Nick saw no point in embarrassing him. He swiftly changed the topic.

“I was hoping to discuss the meeting you’ve got scheduled next week, dealing with the new subway to Manhattan. I understand the governor of New York will be in attendance.”

“Will he? I suppose so.”

“I’d like to be invited to the meeting.”

Mayor Jenner set down his glass. “I wasn’t aware you had any interest in subways.”

“I don’t, but I’d like to meet the governor. I can make myself available if you can arrange the introductions.”

It was the governor who would appoint the new commissioner to the State Water Board. As the acting commissioner, Nick was the logical choice, but he didn’t have the personal connections of the other men vying for the job. If he could meet the governor, he’d be able to prove himself. He didn’t have

a fancy college degree like his competitors, but he had more real-world experience and a knack for relating to people. All he needed was to get his foot in the door with the governor, and he'd have a clear shot at the appointment.

Mayor Jenner laughed uncomfortably. "I can't imagine you'd be interested in a meeting like that. Just a lot of arguing about subway tunnels and tax money."

"I'm interested. Can you make it happen?"

A pause stretched between them, and Mrs. Jenner rushed to her husband's rescue. "Oh look, the harbor master of Port Elizabeth just arrived. Perhaps I should introduce you?"

"No offense, ma'am, but perhaps your husband can introduce me to the governor of New York. I think I've earned that."

The mayor shifted uneasily. "That's not how business is done, Mr. Drake. I'm sure everyone in this room understands why you've been invited to this event, but it wouldn't make sense for you to be at a high-stakes political meeting."

"How about because I just saved your city a million-dollar payoff to a water company that didn't deliver on their contract? I think you can spare me five minutes with the governor."

The city's lead attorney broke the tension. Herman Dressler was a thick-set man who had suggested the unconventional tactic of recruiting Nick as a plaintiff expert who could explain complicated water filtration systems to the judge.

Herman extended his hand. "You're a good man to have in a fight, Mr. Drake!"

"My pleasure, sir." And it had been. It was a privilege to be part of a team committed to ensuring the growing cities of the eastern seaboard continued to have plentiful supplies of clean water.

"With luck, we will no longer need your services," Herman said. "But should the deferment prove difficult, will you be available through October?"

“What deferment?” he asked.

Nick’s temper heated as he learned that instead of a complete victory for the city, the judge had hedged his bets by allowing the defendants an additional ninety days to let their scientists make the case for a chemical alternative. Two of the defense experts had managed to persuade the judge to give their bizarre and unproven technique another bite at the apple. Their plan amounted to a newfangled method using chlorine to kill germs in the water. They claimed it wouldn’t harm humans, but it had never been tested or proven anywhere in the world. Nick wouldn’t stand aside and let them test it on his family or the people of Jersey City either.

“I’ll be available,” he promised. The opposition was grasping at straws, turning to a pair of meddlesome scientists to avoid building another pricey filtration plant. He looked pointedly at the mayor. “And I’ll be available for next week’s meeting with the governor. I trust you will make it happen.”

It was a statement, not a question, and Nick succeeded in collecting his favor before leaving the gala celebration.