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# The Midwife's Ledger

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## Introduction

I write by a tallow candle that gutters in the draught, the flame bowing as if in prayer. The ledger upon my lap is bound in the leather of an old glove, its pages stitched with thread I saved from the hem of a christening gown. Here are the names of mothers, and the names of babes when they are granted them; here are marks for those that came head-first and those that turned stubborn; here are measures of rosemary and rue, of honey warmed and oil made fragrant with juniper; here are prayers whispered against fever and charms folded into the corner of a sheet. This book is a private map of my work and my worry, for there are things a woman may witness in a birthing room that cannot be spoken aloud in market or church, lest the tongues of men make them strange and wicked.

Our parish lies where the lanes narrow and the hedges rise, where the old Roman road breaks into ruts and the miller's wheel turns faster than the year. To the east, the manor fields lie in crisp order; to the west, the commons and the thorn brake invite both gathering and gossip. The bell at Saint Bride's keeps time for us all: it tolls for mass and marriage and, too often, for mourning. There are those who ride through with cloaks lined in velvet and Latin on their lips, and others who pray with cracked hands and winter on their breath. Yet birth levels us, I have seen it do so. A girl with a linen cap or a woman with a pearl at her ear—both learn to breathe the same way when the second pain grips them, and both grip my wrist until my bones remember.

You must understand, dear reader—if you read this in a year when our names have faded from parish vellum—that a ledger such as mine is not welcomed by all. A midwife is sworn to certain oaths and watched by certain eyes. There are those who say writing is a man's craft, and measuring a physician's realm, and that a woman who keeps a book keeps secrets too. They are not wrong on the last; I keep secrets because some belong to the mother and none other. So I hide these pages beneath the rushes when the curate calls, and I scratch my notes in the hush between cries, marking the way a storm blows on a woman's back, and whether a moorhen nested early that spring, and if the moon was in a soft or churlish quarter. Patterns make themselves known if one looks kindly and long.

Lately the world has grown noisy with learning. Men carry knives and books into halls where the dead are opened, and they say they are making light in the dark for the good of us all. The barber-surgeon laughs at my poultices, the physician frowns at my saints, and both would have me licensed by their guild or not at all. I do not begrudge them their cleverness; I have sent for them when a mother bled like Michaelmas rain and I feared to lose her. But there is a difference between a theory mapped on clean parchment and a child turning blue while a fire sinks to embers. There is a difference

between a decree posted at the market cross and the soft, stubborn life of a poor woman's womb. Between us stand the old ways—some foolish, some fine—and the new—some bold, some blind—and I am asked to choose with every breath.

You will find in these chapters a braid of both. When I tie a red thread at a wrist to keep a babe tethered to the living, I do it because my grandmother taught me and because I have, in truth, seen a mother breathe easier for it. When I turn a woman upon her hands and knees for a back-lying babe, it is not the stars that tell me, but the shape beneath my palms and the voice within me that has learned from a hundred such turns. I have counted heartbeats under my ear; I have watched urine cloud in a glass to foretell danger; I have burned feathers to smoke out a fever's hold. I have also boiled my blades, kept my nails clean, and broken a pane in winter to let in air when the room grew sour with breath. Call it superstition if you like, or call it care. I have little time for the arguing of names when a life hangs in the space between two candles.

The women you will meet here are not only vessels of their children. They are keepers of songs, tenders of hearths, walkers of long miles with baskets that bite the crook of the arm. Some lay in a linen bed with their mother's mother's sheets beneath them; some crouch on straw, their husbands counting pennies in the next room. I will tell you of Agnes who labored through a plague bell's tolling, and of Mistress Hartwell whose child was baptized in a kitchen basin before the curate could be fetched. I will tell you of a night when the guildhall burned and the city smelled of pitch, and of a morning when the frost made lace at every window and we warmed stones to tuck at a mother's feet. Not all stories end as we wish. I write the lost as tenderly as I can, so that they will not be measured only by the measure of their sorrow.

If you think me bold to set these things down, know that I am also afraid. Afraid of the word witch drifting like ash from a stranger's mouth, afraid of a seal on a paper nailed to our parish door, afraid of my own mistakes, which I tally here in ink to keep them from nesting unchallenged in my head. But fear is a poor midwife. Courage and memory make better companions. So I have taken an apprentice with ink on her fingers and questions that do not tire; I have taught her to count to the length of a pain and to listen for the way a woman grows quiet when she is ready to push. I have shown her the ledger and told her to add to it, so that our knowledge will not be spilt like water and lost in the straw.

Should this book outlast me and lie one day in hands I will never hold, receive it as both confession and craft. Read it for the tinctures if you must, for the remedies I have tried and tried again; read it for the names, so that the dead live a little longer in your mouth; read it for the quarrels between church and shop and hearth that made and unmade our days. Above all, read it for the women, whose labor is the ground beneath every fine building and loud proclamation. Their strength, not the surgeon's steel nor the physician's Latin, is what turns the wheel of the world.

I begin where I always do: with a candle, a woman's hand in mine, and the old leather book open to a clean page.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Birth at Fern Hollow

The night air clung to the thatch of Fern Hollow cottage like damp wool, and the wind whispered through the bare hedgerows as if urging the world to hold its breath. Inside, the fire had dwindled to a handful of glowing embers, casting a wavering amber over the rough-hewn table where a battered tin mug sat half-filled with weak ale. Mistress Elsbeth, her belly swollen like a ripe gourd, leaned against the settle, her breathing shallow and ragged. She gripped the wooden armrests with knuckles whitened, eyes fixed on the dark rafters where spiders spun their silent traps.

Across the room, I knelt on a rush-strewn floor, my hands already warmed by the friction of rubbing rosemary between my palms. The scent rose sharp and green, cutting through the stale smell of sweat and woodsmoke. I had come at the first call of her husband, Thomas, whose boots still bore the mud of the lane, and whose face bore the tight line of a man who feared more than he could say. He hovered near the door, unwilling to enter, yet unwilling to leave his wife to face the trial alone.

Outside, the owl's hoot punctuated the silence, a reminder that night was not merely darkness but a living thing with its own rhythms. I whispered a low prayer to Saint Margaret, patron of childbirth, not because I believed the saints could sway fate, but because the rhythm of the words steadied my own heart. Elsbeth's contractions came in waves, each one tightening her abdomen like a rope pulled taut, then releasing just enough for her to draw a ragged breath before the next surge began.

I placed a cool cloth, soaked in spring water and a few drops of lavender oil, across her forehead. The chill seemed to draw the heat from her skin, and she sighed, a sound half relief, half exhaustion. Thomas, emboldened by the gesture, stepped closer, his calloused hand hovering near hers before he withdrew, unsure of his place. I reminded him, softly, that his presence was a tether, that the simple act of holding her hand could anchor her when the world seemed to spin.

The first strong contraction arrived with a groan that seemed to shake the very timbers of the cottage. Elsbeth's body arched, her back pressing hard against the settle, and I felt the familiar pressure of the baby's head against the cervix through the thin membrane of my gloves. I whispered encouragement, not the hollow platitudes of well-wishers, but the concrete reminder that each surge brought her closer to meeting the child she had carried through months of scarce grain and lingering cough.

Between contractions, I checked the progress with the tips of my fingers, feeling the dilation widen like a slow-opening blossom. The midwife's art lies not in grand

gestures but in the patient attunement to subtle shifts—the way the mother’s skin flushes, the way her breath catches, the way the room itself seems to hold its tension. I noted the timing in my mind, each interval a bead on the rosary of labor, and murmured the count so Thomas could hear, giving him a focal point beyond his own fear.

The fire sputtered, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney, and for a moment the room was lit by a fleeting brilliance that made the rushes glow like emeralds. Elsbeth clung to the settle, her nails leaving half-moon marks in the wood. I urged her to change position, to roll onto her left side, a shift that often eases the descent of a stubborn presentation. She resisted at first, the pain making any movement feel like betrayal, but with my steady hand on her hip and Thomas’s hesitant support, she shifted, the mattress creaking under her weight.

As she settled, a new sensation rose—a deep, burning pressure that signaled the baby’s head was crowning. I warned her gently, “When you feel the stretch, do not push hard; let the body do its work.” She nodded, eyes wide, sweat beading on her upper lip like dew on a spider’s web. The room fell into a rhythm of breath and pause, each inhalation a preparation, each exhalation a surrender.

The head emerged, slick with vernix, a tiny crown of dark hair plastered to the forehead. I caught it with both hands, supporting the delicate skull as it slid free, feeling the sudden rush of relief that always follows the moment the child breaks the barrier of flesh. Elsbeth cried out, not in pain but in astonishment, a raw, fierce sound that seemed to tear from her chest and fill the cottage’s small space.

I placed the newborn on Elsbeth’s chest, the infant’s skin warm and slick against hers, the tiny heart hammering against her breast like a trapped bird. The cord pulsed, a lifeline still tethering mother and child, and I waited for it to cease its throbbing before clamping it with a clean linen strip and a pair of boiled scissors. The cut was clean, the blood dark and thick, and I wiped it away with a fresh cloth, mindful of the superstition that warned against letting the blood linger on the floor.

Thomas, tears cutting tracks through the grime on his cheeks, reached a trembling hand to touch his son’s cheek. The baby’s fingers curled instinctively around his thumb, a reflex as old as humanity itself. I whispered a blessing, not for divine favor but for the simple hope that this child would know the warmth of a hearth, the taste of fresh bread, and the sound of his father’s laughter ringing over the fields.

Elsbeth, exhausted yet radiant, pressed her lips to the baby’s forehead, her breath shuddering as she whispered a name she had carried in silence for months: “Samuel.” The name settled in the air like a promise, soft and certain. I recorded the birth in my ledger that very night, the ink still wet as I scratched the date, the mother’s name, the child’s sex, and the time of delivery—just after the third bell of Saint Bride’s had tolled,

marking the hour when night begins its slow retreat toward dawn.

After the cord was severed and the placenta expelled, I inspected it carefully, noting its shape and completeness, for an abnormal placenta could herald trouble for the mother's recovery. It appeared whole, lobes intact, the maternal side a deep reddish-brown, the fetal side a smooth, shiny surface. I placed it in a clean bowl, intending to bury it later beneath the old apple tree, a small rite to honor the life that had sustained the child.

I then turned my attention to Elsbeth's recovery. She shivered despite the fire's renewed glow, her body expended in the monumental effort of bringing forth life. I wrapped her in a fresh linen sheet, warmed it near the hearth, and gave her a draught of weak elderflower tea sweetened with a touch of honey, known to ease afterpains and restore fluids. Thomas fetched a bucket of clean water from the well, and I washed her perineal area gently, applying a comfrey poultice to soothe the swelling and reduce the risk of infection.

The cottage settled into a hushed vigil. The baby, now swaddled in a strip of wool dyed with woad, slept with faint, irregular breaths, his tiny chest rising and falling like a tide. Elsbeth's eyelids grew heavy, but she fought sleep, wanting to imprint every detail of her son's face upon her memory. I stayed by her side, my own fatigue dulled by the quiet awe that always follows a successful birth.

When the first pale light of dawn crept through the shutters, painting the rushes with a silver hue, Thomas rose to tend the fire, adding fresh kindling and setting the pot on to boil water for the morning's porridge. I took the opportunity to step outside for a moment, to fill my lungs with the crisp air scented with earth and distant woodsmoke, and to listen to the world waking—birds stirring in the hedgerows, the distant low of cattle, the creak of the mill wheel beginning its turn.

Returning inside, I found Elsbeth finally asleep, her breathing deep and even, Samuel still nestled against her breast, his small hand curled around a fold of her shift. I recorded the final notes of the birth: the weight of the infant—approximately seven pounds, the time of placenta delivery—twenty minutes after the child, and any observations—no excessive bleeding, good uterine tone, mother's vitals stabilizing.

As the sun climbed higher, casting long shadows across the floor, I packed my satchel with the remnants of my supplies: a spare length of clean linen, a small vial of juniper oil for future use, and a pinch of dried rue, just in case. Thomas pressed a modest copper coin into my palm, his gratitude evident despite his usual reserve. I declined further payment, reminding him that the ledger itself was my record, my oath, and that the true fee was the trust placed in my hands.

We shared a quiet meal of barley broth and coarse bread, the simplicity of the fare a

stark contrast to the miracle that had unfolded in their humble dwelling. Elsbeth, though weary, managed a weak smile, her eyes bright with a fierce protectiveness that no hardship could dim. Samuel stirred in his sleep, a tiny fist unclenching and then closing again, as if already testing the strength of his grip on the world.

The morning wore on, and I prepared to leave, knowing that other women in the parish would soon send word of their own labors. I paused at the threshold, looking back at the cottage where life had just begun anew. Fern Hollow, with its crooked chimney and stubborn hedges, had witnessed another passage from the dark waters of the womb into the light of day—a reminder that, regardless of the shifting tides of medicine and superstition, the core of midwifery endures: a steady hand, a watchful eye, and the quiet courage to stand beside a woman as she brings forth the next generation.

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