

Chapter One

*February 1886
Somerville, Massachusetts*

The note in Harriet Peters's hand trembled as she read it, the words scrawled across the page in obvious haste making sense in her brain but not in her heart.

Come quickly. I'm ill and need you.

Lizzie

What would make Lizzie Robinson send such a letter? Of course, Charley would be the one to deliver it. Good, sweet Charley. His sister Lizzie had been ill before, but she had never sent word through him for Harriet to come.

No, oh no.

A shiver coursed through Harriet, and an odd fluttering sensation settled in the pit of her stomach. Her head told her not to panic, but her heart said something was very wrong. This couldn't be happening. Not to Harriet's best friend. The person she held dearest in this life. Her only family after she fled from her home. To lose Lizzie would be akin to losing half of her heart.

Harriet bit her upper lip. *Heal her, Lord. Please, don't let it be what the others had.*

She peered at Charley as he stood with his hands clasped, his grip so tight his knuckles were white. "Is it like the other illnesses?"

With a single nod, Charley shattered her world.

Because his father, aunt, uncle, and sister had died of the same mysterious illness.

Mrs. McGovern's hat would have to wait. Harriet shoved aside the flowers and threw the needle and scissors in her work basket. Once she turned the sign to CLOSED on her millinery shop, she grabbed her dark green cloak and flung it around her shoulders. With a quick glance at the ribbons, thread, and notions scattered about her small workshop, she left the mess behind.

Lizzie needed her more.

Harriet dashed into the inky night. A bitter north wind tore through her cloak and bit at her ears. She bent her head to fend off the sleet that stung her cheeks. Though she did her best to hurry, the walks and streets were icy, slowing her too much.

Charley clung to her by the elbow, holding her from slipping on the glazed street. The howling gale kept them from all conversation.

What if they were too late? No. Harriet pushed the thought from her mind and concentrated on picking her way to her friend's house. She had to make it in time to speak to Lizzie, to tell her she loved her, to thank her for all she had done for her.

By the time they reached Holland Street, her toes had frozen to the point that she had no feeling remaining in them.

She climbed the steps that led to the front porch of the gray Greek-revival-style house, the ornate portico sheltering her from the icy pellets. Darkness settled like a blanket around Harriet as she stood on the crooked stoop. The blackness was almost a physical presence, weighing down her shoulders. She couldn't draw a deep breath, the air around her thick and heavy.

With shaking hands, she drew her cloak tighter. As she waited for Charley to open the creaky door, sleet pinged off the dirty upstairs windows.

Willie Robinson, his brother, stood just inside at the bottom of the stairs that led to the second-floor apartment the family occupied. As usual, he didn't smile but grasped her by the upper arm and all but dragged her up the steps. "I'm so glad you came. We really need you."

"Is it bad?"

"Awfully terrible."

When they reached the top of the steps, Harriet unbuttoned her cloak, but Charley and Willie were already racing toward Lizzie's room. She threw her garment on the new blue davenport that the family had purchased after moving to this larger place almost four months ago. Black crepe was draped over the mirror above the fireplace, marking this as a home still in mourning. Mourning for the loss of Lizzie's uncle six months ago.

She hustled to follow the young men to the back of the house. "What are her symptoms?"

Charley whirled and swallowed several times, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing. "Like I said, same as the others. Exactly the same."

Knees buckling, Harriet leaned against the wall for support, her mouth dry. "Just like your uncle?"

Charley nodded. "And Papa and Emmie and Auntie and Uncle. Severe stomach pains, vomiting, the whole bit. She's in agony, Harriet, sheer agony." He sucked in a breath, his face devoid of all color. "No one seems able to do anything about it. Dr. Beers is with her now, but as usual, none of his remedies have worked. I sent Mama to rest, though she resisted it something fierce."

"I'm sure it was hard to tear her from her daughter's side." Harriet followed Charley into the room. Willie already sat at the foot of the bed.

Though she put on her best smile, the odor of vomit and decay was gagging. Harriet restrained herself from reaching into her reticule and pulling out a perfumed handkerchief. Instead, she went to Lizzie's sickbed, falling to her knees at her friend's side. "Oh sweetheart, I'm so sorry about this."

Lizzie lay pale against the pillow, curled into a ball. "Harriet." She croaked the word.

"Yes, dear, I'm here. Just relax. Everything will be fine." Yet Harriet's own stomach clenched. Sweat beaded her friend's fair forehead. Harriet wiped away a damp tendril of Lizzie's brown hair. "Don't you worry about a thing."

"I'm so sick."

"I know. Charley brought me your note."

"Good old Charley."

"Yes, he is." Charley was like one of the brothers she had left at home when she ran away from what would have been a disastrous marriage.

Dr. Beers, a short, balding elderly man with a paunch, stood on the far side of the bed. "It's good of you to come, my dear, and on such a night." He withdrew a gold watch from his vest pocket and flipped open the cover.

Did he have somewhere better to be? He'd been retired for a while, or so she understood.

She'd met him on numerous occasions at the Robinson home. Lizzie had told her that he'd proposed to her mother several times, but the widowed Mrs. Robinson always turned him down. He was persistent, though. "How is she?"

He gave the smallest shake of his head.

Harriet bit her lip to keep from crying out. Why, why was this happening to someone as sweet, kind, and caring as Lizzie? One of the few true friends Harriet had in all the world. When Harriet had

come to the Boston area four years ago, she'd met Mrs. Robinson outside of the Methodist church, hunger gnawing at her insides and her pockets empty. Lizzie and her mother had taken Harriet in and had been a true family to her.

Charley touched her shoulder, the warmth of his hand working to relax her shoulders. "Why don't I get you a cup of tea, Lizzie? That might help settle your stomach."

The once-vibrant young woman made a vain attempt to raise her head from the pillow. "No. I can't, can't even think about it." A moan escaped her chapped lips.

"Well, then, we should let you rest. Harriet, Willie, Dr. Beers, shall we?"

Harriet stared at Charley and raised a questioning eyebrow, but he exited the room. She trailed him, the floorboards groaning as Dr. Beers followed close behind her.

Willie remained in the room. At least Lizzie wasn't alone. Faithful, solid Willie.

Charley leaned against the papered wall and finger-combed his straight hair. "There has to be something we can do. We can't let her go. We've lost so much of our family. Now Lizzie. I won't stand by and watch her die." With his fist, he banged the wall.

Harriet covered her mouth, her reticule swinging from her wrist. Die? No, no, it couldn't be. Losing Lizzie would be the worst kind of tragedy. "I agree with Charley. Some doctor must have some medication that can help her, that can cure her. She's suffering so." Several tears slid down her cheeks. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

Dr. Beers shook his head. "I'm afraid not. We couldn't help the others. There's little hope for her. It's just a matter of time."

Harriet's legs shook, and she crumpled to the ground. She fought the sobs that threatened to tear from her throat. "I won't accept it. We'll get every doctor in Somerville and Cambridge and even Boston to examine her until we find one who can save her."

"That won't help."

At the firm, feminine voice, Harriet glanced up through tear-laden eyes. Mrs. Robinson's black crepe dress with its high neckline rustled as she swished down the hall, tall and regal, with a long, sloped nose. "There isn't the money to pay for a doctor."

"No funds?" Charley pushed away from the wall. "What about the insurance payout we got when Uncle died?"

Charley and Mr. Freeman, his uncle, had been very close. Losing him last summer was a great blow.

"There was no payout from my brother-in-law's death."

Charley stood in front of his mother, peering down at her. "But you went to Wisconsin and purchased new furniture and got a bigger apartment."

"Now the creditors are coming after me. How was I to know Lizzie would get so ill?" Mrs. Robinson's voice warbled and cracked. Her eyes widened, and she stiffened. She pulled at her hair, then glanced all around, as if following a buzzing bee in an erratic flight path. "What is it that you say?"

Who was she talking to?

Charley stepped in front of Mrs. Robinson. "Mama?"

She stared straight through him. "Moses? Is that you, Moses?"

He rubbed his forehead. "Not another one of your crazy visions."

Lizzie had told Harriet about them. Mrs. Robinson had at least one before each of her loved ones died. Harriet didn't put much stock in them, but Mrs. Robinson did.

She was always right. Cold shot through Harriet. If only her cloak weren't in the parlor, she might make an escape.

"Tell me what you want to tell me, no matter how much it hurts. What? You're here for Lizzie? Please, Moses, I beg you not to take her. What will I do without her?" She closed her eyes and scrunched her forehead. "Yes, yes, I understand. You need her more than I." With that, Mrs. Robinson sagged. Charley caught her a moment before she hit the floor.

Harriet's breath hitched in her throat. Not this time. Mrs. Robinson couldn't be right this time. God wouldn't take Lizzie from her. Though the others might stand around and do nothing, Harriet wouldn't.

She wiped away her tears and struggled to her feet. "Not far from my shop, a new doctor has just hung his shingle. Fresh eyes. A young man, perhaps knowledgeable about new medications that weren't available before. I'll fetch him. Maybe he'll know what to do. Don't worry about the bill. I'll pay it. I'll do whatever I have to in order to save Lizzie's life."

Dr. Beers frowned. "I don't see what good bringing in a new doctor is going to do. We've tried that before. No one has had any success treating any of the cases. Not a single one of them knows definitively what is causing this, and not a single one of them has been able to cure any of the patients. You are wasting your time and money, Miss Peters."

"Then I will gladly do it for my very best friend. I need her. We all need her. Who will look after Tommy and Gracie when everyone else is at work if Lizzie isn't around? No, I'm getting the doctor. I'll leave now and hope to be back in the next hour. Tell Lizzie I love her."

Before any of them could brook a single objection, Harriet raced to the main living area, grabbed her cloak from the settee, and still clinging to her reticule, hurried into the frigid night.

All the way to the doctor's place, she prayed that Lizzie would live.

And all the way, she feared for Lizzie's fate.

The carriage bumped along the slippery, uneven road, jostling Michael Wheaton. He clutched his black doctor's bag harder with his sweaty hands and stared at the raven-haired woman across from him, her intricately braided hair slipping from its pins. She returned his stare, her dark blue eyes intense and just a bit watery.

"Can you describe for me again the symptoms your friend, Miss Robinson, is experiencing?"

"Vomiting, great stomach discomfort, profuse sweating." There was a catch in her words.

"And you say this is something that runs in the family?"

"It seems to." Miss Peters drew in a deep breath. "Just last June, her uncle passed away of a similar ailment. Poisoning from the factory he worked in, that's what the doctors guessed. Several others have died too. No explanation has been given in those cases, to the best of my knowledge." She fussed with the reticule on her lap, twisting the ribbon that closed it around her finger.

"Hmm. Unusual symptoms. No fever or chills? No one else in the home ill at the same time?"

She shook her head then leaned forward as the sleet and wind buffeted the carriage, the interior dim but dry. Even in the low light, he didn't miss the firm set to her lips. She clenched him by the wrist, her black-gloved grasp strong. "Please, Dr. Wheaton, there has to be something you can do for Lizzie. Anything. She's..." Miss Peters released her grip and sat back. "She's the only friend I have in the world. There must be some medicine you can give her, some remedy the others have not tried. Each

time someone has fallen ill, Mrs. Robinson has brought in a different doctor, each one less effective than the other. Perhaps, being so new to the profession, you are familiar with some new discovery.”

He wrinkled his brow. How was it that this woman knew he had only just become a qualified doctor?

“Word gets around, Dr. Wheaton.” She answered as if she read his mind. “I own the milliner’s shop a few doors down from your office. A number of my clients have mentioned to me how kind and compassionate you were to them in their illnesses and how pleased they were with you, even though you were new.”

He warmed through and through despite the aching cold blowing through the thin carriage shell. “Thank you. That’s very nice of you to say.” There were many who wouldn’t share such polite words about him. Those who would be downright mean and nasty. Or worse. He clenched then relaxed his fists.

“So you see why I immediately thought of you when Lizzie took ill. All of this is so sudden. I visited her only last evening, and she was quite well. We played checkers with the children, and nothing was amiss at the time. She gave no indication of feeling the least bit poorly.”

Michael chewed on the inside of his cheek. Several family members passed away from similar ailments. The last one from poisoning, supposedly from the factory where he worked.

None of it made sense. He wiped his damp palms on his pants. How was he ever going to figure this out and save the young woman when others had failed? “I’ll know more after I examine Miss Robinson.”

“Thank you.” Miss Peters blew out a breath. “And thank you for the conveyance. It was rather a cold walk on the way to your office.” The pale light of the gas streetlamps penetrated the storm enough for him to catch the brief smile that crossed her pink lips.

They pulled up to a large duplex home, a porch reaching almost to the street, two doors along it, elaborate carvings decorating its triangular roof. He stepped out, the wind howling like a pack of wolves. He pushed his bowler hat down further on his head lest it blow away.

After he paid the driver, he assisted Miss Peters from the carriage, her hand tiny but her step sure. She led the way across the porch, her deep purple skirts sweeping the light dusting of snow and sleet that covered it.

Once upstairs and inside the almost-dark apartment, only one lamp lit in the parlor, she took his hat and coat and led him to the sickroom. “I’ve brought the doctor.”

A short, older gentleman with a rounded belly glared at Michael. “I told you no other physician was needed. I can attend to Miss Robinson myself just fine. I may be retired, but I’m not dead.”

Michael stepped backward. Miss Peters had not informed him that another doctor had been brought in on the case. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know—”

“And as I told Miss Peters, your services won’t do any good.” This from the tall woman in a high-necked black gown sitting beside the patient. “My husband is expecting her in heaven. He told me so. She won’t recover.”

Goose bumps broke out on Michael’s flesh.

What had he gotten himself into?