

CHAPTER 1

SUNDAY, MARCH 24, 1872

Sky-splitting thunder cracked like canisters firing from twelve-pound cannons as drenching rain cascaded in blinding sheets onto two physicians picking their way through muddied Virginia clay to the front stoop of a modest home on Loudoun Street. When they stepped onto the porch, a young woman with tawny skin and warm, tired-looking eyes, glassy and red, opened the door.

“She’s upstairs,” said the maid, Delphi Lozenburg, as she threw open the door and invited them inside.

The house was stale with sickness—the sour smell of vomit and lye intermingled with the sweetness of damp ash from a dwindling fire. Wind gusts howled overhead and rumbled down the chimney, sparking embers to glow and crackle. Delphi took their coats and hats and brought them up the narrow stairs that led to the child’s room.

Not twelve hours ago, when Dr. Randolph “Randy” Moore had walked into the small room at the top of the stairs, little Maud Lloyd had been sitting up against the headboard, playing with a new bisque doll that, she had explained, was her birthday present. Her blue eyes had been alert, and she’d told him that both her tummy and her dolly were feeling much better. Though she was pale and weakened from

nearly three days of purging, he'd been confident that she would recover. The porcelain doll now lay near the foot of the bed, its fair hair disheveled and its wide eyes cast vacantly at the ceiling. Like the doll, Maud's flaxen hair was tangled, and her eyes were half open, staring upward. He was having trouble believing this to be the same child. Her skin was pallid, the lids of her eyes dark and sunk deep in their sockets. She gasped for air between parted, pasty lips, just like her older sister, Annie, who had died the month before. Dread washed over him.

Next to the bed in a rocking chair sat the mother, Emily Lloyd, her arms crossed over her chest, rocking back and forth, looking like a small child herself. Her eyes, set wide under a high forehead etched with worry lines, were pale, a bleached green like the color of lichen in moonlight. She was a slight woman with refined features and honey-brown hair parted in the center and pulled back into a tight bun. She, too, stared vacantly, her ghostly gaze fixed on nothing.

"Mrs. Lloyd," Moore said gently. Emily startled to attention with a rush of words at the sight of him.

"Oh, praise be to God! Praise the Lord you are here!" she said, jumping from the chair to her feet. "You must do something. Please don't let her die! You can't let her die." Tears poured from her eyes, and her whole body seemed to be trembling with desperation and fear.

Moore took Emily's shaking hands in his and watched as his colleague Dr. William Cross took a seat on the child's bed. When Delphi had summoned Moore during the supper hour, his father-in-law, Mayor Robert Bentley, had insisted Moore bring Dr. Cross along for a second opinion. Moore had pushed back, but the mayor was resolute.

"You must tell me what has happened since my visit this morning," Moore said.

"I don't know precisely," Emily said. "She was feeling better when you left. I went downstairs and prepared the powders with lime water and milk like you said. She took that just fine. Sometime after that, she became ill again. She was crying so with pain. I put a hot compress on her belly, but she kept getting sicker and sicker. I gave her more of the medicine, but she couldn't keep it down. Then she began to shake and convulse. I tried to hold her, and then suddenly it all just stopped. She wasn't moving, the lifeblood left her little body . . . just like Annie. Please, don't let her die like Annie!"

“Do you know what time she became ill again?” he asked.

“I don’t,” she said. “I don’t remember when exactly. Maybe Delphi knows. I can’t remember one hour from the next these past few days.” She moved her eyes to her daughter lying listlessly in the bed.

“Are you, too, feeling ill?” Moore asked, and placed the back of his hand on her forehead and cheek, checking for fever.

“I can’t bury another child, Dr. Moore. I just can’t.”

“Worry won’t help either you or the child,” Moore said, the backs of his fingers lingering on her cheek before he moved his hand to her shoulder. Her collarbone protruded under the fabric, and he wondered how long it had been since she’d eaten a proper meal. Forcing a reassuring smile, he walked Emily back to the chair. “Let me take a look at her and see what we can do.”

Dr. William Cross was in the midst of his exam, forcing Maud’s lids open with his thumbs, studying her lifeless eyes. As Moore neared, he recognized the look of approaching death. His breath caught in his throat, and his heart felt as if it were being ripped from his chest.

Moore opened his bag and riffled through his instruments, fumbling his stethoscope and sending it flying to the floor. Drawing a long breath to calm his nerves, he retrieved it and settled on the bed next to the little girl. With an aural tube in each ear, he placed the chest piece on the child’s breast and listened. Her heartbeat was rapid and erratic, her breathing shallow and labored.

Dr. Cross, who sat at the girl’s opposite side, looked up. “I have a few questions for the maid,” he said and stood from the bedside.

Moore nodded and closed his eyes, listening to the fitful beating of the child’s heart. *Please, Lord, not little Maud.* For the life of him, Moore could not fathom what could have gone so wrong. *Could she have accidentally eaten something she shouldn’t have?* He opened his eyes and moved the chest piece to her abdomen and tried to listen over the roar in his mind. *No, my initial diagnosis is the only explanation.* As he finished his exam, Moore returned his instruments to the case and glanced at Emily in the rocking chair. She sat preternaturally still, the only movement the wringing of her hands in her lap, her eyes fixed somewhere beyond the window. Dr. Cross caught his attention and motioned to him from the doorway. Moore glanced at the child again.

With his heart breaking, he rose from the bed and stepped into the hall with the other doctor.

"I haven't changed my impression, William," Moore said out of earshot of Delphi and Emily. "It's congestion of the stomach."

Dr. Cross peered over his spectacles at his colleague. "And you said she was improved this morning?"

"She was. Sitting up in bed. Playing. I thought she was on her way to recovery."

"And did you prescribe anything further?"

"I told the mother to continue with lime water and milk, and I had my assistant send over more bismuth salts and told her to continue with that routine until tomorrow."

Dr. Cross raised his brows.

"The child has been afflicted with stomach ailments off and on now for a number of months," Moore explained. "And since the bout of cholera that took her sister, it's been worse."

"I understand the need for aggressive treatment," Cross said, "but I am not convinced this is stomach congestion."

Moore pulled in his chin, unable to mask his irritation. "This is the first time you've seen her, and your exam was cursory at best. The only other thing it could be is cholera, but that wouldn't explain her improvement this morning."

"Her symptoms are consistent with a reaction to poison."

Moore felt a rush flood his veins. "What are you suggesting?"

"I believe the child is suffering from an unnatural condition, most likely induced by a chemical toxin. White arsenic. Possibly antimony."

Moore scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Your suggestion is preposterous."

"I've seen enough in my day to recognize an unnatural condition!" Cross snapped. "There's no other explanation for the child's recovery and subsequent rapid demise. A postmortem will tell us for certain."

Incredulous, Moore looked over Cross's shoulder into the room to ensure that neither woman was listening. "She'll have to die for that to happen," he said in a low voice, "and as her physician, I have an obligation to do everything in my power to save her."

"Surely you realize there is nothing that will save this child's life," Cross said. "At this point, the only thing you can do is to make her

as comfortable as possible. You can try Huxham's with a grain of cerium. And a warm bath with a bit of opium to ease any suffering. My guess is that she'll be gone within the hour." Cross glanced at Emily and frowned.

"You think the mother is responsible, don't you?" Moore said, following Cross's eyes.

"It's not my place to judge. But the town will not sit quietly and allow her to bury another child without an inquiry."

"I am telling you the child is suffering from severe stomach congestion." Moore was insistent.

"Look," Dr. Cross said, "I am more than happy to let the mayor know that you and I are in disagreement about the source of the child's malady. Best to leave it to him and the sheriff to decide what to do next."

"I know Emily Lloyd," Moore said. "She's a caring mother and would never harm her child."

"In my opinion, Randy, something has harmed this child. Something or someone."