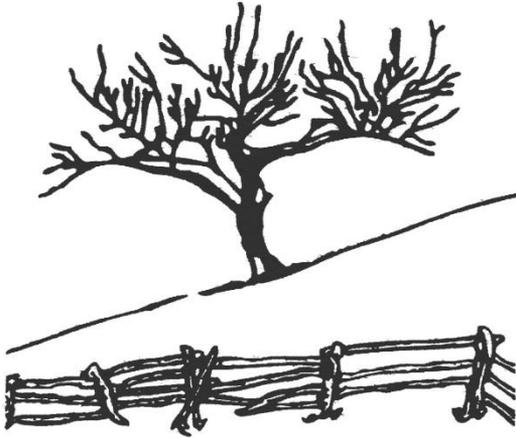


Emma Field

Book One

A novel by

Carol E. Williams



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PROLOGUE



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THE SILVER-HAIRED WOMAN cocked her head to one side and smiled such a tiny smile that the man at the back of the room could not see it. But he knew she was smiling. He knew by the angle of her neck and the delicate motion of her fingertips on her lips that her eyes were soft and distant as she remembered.

“Who influenced me the most?” she repeated to the reporter perched on a wooden chair at the end of the third row. “I didn’t know my mother. My father was good to me.” She paused, her eyes narrowing slightly. “But I believe that those who showed me love and dignity...and the power of taking risks...influenced me the most.”

“Who were those people then?”

“To start with...a girl named Vera, a man named Dr. Watson, and another named Ezra, a woman named Elizabeth...and a boy named John. Yes, they were the first to show me these things.”

“They sound like ordinary folk. Surely, there must have been more influential people, women like Mrs. Mott and Mrs. Stowe?”

The woman smiled again, both hands firmly grasping the podium. “Lucretia Mott and Dr. Emily Stowe? Yes, they influenced me...but they weren’t the first. For some reason, it is always the people who first truly open or close their hearts to us who shape us the most.”

She hesitated, staring at the pale blossoms of the apple tree outside the hall window. “And the place. The place where I began...that influenced me in ways I don’t yet understand.”

“I see,” said the reporter, crossing his arms as he leaned back in his chair. The young woman beside him sat forward, timidly raising her hand.

“But what you just said is so soft,” she said. “Your speech was hard – about changing laws to allow women to vote, to have an equal voice, yet what you just said about people and places is so soft. I don’t even know what I’m asking...I guess I’m just puzzled.”

The speaker nodded her head slowly. “Ahhhh,” she said quietly. “Hard and soft...you can’t have the one without the other. I wouldn’t have been able to do this hard political work had I not first experienced the softness of love. And without the rigid or hard framework of laws which protect women as human beings, there is little room for softness – the safety and nurturance every child requires.”

“Is that what those people did for you...the ones you named?”

The woman nodded and beamed with a smile so generous that even the man at the back of the room could see it. “Yes,” she said. “They showed me ‘all that is.’”

The young woman's hands formed a cup as though she wished to hold the words she knew to be both foreign and true. "I think that I understand. Thank you. How old were you when you met those people?"

"About your age. It's never too early, or too late, to begin."

CHAPTER I



EMMA'S WORLD

EMMA LIVED IN A QUIET WORLD. Most of the sounds and all of the colours came from nature. She absorbed them like moss absorbing a spring rain.

Emma Field – daughter of Jeremiah and the late Josephine, child of the land, child of a Methodist and Quaker community swept by the winds of Lake Ontario – knew where she belonged. The circles of her life were clearly defined. That gave her comfort. It also filled her with fear.

She shoved the sleeves of her dove-grey dress to her elbow and scraped the sticky bread dough from the bowl onto the table top. Closing her eyes, she sprinkled the mound with flour with one hand while with the other she folded the edges over into the middle. She often created games in which she closed her eyes. Today, it was to practise for a day when her vision might be gone. Yesterday, it had been to notice things with her frailer senses. Other days it was to memorize the smallest details of things that mattered to her.

Emma kneaded the dry flour into the dough. In her mind's eye she could see the land to the south of the cabin and the ribs of the rail fence following the contours of the fields sloping down toward the creek. No need to open her eyes: she knew where the fence intersected first with a small pile of snow-dusted rocks, then with a patch of silvery ice. She saw the ribbon of barren maples and beech and butternut and elm stretched from the creek's edge to the far ridge.

Swinging her view to her left, Emma opened her eyes to see if the sun had yet broken through the heavy veil covering the November sky. It hadn't. The bands of cloud were only a lighter grey above the woods.

She closed her eyes again and in her imagination swept past the simple frame house and barn belonging to the Coopers, past the newly constructed log schoolhouse, and on to the fine brick house in the southwest. Emma liked its size, dignity, and sturdiness. It was full of surprises – like the indoor privy and especially the dumb-waiter in the pantry. As they had cooked for each threshing, Anna and Mary Victoria Williams had let Emma use this convenience to pull the jugs of cream up from the coolness of the cellar.

Emma liked Anna and Mary Victoria. They were nice and they were kind. They worked hard. They wore pretty dresses and had older brothers – and both parents.

With the back of her forearm, Emma pushed her hair from her face. She wondered what it would be like to have so much and so many in one's nearest circle. Opening her eyes, she went to the window. The road was empty: empty of people; empty of beasts; empty of colour. Emma cocked her head to one side. She had never noticed until now how the woods, barren of leaves, wrapped themselves around the house like a worn and frayed mother. "Huh!" she said, pleased with herself for having discovered a fresh detail of the world so familiar to her.

Emma returned to the circular mound of silky gold-and-brown dough, plopped it into the three-legged kettle, and gave it a satisfied little pat.

CHAPTER II



FINDING COLOUR

THE SNOW WAS SMACKING like little kisses against the schoolhouse window. It was sticking, melting, then running in tiny rivulets down the outside of the wavy glass above Emma's bench. She forced her pencil across the slate board, looked up at the rivers, sighed heavily, and copied yet another line.

The girl eased sideways on the bench. The snow was falling heavily now. Emma calculated the angle of its path...180 degrees was even with the horizon, 90 degrees was straight up, 45 degrees was half of that. 40, it was close to 40 degrees. Emma wondered what made it fall like that. How could something as light as a snowflake fall with such purpose and speed?

The fire in the wood stove behind Emma snapped. She glanced furtively at Jane, sitting beside her, scratching on her slate board with the diligence of a dog after a lone flea. Emma sighed again and rested her mouth on the inside of her wrist.

The village in the distance was dusted from view by the snow. Emma followed the angle of the snowflakes to the top of the window and imagined flying directly into them, her face stinging. Then she would turn and soar above this patch of earth cleared out of the wilderness of Canada West. She saw what a hawk would see: vast expanses of charcoal grey deciduous woods, patches of smooth white fields, and patches of worn, dark cedar bush. The woods looked like her father's beard, and the fields all pale and sickly white like the skin of

Mr. Brown, who was languishing on the teacher's chair at the front of the classroom. Emma had never seen a man with skin as white as Mr. Brown's.

Her father had once told her there were people who had skin the colour of cocoa working the fields of their white masters in southern United States. He had said the coloureds were becoming restless and nothing but chaos, confusion and the ruination of the cotton industry could come from it. Emma tugged on the waist of her faded cotton dress. It pulled tightly against her breasts. She glanced at the darker band of fabric used to let out the seams this past summer. Her eyes gently closed, she felt the sodden humidity of summer, heard the whine of cicadas, and tasted the tangy fleshiness of raspberries. She leaned her mouth into her knuckles and looked out the window. It was hard to imagine, she mused as she watched the snow falling, that all that lay beyond the window could change to the colours and sounds of summer. That would take time...time or imagination... imagination...was that what was causing the brown people to think that they could be anything but slaves? Women were almost slaves - well, Mrs. Henderson wasn't - she had her own dressmaking business in the village. And there was a woman in Picton with her own school. And Emma supposed that Jane's mother wasn't almost a slave - she had servants of her own - but she was still the property of Mr. Morgan.

A knot tightened in Emma's stomach as she thought about being the property of someone other than her father. One hand dropped to her belly; the other clutched the slate pencil as though it were a lifeline. Emma had begged her father to let her do more of what a tenant farmer's wife would do around the cabin and barn. She didn't need to attend school - no

one did at her age. But he had remained firm: Emma must become a woman schoolmaster - schoolmistress - though she had never heard of such a thing. That way she wouldn't have to be someone's property.

A chair slammed against the wooden platform at the front of the class.

"Uh!" said a wakening Mr. Brown in a loud, startled voice. "Yes. Wipe off your slates now. The Bible reading...George, fetch me the Bible!"

Emma stared at the whitewashed logs of the side wall.

"Turn around, everyone. Now!"

She wheeled in unison with Jane and the other girls to face the boys who were against the far wall.



The snow had stopped when Emma and Jane stepped into the deepening grey of the November afternoon. Emma stared past her cabin to the south.

"Watch that puddle!" said Jane. "You never look at your feet, do you?"

"Why would I look at my feet when there are much better things to look at? I was thinking about the colours of summer. I'm certain that there is more colour here than I can see at this moment. Do you remember how we used to play "I Spy" when we were little? Want to play it again? Come on. It could be fun."

Emma thought of Jane Morgan as a salt-pork friend. Though she was fancy enough to be dessert, she provided Emma with a predictable and salty companionship. Jane's father was a miller in the village. The Morgans lived in a fine brick house

flanked by a huge verandah on the Danforth Road. Emma dreamed of one day having a house with a verandah. She vowed she would sit on it every day of the year, no matter what the weather.

“When will you grow up, Emma Field?” complained Jane.

“I am grown up,” responded Emma, “I am much more grown up than you. It’s just that I also like to be young at heart, shall we say. Let’s play a more adult version then - yellow, no, gold, do you see any gold?”

“The long grass?” asked Jane.

“Right. Your turn.”

“I spy with my little eye something that is grey.”

“The sky?”

“No.”

“The tree trunks,” Emma stated with certainty.

“No.”

“Those rocks over by the fence?”

“No.”

“Everything is grey. Give me a hint,” pleaded Emma.

“You were close when you said the trees. Give in?”

“The fence posts - where they touch the ground!”

“Right, Miss Field!”

“Funny isn’t it, how they’re the colour of rust at the top but a ghostly grey at the bottom.”

“Rusty red and ghostly grey!” Jane scoffed. “Your turn.”

“I spy with my little eye something that is oak brown.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “The grass.”

“No, that is not oak brown.”

“These leaves?” Jane snatched a dry, curled beech leaf from the cold ground as they walked along.

“That’s it!”

“Last one. Something red!”

Emma followed Jane’s glance to where the track turned to the north. Red? She couldn’t see anything red. Her eye caught the thorny stems of the raspberry bush which wound around the limestone-grey stump. “The raspberry bush!”

“Yes.”

“What’s your favourite colour, Jane?”

“Purple.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the colour of royalty. What is your favourite colour?”

“In fabric or in nature?” asked Emma.

“In nature. There aren’t enough colours in fabric.”

“No there aren’t, are there? But there might be one day. Father says that everything is changing – steam power and industrialization are changing everything.”

“I don’t see how that would change colours. Come on, what is your favourite?”

“Scarlet! I love scarlet. The colour of cranberries. Can you imagine having a scarlet cape like the brick-red one Mrs. Henderson made for your mother?”

“What’s wrong with brick-red?”

“Nothing. I just imagine how much prettier scarlet would be, that’s all. I wonder if there is any way you could dye the fabric a brighter red?”

“For a tenant farmer’s daughter you have grand ideas! I’ve never seen you in anything but that grey shawl. Why don’t you make yourself a cape? Maybe Mrs. Henderson could tell you how to dye it brighter. Maybe scarlet!”

Emma didn’t respond. “Race you to the pine,” she yelled over her shoulder as she sprinted down the hill toward the

Danforth Road. Wisps of her hair freed themselves from the bun at the back of her head.

“Why don’t you make a cape? There is nice wool for sale at Bishop’s store,” Jane panted as she caught up to her friend. The two slowed to a walk. Jane steadied herself against the pine tree.

“This shawl is fine. Besides, I’d rather wait till I grow up.”

“You would not! You don’t mean that!” Jane stopped, her hands on her hips, her chest heaving under her blue woollen shawl. “Emma, have you ever had a new dress?”

“I do not need one.” She looked back toward her cabin, her chin proudly thrust upwards.

“You’ve never had a new outfit have you? You’ve only worn made-over clothes. That shawl was Matilda Cooper’s wasn’t it?”

Emma wheeled around. “This is as far as I’m going today. And the shawl? It was my mother’s and it’s perfectly fine! See you tomorrow.” She turned and ran quickly back up the hill, her grey dress and shawl flapping behind her.

Jane stood watching. “Her frock is the colour of those rocks,” she thought. “And her shawl – it’s the colour of pine bark – pine bark in November.”

Jane looked to the west. A faint pink bathed the sky above the pines.

CHAPTER III



THE PLANKS

DEEP GREY HUNG OVER JEREMIAH FIELD and the cows to which he was pitching forkfuls of sweet-smelling hay.

“Father?” Emma poked her head around the doorway.

“Father, are you in here?”

“Over here!” he called.

Emma squinted in the direction of her father’s voice. She could barely see him, swinging hay to the cow in the last stall. The barn was warm, fragrant and dark. Emma loved the Coopers’ barn more than any other building in the world. It was especially nice at this time of year, when the cold winds started to hurt. Her father had not lit a lantern to finish his chores; he knew where everything was. He didn’t need to see, and besides, the Coopers were frugal people who valued hired men who did not waste their hard-earned resources. Jeremiah reached across the doorway to hang the wooden fork on the nearest peg. Emma stared straight ahead.

“Father?” she asked again.

“Yeeees.” He jammed his hands into his pockets. “Go ahead. I’m listening.”

Emma blinked. “Oh...Yes...Father, was this really Mother’s shawl?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering.” She fixed her gaze on the calf tied in the far corner. “Father?”

“Hmmm.”

“Who do I look like?”

“Your mother.” He leaned against the satiny hip of the nearest cow.

“What part of me is like Mother?”

“Everything – the colour of your hair. The way you stick your tongue out when you concentrate. And the way you ask too many questions.”

“Hmm.” Emma curled her lips inward and dug her teeth into her upper lip. He’d never said *that* before. She’d asked him this question often, hoping for another glimpse of the mother she could hardly recall, yet he had never before given her *that* answer.

“Why did Mother ask questions?”

“Why do you ask questions?”

“Because questions can take your mind zig-zagging to places you’ve never been before.”

“A little like a rail fence taking you across the neighbour’s land?”

“I guess so. Sometimes I worry that my questions will take me to places I shouldn’t be. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” he said with a nervous laugh. “Why do you think I am in this country in the first place?”

Emma’s eyebrows came together like knitting needles. She thought about the wisdom about pursuing that comment further, then asked, “How do you know when you are crossing into places you shouldn’t be?”

Her father smiled and rubbed his eyes with his chapped hands. “You will know. Believe me, you will know. The world has a way of beating down people who ask the tough questions.”

“Then why do people ask them if they are only going to be beaten down?”

“Don’t know. Maybe because they can’t help themselves. I really don’t know.”

Emma noticed him rubbing his eyes again in the gloomy light of the doorway. She recalled how, several springs ago, he had covered his face with those hands when she’d previously asked him about her mother. They had been sitting in the doorway watching the Canada geese fly north. He had dragged his hands down over his face, taken a deep breath, and said, “Your mama loved geese. She always said she wanted to fly north with them each spring. Do you ever want to fly, Emma?”

“Every day,” Emma had said solemnly.

“Would you be the lead goose, or the slacker at the back?”

“Both.” She had studied the V shape that became a scattered W, then two Vs before becoming one again. “I’m strong, but even geese know when it’s time to take a rest and let someone else take over.”

There had been a long silence as Emma realized that maybe she wasn’t really talking about herself as a goose. She had smiled, wrapping her arms around her knees. Her father had said nothing.

“I’ll milk Rosalie now,” her father said now, taking a few steps toward their cabin and tiny barn. “Say – I know it’s getting late, but would you run down to Morgan’s Mill and get the strips of blanketing that Caleb has set aside for me? I want to tack them around the door frame before it gets too cold. They’ll be working there for at least another hour.”

“But what about the stew?”

“It’s on the fire already.”

Emma trotted down the hill to the southeast. The western windows of the mill were glowing with lamplight. The millpond was full of frigid water from the rains that had been falling steadily all autumn. She had heard Father say that Caleb Williams wanted to card as much wool and saw as much timber as he could before the ice froze the massive water wheel. Perhaps he was carding wool now.

A slight movement on the bridge over the creek caught Emma's eye. She slowed to a walk, then stopped and squinted. She could see the faint outline of a girl crawling across the bridge on her hands and knees. Emma squinted harder and walked slowly past the mill. The girl appeared to be wearing a dress tattered enough to be discarded and used as a rag in most households. Emma guessed the girl was a Plank from the shack on the other side of the creek. She understood the girl's fear: the water under the bridge at this time of year made you feel you'd be sucked into it and drowned. The child was hesitating, staring at the water below, then looking at the far bank.

Emma had always been the first to help. She had a certainty about her that made her the master of the ship in calm and in storm. When George Robertson had smashed Samuel Barker's nose with a branch from the silver maple tree, Emma had bolted to the boys' side of the playground and forced Samuel to tip his head back. She had dispatched Peter Minaker to fetch Mr. Brown, who promptly chastised her for being on the wrong side of the yard. But this was a storm she didn't know how to navigate. Something felt different - like blood about to spurt from a sudden gash. Emma could almost taste it.

She shifted sideways and for the first time saw a woman standing amongst the cedars on the far bank, her skirts wet and hanging limply around her ankles. The woman raised a rifle to shoulder height and pointed it at the girl crawling toward her on the bridge. Emma's legs went limp and she sank into the tall grass beside the track, shaking violently. The girl's bare hands clutched at the timber in front of her. Her dress caught under her knee and she slumped forward.

Emma looked over to the far bank. The woman was lowering her rifle and shouting something into the din of the rushing creek. The child dragged herself to her feet, stumbled over last few yards of the bridge, and struggled up the bank. The woman wheeled around and strode away. Emma caught sight of her at the next break in the trees. The girl staggered after the woman, holding her wet skirts to her knees.

Her legs now cramped and tingly, Emma turned just in time to see the silhouette of Caleb Williams heaving the mill door shut.

"Mr. Williams! Mr. Williams, sir!" She called out to him. Caleb jumped.

"Good heavens, child, where did you come from?"

Emma wasn't certain how to answer that. "Thank you...I'm sorry...Father asked that I fetch the woollen strips you offered him."

"Oh, is that it? Here they are, just inside the door."

"Thank you, sir. And Mr. Williams, do you know the people who live in the shack on the other side of the creek?"

"The Planks? Yes, I know them to see them. A sorry lot, they are," he said, shaking his head thoughtfully.

"Are they...do they...do you think that they would hurt one another?"

“That’s a strange question but, yes, I suppose that they just might hurt one another. What makes you ask such a thing?”

“Oh, nothing.” Emma was uncertain. Adults were different when it came to dealing with the wrongs of other adults. They were so quick to chastise youngsters, but so tight-mouthed about the behaviour of adults. “You look cold, Emma. Let me give you a ride up the hill. Hop up on old Jed. That’s right. Giddy-up, Jed.”

The wind had turned colder and carried with it a bone-chilling dampness. Emma ducked behind Caleb’s broad back and gripped the fabric of his coat.

End of sample.
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