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Prologue

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON · JUNE 1888


Step away from this patient, Charissa Nadal demanded, striding around the examination table. Her long Bellevue nurse's skirt impeded her progress, and she pulled the heavy cloth aside. She'd had enough, seen enough. Nothing was going to stop her from kicking this, this quack out of her office.

Wh-what? the man said, looking over at her with a mixture of surprise, fear, and bemusement on his face. He set down a brown bottle he had pulled from his bag.

You heard me. You are not going to touch this woman. Get out. You may not buy the business. She pulled the stethoscopic tube—her own Ari's old instrument—out of his hand and looked up at him, daring the man to defy her orders.

His expression changed from shock to rage. You, why y-you . . . who are you to think

I am Charissa Nadal. I own this building and this busi -



ness, and I am in charge here. You are nothing but a trespasser. She stood up to her full height, which as a petite woman, didn't amount to much, but she would use every inch she had.

Dr. Gallatin if one could call him a doctor stared at her and then at his patient, a young Caribbean woman who was plainly suffering from the ague. She needed rest and plenty of water and broth, perhaps a dose of quinine, not the calomel that Dr. Gallatin was giving her.

Now, Nurse Nadal, perhaps there's been some misunderstanding. A slow, deep red blush climbed his neck as he attempted to suppress his obvious fury.

No, Dr. Gallatin, there has been no mistake. I simply will not stand by and see you misdiagnose or mistreat another patient. You can't give this poor woman calomel. Have you not seen what that can do to a patient over time? It leaves one's gums and teeth a bloody mess! And it does nothing to cure the disease for which you are prescribing it. Have you not read the latest findings on these things?

Dr. Gallatin's mouth clamped shut, and with cold eyes he studied her for a moment. The red tide along his neck reached his cheeks. I will not forget this, he finally said, shaking a finger in her face.

Fine, Charissa said. See that you don't. She followed him out the door and watched him stride into the dusty, busy street. He would have no difficulty finding another position in the burgeoning city of Seattle—that was the real travesty.

She sighed, giving in to the trembling that always followed an argument. When she and Ari had quarreled she could hardly remain on her feet afterward. . . .



The young woman's cough brought Charissa back to the present. Ari was gone, dead these long two years. And she had driven out yet another doctor the fifth who might have taken his place in his practice. She returned to the patient's side and eased the black woman's back onto the table. "Here, there, dearest, you rest. I'll take care of you. Don't you worry. You'll be fine, just fine."

Salma, Charissa's loyal friend and maid from her years as a child in Boston, appeared in the doorway. "Where's the doctor?" she asked suspiciously.


"I sent him on his way to see about other positions in the city," she responded. "He was not right for us. His type of care is worse than no care at all! Charissa wrung out a cloth and laid it on the sweating patient's brow. The poor girl was suffering from a malarial fever, probably picked up just as she left her native island for the Panamanian crossing and dreams of America. With the prejudices that permeated the town, how could she find a competent person to care for people like this woman? What would happen if Charissa closed her doors and said good-bye to the whole mess? Not that she hadn't considered it now and then."

"We need a doctor, miss," Salma said, her voice rising in concern.

"We are faring just fine on our own," Salma.

"We need a doctor. The town council, they don't like you operating without a doctor. You can't keep on seeing patients all on your own."

"I can and I will, until we find the right doctor to see to our patients." Charissa gripped the tall woman's arm and pulled her out of the examination room and into the front



parlor, where they could discuss things in private. I will not stand by and see Ari's patients mistreated. And it's only a small group of old biddies and some insecure doctors on the city council who make a fuss about me seeing anyone. She let out a dry laugh. Whoever heard of anything so ridiculous! I am a woman. Just a nurse. Seeing the people they refuse to see. And yet, somehow, they're still threatened by me. Just boys in men's clothing, that's what they are.

Them boys can make trouble for you, miss.

Oh, they'll fluster about, but they'll let me be. Soon, the right doctor will come to us, Salma. Charissa reached out to take her friend's hand. The black woman's fingers were long and slender, an artist's fingers, as compared to her own olive-toned, short, stout digits. I promise. If Seattle keeps growing at this rate, we'll have five new doctors on our doorstep tomorrow, all wanting the job. Since the fire leveled the city, it was rebuilding at twice the previous rate, like a forest floor reseeding itself.



BOISE, IDAHO

Mrs. Alton put a wiry arm around Samuel Johnson's shoulders. He struggled to keep himself from shaking off her attempt to comfort him. It was her husband—her husband!—he had let die. He stared out the window into the coal black darkness.

There was nothing more you could do, Dr. Johnson.

There must've been something. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

I watched you m yourself, Samuel, she said. He'd known



her since he was just a boy. Her husband, Joseph, had been like a second father to him. Everybody in this town knows there s not a one who takes care of his patients like Samuel Johnson.

Still, I keep thinking there might ha ve been something . . .

Let it rest, son, the woman said, tears now making her eyes bright in the lamp s light. My Joe is at peace now . You be the same. You did all that God could expect of you. It s certainly enough for me.


Samuel let out a shallow breath and turned to take the small, elderly woman in his arms. It had been she who had come alongside him after Mamie died. She had been the one who had consoled his spirit with gentle talk and fed his body with warm food. But still, every time he lost a patient, he was taken back to the night he lost his beloved wife, the night he lost the son who never got to take his first breath. Two years ago now.

Forcing a smile to her face, Joan Alton moved away. I ll see to my man now. It was his time, Samuel. You just remember that. He struggled for so long, was in such pain. . . . If there had been something you could have done, you would have found it. You did your best. That s all anybody expects of you.

Samuel shook his head. I m sorry. You re the one who needs comforting, and here you are comforting me.

I know what Joe meant to you. She brought an old, wrinkled hand up to her mouth and let the first tears fall. Meant to us all, she added, her voice cracking.

Together, they turned to the old man who had lived a



full life. Joseph Alton had spread good cheer and a kind word wherever he went. Samuel Johnson wanted to be like him. If he could just rediscover that joy from within, that joy he had lost with Mamie. But he had no idea how to go about reclaiming it. As they stood looking at his old friend, now lifeless, growing cold, Samuel realized that he needed a change. Joe's death sounded an alarm bell on the old fire wagon. A call to wake up and move. Being here in the town where he had lost his family just brought it back to him again and again. The pain was easing away, and there were weeks when he didn't think of them. But then there were days like today that seemed to bring it all back, as fresh as a storm on the wind.

Yes. He needed a change, a new challenge. New surroundings, new people people who didn't watch him with wise, wary eyes, waiting for him to make a mistake again. In some place new, he could live his life as Joe Alton had lived his, how Samuel's wife, Mamie, had lived hers. He would practice long, slow, generous smiles and care for his patients. Do the best he could, as Joan put it. The best he could. And find some peace in it.

His eyes went to the lithograph above the Altons' bed, the bed they had shared for over forty years of marriage. It was a picture of a wharf in Seattle, sent last Christmas to the Altons from their son, a ship's mate. The grand, tall schooners were lined up in a row, their sails furled, their decks empty of men or cargo, waiting . . . waiting. For what?

Seattle. It would be nice to see the Pacific Ocean. And who knew? Maybe he would sail on one of those ships himself.

Chapter One


Salma reached over and dabbed at Charissa's brow with a cloth as Charissa worked on the gash in the Chinese man's chest.

I need more light! Charissa barked, frowning as she worked to stitch up the wound.

They're no more lamps, miss. The wall lamps are up as bright as they'll go.

Dark had descended just as the railroad boss brought the Chinaman into the office and dropped him off like a load of horse dung from the stables. Fight at the tracks, he had said, shrugging his shoulders as if bringing someone to the doctor with a knife wound were an everyday occurrence. Then he'd walked out without saying another word.

Tensions were high between white settlers and the Chinese these days. There was talk daily of driving all Chinese out of town. They steal all the jobs from us hardworkin' white folks, she'd heard a particularly surly



man at the mercantile say. Charissa knew there was plenty of work in this new, untamed land. But such reasoning didn't seem to matter one whit to such idiots. Who was next? Charissa wondered. Would they target Greeks, like herself? Demand she leave her home and her husband's business behind because of some narrow-minded paranoia?

The Chinaman moaned and moved, and Charissa prayed he would not awaken. She needed to stay on with her stitching, hadn't time to give him another dose of ether. Salma, she muttered, I'm going to need your help. Her eyes widened when she saw a bit of the man's intestine; it had been sliced open. Ari had always told her it was deadly when that happened. It was too hard to stitch the intestine and keep it clean. Never mind that it made the wound itself toxic. Most likely it had already released poison into the abdominal cavity. Septicemia was probable.

Give him a dose of that ether, she directed the maid. No more than five breaths. Be sure you count.

Yes m.

She closed her eyes for a moment. If only there was a doctor with her. This was beyond Charissa's capability, her training, even with her years working at Ari's side. Perhaps she should have insisted the railroad crew boss take the man to the hospital, but even as it crossed her mind, she shook her head. They would have never accepted the man with his slanted eyes and yellow-toned skin. His long, black hair, neatly braided, was enough to make him a target of their prejudice.

Miz Nadal, you better come and see this, Salma said. She had moved over to the window, where the sounds of



men's voices rose. There was fear in her voice, anxiety in her wide eyes. For the first time, Charissa saw torchlight bouncing around the window behind her maid, accompanied by the sounds of men's voices. They were coming closer. A knock sounded on the front door. Salma went to answer it, but returned with a grim face.

It's the city council. They want to talk to you now, Miz Nadal.

Oh, for heaven's sakes. Charissa finished stitching the intestine as best she could and then laid a blood-soaked cloth over the rest of the wound. Open the door, Salma. Then see that the patient rests quietly.

They don't look too agreeable, miss. I'll go fetch the gun, Salma whispered. They're some rabble-rousers with the councilmen.

You do that. Taking a deep breath as the pine door creaked open, Charissa walked out to the porch. There were eight or nine of them, their faces lined with concern. When she left the porch and approached the men, they parted for her like the Red Sea before Moses, mouths agape as they spied the bright red blood on her hands and her nurse's uniform.

Who you got in there? one man asked, looking toward a companion.

You're not licensed to practice surgery, Mrs. Nadal! Fred Hastings said. We've been hearing a lot of complaints again.

Gentlemen! she barked. Surprisingly, they quieted for a moment to hear what she had to say. I have a patient who will likely die if I don't see to him. Can we not have this discussion tomorrow morning?



Take him to his own, said one in a soothing voice.

What do you care that I am seeing to his wounds? she asked calmly.

We can't just go on letting anybody practice medicine about town. We have rules, standards. If we can't appease the people of Seattle, I'm afraid we'll have upheaval, riots even.

I see how it is. You kowtow to your racist constituents and let a whole segment of our town suffer and die because of their ignorance, Charissa interrupted.

The other doctors in town tell us

Tell you what? That I am practicing medicine? Well, I'm the best some of our townspeople have since these doctors refuse to treat them. I had formal nurse's training at Bellevue. I served as my husband's nurse for years, and I have seen a great deal. We've spoken of this before I am interviewing doctor candidates.

Whom you keep firing, said a red-faced man from the back. That was when Charissa noticed the men beyond the lamplight's glow. She took a half step backward, suddenly realizing that the men were pushing subtly forward. She cast a furtive look about. There were faces in the windows of her neighbors' shops and homes, but few dared to come out. Nobody wanted trouble. There were a couple men riding by on horseback, and one edging closer . . .

You either show us your new doctor or close up shop, the first man said, taking a step closer to her and whispering so the others wouldn't hear. Or there will be more trouble in town than we'll be able to handle.

She looked up and for the first time felt fear. John Napier, a no-account who was continually in trouble with the




sheriff, looked at her from the back of the group. His slitted eyes moved over her from head to toe, sending shivers of fear down her spine. This isn't a place for a lady, Mrs. Nadal, he shouted. We'll take your patient to his own, and you can see to womanly things. You seem to have a hard time grasping the fact you're not a doctor. With your man gone, we're here to make the decision for you.

That would be a bit premature, said a man of medium height. He edged through the passel of men about Charissa and came to her side. Mrs. Nadal, I am Doctor Samuel Johnson. I believe you received my cable about an interview?

Charissa looked up at the man who had warm, kind eyes behind his wire-rimmed spectacles. Gently he took off his bowler hat and gave her a curt bow. She didn't know the man from Adam, had received no telegram. Doctor Johnson! she said with relief. I wondered when you might arrive. She turned halfway to show him in and cast a glance back at the mob of men. You all go on home, she said, taking the tone of a chastising mother. We have a life to save. See to your own business and leave me to mine.

See that you keep the good doctor around this time, Councilman Hastings said. Or we won't have a choice but to shut you down.

I shall keep him on if he is suitable for the job, she said, reclaiming her pride. And with that, she turned on her heel and followed the waiting doctor if he was who he said he was over the threshold and into the building. She shut the door and leaned against it for a moment, eyes closed, and fought against the trembling that tried to claim her. When



she gazed up, she saw Samuel Johnson staring down the length of a rifle that Salma held on him.

I am no threat, he said, his hands raised in submission. Charissa shook her head at Salma and the gun slowly lowered. Dr. Johnson drew a deep breath and took long, purposeful strides into the examination room and removed the cloth over the patient's wound. Nice stitches, he said. He looked over at Charissa with admiration in his eyes, then down at her dress in a gentle perusal, not the leering glance of the man outside, but with a shy, sweet expression. Bellevue nurse, eh? You look like you could use a few minutes off your feet. May I take over for you here for a bit? I am not just your knight in shining armor; I truly am a doctor.

Charissa pursed her lips. It was true; she was dying to get off her knocking knees for a minute or two. If you are a doctor of at least three years with a legitimate medical degree from a legitimate medical institution, you may scrub your hands in the kitchen and see to that wound. I was forced to stitch a bit of his intestine. She looked to the patient uncertainly. If you could review my work and do what you can about the rest, I would be most appreciative.

Done, he said, turning away at once and heading for the kitchen.

Charissa immediately sank onto the red brocade settee in the front parlor, which was directly opposite from the examination room and had served as Ari's office. Charissa tilted her head toward the kitchen and said in a low voice, Can you keep an eye on our mystery doctor? Salma nodded and followed the man into the kitchen.

Charissa was suddenly tired, so tired. And angry. What



did those men care if she looked after the medical needs of the Indians and Chinese and Negroes and all the rest? It all boiled down to one thing: They didn't want anyone else here at all, at least no one who was different from them. Never mind that Seattle wouldn't have their builders for roads or railroad tracks or workers for their mines or drivers for their lumber wagons without those who were willing to take on their dirty work.

It probably irked them that she, a woman, was making a living on her own without the help of a man. A woman more competent than some physicians. And a woman who had the audacity to fire those same men. A slow smile grew across her face.


Salma returned with a damp rag for Charissa's hands and a cup of tea for Charissa and another one for herself. Together, they sipped the tepid liquid and watched the doctor emerge from the kitchen with a white apron on. For the first time, Charissa spied the small black bag he carried. He set it on the long table behind him in the examining room and quickly, efficiently laid out his meager supply of instruments.

Use what you need of ours, she invited with a soft call as she continued to observe him from her seat in the parlor.

He looked up at her as if in surprise that he wasn't alone, so intent was his focus, and nodded once, then returned to his work. Selecting a bottle from his bag, he turned and began inspecting the patient's wound. Has he had ether? he asked quietly, still staring at her stitching when the man moaned and moved.

A bit. But it's likely wearing off.

Unable to curb her curiosity any further, she joined him



in the examination room. He began to work, irrigating the wound to better see Charissa's work, looking at the remaining damage, and washing away anything that might cause septicemia. You've done well here. . . . What shall I call you? Nurse? Mrs. Nadal? I take it from the idiot outside that your husband has passed on.

He has. Two years ago . . . Her voice faltered, and Samuel glanced up at her with wise, knowing eyes, a compassion in their depths. Was that a hint of shared sorrow? You may call me Nurse Nadal or Mrs. Nadal for the moment; it matters not to me. I've been searching for the right doctor to take my husband, Ari's, place ever since he died, she said, raising her chin.

Probably not a man who could do that. Take his place, that is, he said softly, kindly. He cleared his throat. *Make* his own place now that's another matter.

True enough. Ari was the best of doctors. He was always reading and reading, eager to learn, to expand his knowledge so he could better treat his patients.

I do my own share of reading, Samuel said, his concentration back on his stitching again.

That is good to hear. A surprising number of men who call themselves doctors do not.

True. There are a good number still trained by the apprentice method. Unfortunately, he said, pausing to make a quick knot, that leads to a lot of old, unf it practices still being used.

Like administering calomel, Charissa m uttered.
What?



She shook her head. Forget it. Where did you take your medical training?

At the University of Pennsylvania. And where did Dr. Nadal receive his education?

Harvard.

Ahh. No wonder your standards are high. And you, yourself a Bellevue nurse. His eyes again traveled to her uniform.

Indeed. She squirmed under his steady gaze. Did he always look at people that way? As though he could see right through them?

He worked on in silence, closing the wound and bending to listen to the patient's respiration. Know his name?


No. He was dropped off by a crew boss who seemed relieved not to have him bloody up his wagon anymore.

That kind, eh? Samuel said.

Better than those who would let a man die by the tracks without even trying to save him. The lesser of two evils, I suppose. At least he left him in my care. Which brings me to the job itself. Are you indeed interested in a position in Seattle, Doctor?

Samuel let out a humorless laugh. Well, I hoped to purchase a business outright. Begging your pardon, ma'am, but I don't care to work for anyone but myself. I'm my own man, and I have enough to handle pleasing myself with my work, let alone a widow who wants someone to fill her husband's obviously large boots.

Charissa bristled at his words. She didn't want someone to fill Ari's boots . . . did she? I . . . I understand, she said, struggling to maintain her dignity. She couldn't afford to get



angry with another doctor. Perhaps you can keep this business in mind as you interview around town. The majority of our patients are people who generally shy away from seeing white doctors, mostly people of Indian and Negro and Chinese descent. Most of them have work in Seattle. They don't pay well, but they do pay; some have to pay in onions or beef.

I would do my best not to . . . compare you your work, I mean to my husband. I might consider selling the business, but I would need to be certain that Ari's patients are well cared for. . . . I had hoped, however, Charissa continued, unsure of his reaction, to remain on in my role as a nurse.



Samuel studied the beautiful, petite woman before him. She was so brave, and yet there was a weary quality in her expression, a sadness that she was trying so hard to hide. He'd seen that look before. In his own mirror. How long had she been practicing medicine on her own? taking care of people nobody else cared to?

He looked back to the patient. He was still unconscious, and Samuel pretended to listen to his lungs. Anything to keep from staring at the woman across the table so proud, so needy. What was this connection between them? He hadn't felt so instantly drawn to another woman since the day he'd met Mamie. Did Mrs. Nadal feel the same attraction? He shook his head. It was simply their shared experience in losing a loved one at about the same time that drew him



to her. That certainly didn't mean anything romantic . . . did it?

A woman like Charissa would never look twice at a man like him. Ari Nadal had no doubt been her equal not only in medical aptitude but also in looks and fiery demeanor. Samuel was nothing of the kind. Still, he glanced up at her again and found himself fighting off the crazy desire to take her like a child into his arms and tell her that he would stay, that things would be all right. That he would make it all right.

His thoughts startled him. He'd never looked at another woman since Mamie, and here he was not half an hour after meeting this woman wanting to hold her in his arms. It was ludicrous! He was allowing his lonely heart to wander. He had to stay with what was best for himself and not let such silly ideas creep in. He had to strengthen his resolve.

I'm sure this is a fine business, he answered her at last. And that you're the finest of nurses. But since I just got to town, Mrs. Nadal, I think I will see what else is available and spend some time in prayer before I make any rash decisions. He dared to meet her gaze.

I would expect nothing less, Dr. Johnson, she said. Was that a bit of triumph in her luminous eyes? But I sense that you're the right doctor for this part of the city. And you'll soon see it too.

Samuel smiled. Do you always get your way, Nurse?

She tilted her head up to him, her long lashes curled around dark, beckoning eyes. Nearly always, Doctor.

And that was what he was afraid of. Sweet heaven, she was beautiful. How could he resist this headstrong, gorgeous woman working at his right hand?