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PROLOGUE

The Midwife

“Emily, you will be frightened. I think it wise for you to go to your neighbour’s house tonight.” The midwife, an elderly woman rather stooped for her years, placed a full kettle of water upon the kitchen wood stove as she spoke. A nearby kerosene lantern softly illuminated her most prominent features—deep-set wrinkles and grey hair pulled back into a bun so taut it appeared to have been glued into place. Generally of a cheerful disposition, her expression was more serious than usual this evening. “Your mother’s waters have broken and her baby is ready to be born.”

Ten-year-old Emily, who had hovered nearby each time the midwife came calling, adamantly shook her head and insisted that she be allowed to stay.

“I want to help,” she said with determination.

“Your mother will feel great pain while she works to give birth. You will find it upsetting.”

“I will not,” Emily assured her.

The midwife sighed. She had been making regular visits to the Thornton household for the past several weeks, just one in her lengthy list of homes with expectant mothers. She was perpetually weary after spending so many hours overseeing the delivery of babies—often in the dead of night—and she was too tired to argue.

“Very well,” she responded, “you may stay. But be mindful that you do not get underfoot, for this delivery may take some time. I presume that your hands are well washed?”

Nodding that they were, Emily followed the midwife upstairs to her parents’ bedroom, where Lucy Thornton lay upon a thick, straw-filled mattress that had recently been covered with newspaper and several additional layers of cotton ticking. By the light of the lantern, Emily could see that her mother’s face was tight, her teeth gritted, eyes glazed. Seemingly oblivious to anyone else being in the room, she breathed heavily, sweat glistening on her forehead. Noticing a bowl of water and a small cloth by the bedside, Emily dipped the cloth into the water and gently dabbed her mother’s brow.

“Look at the flowers I picked for you this morning, Mama,” she said, pointing to a bright bouquet of daisies on the bureau. “Aren’t they just lovely?”

The midwife glanced at her pocket watch. “You are doing well, Lucy. It won’t be long now.”

During the next hour, Emily looked on with growing apprehension as her mother’s pain steadily increased.

“Is Mama all right?” she asked the midwife somewhat timidly.

“Of course she is.” The midwife’s voice had a warning tone.

Emily could feel her own inner turmoil rushing to the surface, but she knew that if she betrayed any fears she would be asked to leave. Well aware that childbirth was universally feared among mothers-to-be, the midwife kept up a steady stream of encouraging words. It was common knowledge that numerous complications could arise during labour, and there was never a guarantee that mother or baby would survive the ordeal. Keeping one hand over Lucy’s abdomen, she held a pocket watch in the other to monitor the strength and timing of her contractions. Lucy’s breath was now coming in short gasps.

"See that knotted bedsheet over there?" the midwife said to Emily, pointing to a sheet that had been draped over a nearby chair. "I want you to tie it firmly on the end of the bedpost and give the knotted end to your mother."

Emily did as she was told. As she looked on, her mother took hold of the knot and began to pull on it for all her worth. Minutes later, the midwife reported that baby's head was beginning to emerge. She put down the pocket watch and picked up a roll of clean cotton wadding.

"We must keep gentle control of the baby's head so that your mother does not tear," she explained to Emily. "Breathe and push, Lucy. Breathe and push."

"How much longer?" Lucy gasped.

"You're doing fine. Push, Mama," Emily urged, unconsciously repeating the midwife's commands. "Keep going!"

As Lucy gave one last guttural cry of pain, the midwife gently guided the baby the rest of the way out. Then, much to Emily's horror, she dangled it aloft by the feet and gave it a firm smack on the buttocks.

"What are you doing?" Emily exclaimed, as a crescendo of howls filled the bedroom.

"Helping baby to breathe," the midwife replied with the barest hint of a satisfied smile.

Her blow had produced the desired effect, for the baby continued to cry lustily, drawing great gasps of life-giving oxygen from the outside world. The midwife cheerfully announced that it was a girl.

"It's a girl, Mama!" Emily exclaimed in delight. "It's Josephine!" Josephine was a name that the Thorntons had decided upon weeks in advance.

"Would you like to cut the umbilical cord?" the midwife asked, drawing a pair of sterile scissors from a pot of water simmering on the hearth.

"Will that hurt Mama . . . or Josephine?" Emily asked tentatively.

"Of course not, the umbilical has no nerves, but I can do it if you wish."

Emily resolutely shook her head and took hold of the scissors. She carefully made the cut, noting how easy it was. While tiny Josephine Thornton continued to cry, the midwife wrapped her in soft clean sheeting and laid her in the bed alongside a tired but now beaming Lucy.

“We must keep mother and baby warm,” she reminded Emily. “This fire will need regular replenishment.”

“I’ll make sure of that,” Emily answered firmly.

The midwife smiled. “You did a good job, Emily,” she said. “I believe that someday you will make a fine midwife yourself.”

Emily gazed at baby Josephine, so impossibly tiny—her skin the colour of rose pink—already a thick growth of dark hair matted against her head. As the midwife had warned, the delivery of a baby was an unnerving experience, but Emily felt proud and exhilarated to have taken part in it. She had yearned to have a sibling again. For so many years she had waited and she now believed that there could not be a happier, prouder sister in all of Lincoln County—perhaps even the entire state of Maine—than Emily Susan Branscombe.

CHAPTER 1

Nurse in Training

Emily's birth was not unlike that of Josephine's. The daughter of John and Lucy Branscombe, she had been born at home in Bath, Lincoln County, Maine, on July 22, 1836, with a midwife in attendance. Lucy Branscombe, also a Bath native, was an industrious and hardworking housewife of staunchly Christian principles, where helpfulness and obedience were not only expected but demanded. Clad in her freshly laundered pinafore and high leather boots, Emily would help with the most mundane of household chores—from sweeping the hearth to scrubbing the soil off newly dug potatoes. By the young age of three, she was already tasked with carrying small parcels as she dutifully followed her mother and baby brother John in his perambulator about the Front Street marketplace.

But on May 19, 1840, Emily's well-ordered world was shattered when her father, John Branscombe, died at the age of twenty-eight. Death was an unfamiliar concept for a little girl not quite four years of

age. All Emily knew was that she and her grieving mother, clad in black, had to make a lengthy walk behind a slow-moving cart to the Maple Grove Cemetery on Bath's outskirts, where they would watch the wooden box that contained John Branscombe's mortal remains lower slowly into the ground. She had gently been told that Papa "was safe in heaven," but that did not seem to remedy the empty feeling that lingered in her heart. Death would visit the Branscombes yet again on March 3, 1842, this time for Emily's brother John. By then, Emily had begun to understand that death was to be expected—a grim reaper, whose random choice of victims spared no boundaries or sympathies. Headstones throughout the cemetery told the story—weather-beaten monuments etched with the names of Bath citizens from all walks of life. Some individuals had been blessed with well-advanced years, while others were not far out of childhood. Then there were those tiny souls who had barely left their mother's wombs—their graves often guarded by angels of stone, gently gazing down.

Lucy Branscombe married the town blacksmith, Joshua Thornton, on May 12, 1842, little more than two months after the death of her son. However uncertain she was about having a new father, Emily knew that her mother had been sad and lonely, and she hoped that this second marriage would rekindle her happiness. The Thorntons lived in a house on the corner of South and Washington Street, within easy walking distance of the town centre and riverfront. Most advantageous was the close proximity of the South Grammar School—a mere one-block walk from her home. Emily excelled at her studies, taking particular interest in science and geography. She was a voracious reader, stealing away as time allowed to whatever remote corner of the Thornton household she could find to immerse herself in a book.

Emily longed for another sibling to ease the sorrow of losing her

*John Branscombe & Lucy Elizabeth his wife had born unto them in Bath
County of Lincoln & State of Maine, the following Child viz.
Emily Susan a Daughter born July 22. 1836.*

Emily's birth record

brother but would have to wait several years before the arrival of her half-sister Josephine in 1846. Josephine's birth was followed by that of Joshua Junior in 1848 and John, named in honour of Emily's dearly departed father and brother, in 1850. Emily had been present at every delivery, gaining more knowledge in the skills of midwifery while assisting in whatever way she was able. She learned about the "absolute necessity" of handwashing to avoid infections like the dreaded puerperal fever, how horrific complications could occur by improperly administering ergot of rye to hasten contractions, how postpartum hemorrhage could result if the placenta had not been fully expelled from the uterus. Emily asked questions and even wrote detailed notes on everything that she observed, to peruse repeatedly in her spare time. As she grew older, all manner of medically related topics became her fascination. She would learn the rudimentary skills of dealing with a fracture or bringing down a fever. She would rush to the scene with clean water and bandaging if Joshua skinned his knee or John needed an oatmeal poultice after his latest encounter with poison ivy. Her ministrations did not go unnoticed by her mother.

"You have the makings of being our new Granny Lombard!" Lucy told her with a smile.

"I do wish that I could have known her!" Emily replied.

Sarah "Granny" Lombard was legendary among old-timers of Bath—a woman who had served both as midwife and doctor in the town and the surrounding area through much of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Sarah had been on call day or night, sometimes riding on horseback for miles along narrow, thickly forested bridal paths when word came that her services were required. Emily often found herself imagining what it would have been like to be the brave and heroic Sarah, to tend to patients' wants and needs and feel the immense satisfaction of making them better.



By the time she reached her early twenties, Emily had grown into an attractive young woman who enjoyed Bath's society life, dances and

parties, but she also took pleasure in solitude or the company of a few close friends. She did not partake of alcohol—her Christian upbringing having instilled her with a firm belief in abstinence—a stance widely embraced across the entire state of Maine. The Thorntons, like many others, were ardent supporters of the “Maine Law”—an 1851 state-wide prohibition on the manufacture and sale of liquor, which had been the longtime vision of Neal Dow, mayor of Bath’s neighbouring city Portland. Dow’s argument was that rampant consumption of alcohol was having a detrimental effect on the state of Maine’s industry and productivity. The only way to reverse the alarming trend was through strict government control. Yet despite the prohibition, there were still those few individuals who managed to flout the law of the land. Whenever Emily came across these “wayward souls,” as her mother called them, she would more often than not smile at their flirtations, while inwardly reminding herself never to fall prey to such bravado. Over time she came to notice that men off the ships, newly landed from places afar, were particularly notorious for their drinking habits. One summer morning, an encounter with one such “wayward soul” would mark a dramatic turning point in her life.

It was a beautiful day. Having finished her regular round of morning chores, Emily decided that she would put on one of her finer dresses and stroll into town for a cup of tea and a good read of a new medical book. She had long finished her childhood schooling years but yearned to begin studies in the field of nursing. Word from overseas told of a remarkable English woman by the name of Florence Nightingale who had administered care to soldiers wounded on the battlefields of Crimea. Florence Nightingale had taken her training in Germany, and while Emily had little hope of travelling that great a distance, another medical institution much closer at hand had caught her attention: the Geneva Medical College of New York. Founded in 1834, Geneva Medical College had seen a number of graduate physicians, and in 1849, one of those graduates happened to be Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell—the first female doctor in the United States. While no school dedicated to the field of nursing existed in the country at present, Emily could not help being inspired and optimistic thanks to the groundbreaking career path of Dr. Blackwell of the Geneva Medical College.