

CHAPTER 1

ONCE UPON A BED

Once upon a bed and long ago, there lay a maid. And the maid had to huff and to puff, and to puff and to huff, until finally she gave birth to a small bundle of child.

“Go to sleep now,” the midwife told the maid who was now a mother, “You must rest, you’re so exhausted, lamb.”

But the mother was too elated to sleep. “Bring her to me, please, please nurse, I just want to hold her again,” she pleaded.

She spent the next seventy-two hours staring into the new infant’s eyes and playing with the tiny fingers when it was awake, or nuzzling the downy head and sniffing the honey smell when it was asleep. She even experimented with crooning lullabies of love into the translucent shell of its dainty ear. The enormity of what had just occurred dazzled her: the idea of a baby, a new human being, had never seemed real when it was still inside her. Now that it was out, and wrapped in its own separate package of broody skin, it was so tangibly, deliciously real, that the thought of her previous indifference blurred her eyes with tears. She surrendered abjectly to this new and terrible tenderness. It pounded through her veins, and surged from her to the child and back again. For even though the cord had long been cut, there was clearly a connecting thread still between her battered womb and the infant’s taut belly; both felt it achingly.

In the midst of this ecstasy, a blood clot no bigger than the tip of your thumb dislodged itself from one of the mother’s blood vessels and began to wend its way along the passages of her bloodstream. Skirting the liver and the spleen, it clambered upward, bulldozing legions of blood cells out of its way. Nonchalantly it rolled and floated along, bumping into walls and trailing along avenues, until it flipped into the right-hand chambers of the heart and, somersaulting out again, reached the spongy region of the lung. There, in narrowing corridors, it finally stuck fast, unable to move forward or backward, causing a fatal gridlock. And the young mother, on her way to answering a call of nature, fell down on the chill cobbled stones of the bedroom floor.

They said she died of a broken heart.

CHAPTER 2

A SILVER SPOON

To ward off evil fairies and a lifetime of bad luck, it is customary to place a coin on the infant's tongue at birth. Sensible godmothers, however, mindful that the lucky coin presents its own hazard, since infants are inclined to choke to death on it, advise that the coin be replaced with a spoon—preferably a silver spoon, if the family can afford it; an item, in short, that is more difficult to swallow.

The midwife made the decision to take care of the nursling until the young woman's relatives showed up to claim her. A good soul of no fixed abode, she made herself indispensable whenever called for, as midwife, wet nurse or even, in happier days, as temporary occupant of the master's bed. Her full name was Elizabeth Sarah Goose, but being a humble person, she always referred to herself as Bessie.

Despite a somewhat questionable reputation, her services were always much in demand, for she had what was called the Touch. This meant she was one of that rare breed who can give a woman in labor a shot of relief by resting a finger just so on the exact spot where pain or panic are at work, filling the bewildered mother with renewed strength and resolve.

But now Bessie found herself saddled with a newborn in an empty gentleman's house on the Thames west of London. Summoned there to deliver a maiden too young to be a mother of an infant about to become an orphan, she had found no one in the house besides the young lady moaning on the bed. Later a charwoman had come in to clean and make the fires, but she too knew nothing about her employer and told Bessie she'd stop coming if she weren't paid for the extra days.

On the day following her patient's death, Bessie took it upon herself to notify the parson's wife, Mrs. Dunes. Mrs. Dunes often found work for Bessie in Chiswick; she was the person you first thought of if you had a wedding, a funeral or a lying-in to arrange. She was a large woman who sighed frequently out of a loose, wet mouth, helplessly out of breath at the thought of all the busy things expected of her.

Bessie had found a family crest embroidered on the pouch containing the young mother's personal knife and spoon.

"This should not be too difficult to trace," wheezed Mrs. Dunes, twisting her head around to make out the emblem. "Two boars rampant on a field of lilies, and the motto *Pecuniae Fiducia*. Let me have this, and I shall see what I can find out. She died of the fever, then?"

"No, no sign of the childbed fever, nor tearing, either," said Bessie eagerly. "It was an easy birth, and she was mending nicely. It came up very sudden-like. From one moment to the next, no life in her. But the poor thing had been grieving, and then the baby filled her with such joy. With such a confusion of humors, no wonder her little heart cracked..."

Mrs. Dunes snorted. "Just retribution more like, if you ask me. Delivered of the child all alone, and neither husband nor relative in sight? Come now. Don't tell me all was well and proper." She smacked her lips wetly, reproachfully, and turned her attention to the bundle in Bessie's arms. "Now, Bessie—the nursling. Are you able to, er, *provide*, or shall I ask Brandy Nuthatch...?"

“Ah, no thank you, ma’am,” said Bessie, “the milk is still in, I make sure of that. It must be, oh, a good twelve-month since my little Jonas passed, God rest his soul...” she piously wiped away a tear... “But the milk’s the more precious for it, so I tell my ladies. A glass of ale at bedtime does wonders for the flow, old Annie Coles used to swear by it. ‘Bessie,’ she used to say, ‘a glass of dark ale—dark, mind you—that’s the way to increase the flush’...”

She gathered that this subject was not one upon which Mrs. Dunes was eager to have her elaborate further, since that lady now closed her eyes and, taking in another rattling breath, heaved herself to her feet.

Bessie hastily tried another gambit. “Poor soul. Must be quite the fancy folks, wouldn’t you say? The little miss spoke so prettily, I thought she must be well born, with her heavy knife and spoon—real silver, they are—and you should feel the silk of her niddy-hose...”

There being no hint from Mrs. Dune that she was interested in examining the aforementioned undergarments for herself, Bessie took her leave, wedging the wellborn infant between her abundant side and the shell of her rough woolen cloak.

The baby brooded over its loss, trying to find the thread that had connected it with its mother. It did not cry much, but waved its little fists, rooting with its mouth for the missing link.

“Don’t fret, my lamb,” whispered Bessie as she stopped the searching mouth with her own breast. “We’ll take good care of you, I promise.” It occurred to her that the baby did not yet have a name. “Lucinda we’ll call you,” she said solemnly—a name that to her epitomized everything that was grand, noble and expensive. “And you’ll be a lady,” she promised, “just like your mama.” Then, underscoring each point with a touch of her forefinger to the tip of the baby’s nose, she chanted,

“And you’ll be rich, and you’ll be famous, and you’ll be loved-loved-loved...”

As it turned out, it soon became clear that if Bessie Goose wanted this baby to be loved-loved-loved, it would be entirely up to her.

Within a week, the parson’s wife sent word that the deceased girl’s family had been found. Bessie was to take the infant by stage and hired coach to Wriggin Hall, in Hampshire. This was the country seat of William Steppys, Earl of Hempstead. He was the child’s grandfather.

The midwife duly set out for that destination dreaming of a world she had never seen first-hand (a world of silver soup tureens and ladies in taffeta dresses), the aristocratic Lucinda tightly wrapped in her muslin shawl.

“Oh my Lord!” exclaimed Bessie, who had fallen asleep during the last leg of the journey and had to be joggled awake by the coachman. “Are we here, then?”

She could not believe her eyes. It was just as she had pictured it, only grander. Reverently she peered up at the mansion before her.

What Bessie saw was an imposing stone structure three stories high. Spaced out along the façade was a line of stone pillars, which upon closer inspection turned out to be statues of beautiful ladies with vacant eyes and indecently draped undergarments. There were heavy carved doors rich with brass, sumptuous stone urns brimming with petrified fruit, and wide steps leading to gardens crisscrossed with meticulously shorn hedges. Bessie had never seen the likes of it.

Nor did the interiors disappoint. The servants' quarters were vast. The kitchen ceiling was at least two stories high, she reckoned, and filled to the rafters with foodstuffs—braces of pheasants nicely decomposing, several hams drying, pigs' bladders, a pair of freshly slaughtered geese, bunches of herbs, sacks of meal, turnips and onions, a rack of cheeses pungently ripening. Not one, but two fireplaces, each large enough to roast an ox, their spits turned by a team of dogs on a treadmill; and even a stove made of bricks along one wall. (Bessie had heard of this new-fangled contraption—it meant you could stir soups and sauces with scarce any risk of burning yourself—but she had never before today seen one firsthand.) There were also a staggering number of windows—Bessie counted at least six—each glazed with real glass.

Even this magnificence, however, did not prepare her for the gala grandeur of the main house. She gaped at gilded panels on walls and ceilings depicting glorious scenes of a place she took to be heaven, since the elegant people in them were being fawned over by cherubs; dark portraits of grim men and women glowering into old-fashioned ruffled collars; sparkling chandeliers; gleaming floors that echoed impressively underfoot; the most ornately carved chairs lined up against the walls.

“Do you like it, pet?” she whispered to her charge. “This is where you belong. This is how the fine sirs and madams live. Nothing but the finest for you, my lamb.”

The interview with the lady who was the lamb's grandmother was brief.

“So this is the child,” she said distastefully. The child had chosen the moment to let out her most piercing wail.

“Yes my lady, madam,” said Bessie. She kept her lips compressed in a tight circle, in an effort to sound elegant. “Our Lucinda is such a good girl usually, she just...”

“Lucinda?”

“So I've been calling her, milady, but...”

“Lucinda will do.”

Lady Hempstead indicated that she could not bear the noise any longer and flicked her illegitimate granddaughter out of the room with a flip of a bejeweled hand.

It was sitting by the servants' hall fire that Bessie heard the juicy details of the scandal. The infant's mother was Olivia, Lord and Lady Hempstead's fifth daughter. Lady Olivia had always been an obedient child and was perhaps less closely watched than her older sisters. Her innocence, however, had landed her in trouble when she'd made eyes at a debt-ridden baron who had allegedly had her in the bushes while her sisters were dancing the gavotte.

“And it was five months before milady found out, when anyone could see she was with child. Although it isn't as if some of us didn't have our suspicions, what with her secretive ways and feeling so poorly...”

Bessie nodded, and in doing so caught the eye of a footman who had a delicious crease running from the side of his mouth all the way up his cheek.

“Well, as you can imagine, Milord declared she would never be allowed back in this house. Milady had a family friend arrange for a place...”

“In Chiswick,” Bessie supplied.

“No, that may be where she died, but that is not where she was sent. And all the trouble milady went through, too, to make the arrangements! She was to board with a person who takes in

ladies in her condition, up at Aldringham, I think it was, wasn't it, Nell? We heard she never arrived, but if you ask us, there was some as was relieved to be rid of her."

Bessie raised her eyebrows.

"Well, you know, the shame of it, the good family name and all."

And so Bessie never did discover how Lady Olivia had wound up in the house in Chiswick, but she had other things on her mind just then, including the footman's creased cheek. It occurred to her that she could not possibly leave her little Lucinda, her lamb, her pet, with these indifferent, although clearly very wealthy people. For Bessie, who had seen not one of her own offspring live this long, was beginning to feel she had a legitimate claim to the infant. After all, after having delivered the little sprite, hadn't she been the one to christen her too? She, Bessie Goose, had chosen Lucinda's name, and milady had approved it. And then, in the absence of a godmother, it was Bessie who had placed the silver spoon upon Lucy's tongue for good luck—none other!

Bessie decided she would go to Lucinda's grandparents and offer her services as the child's nurse. It was the right thing to do.

Of course the crease in the footman's cheek may have been another factor in her calculations.

"Very well," said Lady Hempstead, probing beneath her curved fingernails with an ivory implement. "That will do, I suppose." Bessie's application saved her the effort of having to find some other candidate. It really was better for her health if she did not trouble herself any further with that pitiful token of her youngest daughter's shame.

And so Bessie Goose and her pet-lamb became members of the Hempstead household. They were assigned a garret in the top of the west wing where the servants lived, and had nothing to do with the elegant folks living below for a good long while.

