

Prologue

In the dream, Elizabeth Blackwell sits opposite Jane Avery's deathbed. She dabs Jane's furrowed forehead with a wet cloth and whispers that all will be well. Jane tilts her head toward Elizabeth and tries to speak through her cracked lips caked in muck. Then Jane slips into an irreversible coughing fit—

—and that's when a noise wakes Elizabeth.

She opens her eyes, relieved. She hates that recurring dream, the helpless feeling of watching her friend die. It's been six years since Jane Avery's death, and not a day goes by that Elizabeth doesn't believe that she might have saved her had she been properly trained as a physician.

The noise sounds again.

Around her, in the dormitory of the Women's Medical College of Manhattan, the other four students do not stir. Perhaps it was nothing.

She closes her eyes and summons the image of Jane in her prime, her long elegant frame and creamy skin. After Latin class at The Cincinnati French and English Academy for Young Ladies, Jane is cleaning the blackboard. She erases the word *mulier*. She senses Elizabeth watching, turns and smiles—

—there it is again. A metallic banging this time.

Elizabeth reaches for her housecoat and slippers. She lights a candle, waking Miss Zacky in the bed next to her.

“*Lizzy*.” Miss Zacky checks her pocket watch. “It's three in the morning, and Abraham's trial begins at nine.”

Abraham Stowe, co-founder of the women's college and a married man, has been

accused of manslaughter, the result of a botched abortion performed on Mary Rogers, with whom he admitted having a love affair. In his defense, and for the sake of Abraham's wife and college co-founder, Lena, the students stayed up late preparing anatomical diagrams outlining the effects of abortion on a woman's body. The diagrams would be compared with the Mary Rogers autopsy report, which Lena and Elizabeth believed had been altered to implicate Abraham.

"Be that as it may, I heard a noise downstairs. I should have a look."

Miss Zacky groans. "You know that means I have to accompany you."

"I also know that you are capable of making your own decisions."

The two women skulk across the room into the stairwell, closing the dormitory door behind them. They make their way down the stairs past the third-floor maternity ward, all silent, then to the second-floor infirmary.

Inside, the patient nearest the door, Mrs. Cook, sleeps soundly. Mrs. Stephens, a few beds over, also lies still. Mrs. Dowd, in the bed next to the window, shifts at the sound of their entrance. She sits up straight, struggles to breathe through the dehydration associated with the cholera-like symptoms that landed her in the sick room the day before.

Elizabeth props Mrs. Dowd with a pillow while Miss Zacky goes for laudanum.

"There, there, Mrs. Dowd," Elizabeth says. "Take your time."

But Mrs. Dowd's deep, panicked, breath can't catch up to itself, and suffocation is closing in. Elizabeth keeps talking, rubbing her back. "You can do it," she says.

Mrs. Dowd's eyes roll back, and she heaves.

Elizabeth doesn't hesitate. She slides onto the bed and wraps her arms around her patient. She finds the sternum and pulls hard. Nothing happens, and so she repeats the move. This time, Mrs. Dowd coughs up a bite of meat, which lands on the white sheet at the end of the bed.

Elizabeth holds the woman until she catches her breath. “Didn’t quite finish our supper, did we?”

While Elizabeth holds her upright, Miss Zacky raises the glass to Mrs. Dowd’s mouth. She struggles to swallow at first, but then works it down.

When the laudanum takes effect, the results are swift. Mrs. Dowd’s body weight collapses into Elizabeth’s lap. She looks at Miss Zacky, who mouths the words *Her eyes have closed*.

Relief washes over Elizabeth. She has the fleeting thought that healing is what God put her on earth to do. She eases out from behind her patient, tucking the blanket under the sleeping woman’s chin.

Back in the stairwell, Miss Zacky whispers. “You’re going to be an excellent doctor, Lizzy.” Elizabeth smiles in response.

Back in her dormitory, Elizabeth observes the rise and fall of the sleeping bodies and contemplates the miracle that is a medical college for women. *And it’s all thanks to Abraham and Lena Stowe*. Later this morning they’ll begin the work of proving Abraham’s innocence, and the college can return to its primary mission: to advance the welfare of women through medicine and education. Slipping beneath the covers, she lays her head on the straw pillow, and closes her eyes to dream of Jane once again.

Suddenly loud and chaotic noises, a string of grunts and screams, ascend from the first floor.

She glances at Miss Zacky, eyes wide. The other students pop up one after another: Karina Emsbury, Olive Perschon, Patricia Onderdonk. *What is it?* they want to know, and Elizabeth bids them *wait here*.

She and Miss Zacky hurry down the stairs to the dissection room on the first floor.

Elizabeth puts her ear to the door. Nothing.

From behind her, Miss Zacky whispers, “The body snatchers . . . ?”

A scream sounds.

Elizabeth throws open the door, searching for signs of the fearsome resurrection men who dig up fresh graves and sell the corpses to medical colleges like this one. A single candle on the back wall illuminates the familiar sight of a large central table ringed by shelves and counters. A lone figure hunches over a body, laid out as if for dissection.

It’s Lena Stowe, gazing down at her dead husband. His eyes and mouth are open, and his chest has been split apart, his rib cage sawed in two. Blood is everywhere. On Abraham. On Lena. On the table and floor.

Elizabeth wraps her arms around a sobbing Lena, and while they cry together, she can’t help but stare at the monstrous carnage.

It’s not yet morning on February 12, 1843.