*Chapter 2*

# The Midwife

"Do you have calendula?" the midwife said. "I also need lobelia and witch hazel."

She was sitting at the kitchen counter, watching Mother rummage through our birchwood cabinets. An electric scale sat on the counter between them, and occasionally Mother would use it to weigh dried leaves. It was spring. There was a morning chill despite the bright sunlight.

"I made a fresh batch of calendula last week," Mother said. "Tara, run and fetch it."

I retrieved the tincture, and my mother packed it in a plastic grocery bag with the dried herbs. "Anything else?" Mother laughed. The pitch was high, nervous. The midwife intimidated her, and when intimidated my mother took on a weightless quality, whisking about every time the midwife made one of her slow, solid movements.

The midwife surveyed her list. "That will do."

She was a short, plump woman in her late forties, with eleven children and a russet-colored wart on her chin. She had the longest hair I'd ever seen, a cascade the color of field mice that fell to her

knees when she took it out of its tight bun. Her features were heavy, her voice thick with authority. She had no license, no certificates. She was a midwife entirely by the power of her own say-so, which was more than enough.

Mother was to be her assistant. I remember watching them that first day, comparing them. Mother with her rose-petal skin and her hair curled into soft waves that bounced about her shoulders. Her eyelids shimmered. Mother did her makeup every morning, but if she didn't have time she'd apologize all day, as if by not doing it, she had inconvenienced everyone.

The midwife looked as though she hadn't given a thought to her appearance in a decade, and the way she carried herself made you feel foolish for having noticed.

The midwife nodded goodbye, her arms full of Mother's herbs.

The next time the midwife came she brought her daughter Maria, who stood next to her mother, imitating her movements, with a baby wedged against her wiry nine-year-old frame. I stared hopefully at her. I hadn't met many other girls like me, who didn't go to school. I edged closer, trying to draw her attention, but she was wholly absorbed in listening to her mother, who was explaining how cramp bark and motherwort should be administered to treat post-birth contractions. Maria's head bobbed in agreement; her eyes never left her mother's face.

I trudged down the hall to my room, alone, but when I turned to shut the door she was standing in it, still toting the baby on her hip. He was a meaty box of flesh, and her torso bent sharply at the waist to offset his bulk.

"Are you going?" she said.

I didn't understand the question.

"I always go," she said. "Have you seen a baby get born?"

"No."

"I have, lots of times. Do you know what it means when a baby comes breech?"

"No." I said it like an apology.

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THE FIRST TIME MOTHER assisted with a birth she was gone for two days. Then she wafted through the back door, so pale she seemed translucent, and drifted to the couch, where she stayed, trembling. “It was awful,” she whispered. “Even Judy said she was scared.” Mother closed her eyes. “She didn’t *look* scared.”

Mother rested for several minutes, until she regained some color, then she told the story. The labor had been long, grueling, and when the baby finally came the mother had torn, and badly. There was blood everywhere. The hemorrhage wouldn’t stop. That’s when Mother realized the umbilical cord had wrapped around the baby’s throat. He was purple, so still Mother thought he was dead. As Mother recounted these details, the blood drained from her face until she sat, pale as an egg, her arms wrapped around herself.

Audrey made chamomile tea and we put our mother to bed. When Dad came home that night, Mother told him the same story. “I can’t do it,” she said. “Judy can, but I can’t.” Dad put an arm on her shoulder. “This is a calling from the Lord,” he said. “And sometimes the Lord asks for hard things.”

Mother didn’t want to be a midwife. Midwifery had been Dad’s idea, one of his schemes for self-reliance. There was nothing he hated more than our being dependent on the Government. Dad said one day we would be completely off the grid. As soon as he could get the money together, he planned to build a pipeline to bring water down from the mountain, and after that he’d install solar panels all over the farm. That way we’d have water and electricity in the End of Days, when everyone else was drinking from puddles and living in darkness. Mother was an herbalist so she could tend our health, and if she learned to midwife she would be able to deliver the grandchildren when they came along.

The midwife came to visit Mother a few days after the first birth. She brought Maria, who again followed me to my room. “It’s too bad your mother got a bad one her first time,” she said, smiling. “The next one

will be easier."

A few weeks later, this prediction was tested. It was midnight. Because we didn't have a phone, the midwife called Grandma-down-the-hill, who walked up the hill, tired and ornery, and barked that it was time for Mother to go "play doctor." She stayed only minutes but woke the whole house. "Why you people can't just go to a hospital like everyone else is beyond me," she shouted, slamming the door on her way out.

Mother retrieved her overnight bag and the tackle box she'd filled with dark bottles of tincture, then she walked slowly out the door. I was anxious and slept badly, but when Mother came home the next morning, hair deranged and dark circles under her eyes, her lips were parted in a wide smile. "It was a girl," she said. Then she went to bed and slept all day.

Months passed in this way, Mother leaving the house at all hours and coming home, trembling, relieved to her core that it was over. By the time the leaves started to fall she'd helped with a dozen births. By the end of winter, several dozen. In the spring she told my father she'd had enough, that she could deliver a baby if she had to, if it was the End of the World. Now she could stop.

Dad's face sank when she said this. He reminded her that this was God's will, that it would bless our family. "You need to be a midwife," he said. "You need to deliver a baby on your own."

Mother shook her head. "I can't," she said. "Besides, who would hire me when they could hire Judy?"

She'd jinxed herself, thrown her gauntlet before God. Soon after, Maria told me her father had a new job in Wyoming. "Mom says your mother should take over," Maria said. A thrilling image took shape in my imagination, of me in Maria's role, the midwife's daughter, confident, knowledgeable. But when I turned to look at my mother standing next to me, the image turned to vapor.

Midwifery was not illegal in the state of Idaho, but it had not yet been sanctioned. If a delivery went wrong, a midwife might face charges for practicing medicine without a license; if things went very

wrong, she could face criminal charges for manslaughter, even prison time. Few women would take such a risk, so midwives were scarce: on the day Judy left for Wyoming, Mother became the only midwife for a hundred miles.

Women with swollen bellies began coming to the house and begging Mother to deliver their babies. Mother crumpled at the thought. One woman sat on the edge of our faded yellow sofa, her eyes cast downward, as she explained that her husband was out of work and they didn't have money for a hospital. Mother sat quietly, eyes focused, lips tight, her whole expression momentarily solid. Then the expression dissolved and she said, in her small voice, "I'm not a midwife, just an assistant."

The woman returned several times, perching on our sofa again and again, describing the uncomplicated births of her other children. Whenever Dad saw the woman's car from the junkyard, he'd often come into the house, quietly, through the back door, on the pretense of getting water; then he'd stand in the kitchen taking slow, silent sips, his ear bent toward the living room. Each time the woman left Dad could hardly contain his excitement, so that finally, succumbing to either the woman's desperation or to Dad's elation, or to both, Mother gave way.

The birth went smoothly. Then the woman had a friend who was also pregnant, and Mother delivered her baby as well. Then that woman had a friend. Mother took on an assistant. Before long she was delivering so many babies that Audrey and I spent our days driving around the valley with her, watching her conduct prenatal exams and prescribe herbs. She became our teacher in a way that, because we rarely held school at home, she'd never been before. She explained every remedy and palliative. If So-and-so's blood pressure was high, she should be given hawthorn to stabilize the collagen and dilate the coronary blood vessels. If Mrs. Someone-or-other was having premature contractions, she needed a bath in ginger to increase the supply of oxygen to the uterus.

Midwifing changed my mother. She was a grown woman with seven children, but this was the first time in her life that she was, without

question or caveat, the one in charge. Sometimes, in the days after a birth, I detected in her something of Judy's heavy presence, in a forceful turn of her head, or the imperious arch of an eyebrow. She stopped wearing makeup, then she stopped apologizing for not wearing it.

Mother charged about five hundred dollars for a delivery, and this was another way midwifing changed her: suddenly she had money. Dad didn't believe that women should work, but I suppose he thought it was all right for Mother to be paid for midwifing, because it undermined the Government. Also, we needed the money. Dad worked harder than any man I knew, but scrapping and building barns and hay sheds didn't bring in much, and it helped that Mother could buy groceries with the envelopes of small bills she kept in her purse. Sometimes, if we'd spent the whole day flying about the valley, delivering herbs and doing prenatal exams, Mother would use that money to take me and Audrey out to eat. Grandma-over-in-town had given me a journal, pink with a caramel-colored teddy bear on the cover, and in it I recorded the first time Mother took us to a restaurant, which I described as "real fancy with menus and everything." According to the entry, my meal came to $3.30.

Mother also used the money to improve herself as a midwife. She bought an oxygen tank in case a baby came out and couldn't breathe, and she took a suturing class so she could stitch the women who tore. Judy had always sent women to the hospital for stitches, but Mother was determined to learn. *Self-reliance,* I imagine her thinking.

With the rest of the money, Mother put in a phone line.* One day a white van appeared, and a handful of men in dark overalls began climbing over the utility poles by the highway. Dad burst through the back door demanding to know what the hell was going on. "I thought you *wanted* a phone," Mother said, her eyes so full of surprise they were irreproachable. She went on, talking fast. "You said there could be trouble if someone goes into labor and Grandma isn't home to take the call. I thought, He's right, we need a phone! Silly me! Did I misunderstand?"

Dad stood there for several seconds, his mouth open. Of course a

midwife needs a phone, he said. Then he went back to the junkyard and that's all that was ever said about it. We hadn't had a telephone for as long as I could remember, but the next day there it was, resting in a lime-green cradle, its glossy finish looking out of place next to the murky jars of cohosh and skullcap.

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LUKE WAS FIFTEEN WHEN he asked Mother if he could have a birth certificate. He wanted to enroll in Driver's Ed because Tony, our oldest brother, was making good money driving rigs hauling gravel, which he could do because he had a license. Shawn and Tyler, the next oldest after Tony, had birth certificates; it was only the youngest four—Luke, Audrey, Richard and me—who didn't.

Mother began to file the paperwork. I don't know if she talked it over with Dad first. If she did, I can't explain what changed his mind—why suddenly a ten-year policy of not registering with the Government ended without a struggle—but I think maybe it was that telephone. It was almost as if my father had come to accept that if he were really going to do battle with the Government, he would have to take certain risks. Mother's being a midwife would subvert the Medical Establishment, but in order to be a midwife she needed a phone. Perhaps the same logic was extended to Luke: Luke would need income to support a family, to buy supplies and prepare for the End of Days, so he needed a birth certificate. The other possibility is that Mother didn't ask Dad. Perhaps she just decided, on her own, and he accepted her decision. Perhaps even he—charismatic gale of a man that he was—was temporarily swept aside by the force of her.

Once she had begun the paperwork for Luke, Mother decided she might as well get birth certificates for all of us. It was harder than she expected. She tore the house apart looking for documents to prove we were her children. She found nothing. In my case, no one was sure when I'd been born. Mother remembered one date, Dad another, and Grandma-down-the-hill, who went to town and swore an affidavit that I was her granddaughter, gave a third date.

Mother called the church headquarters in Salt Lake City. A clerk there found a certificate from my christening, when I was a baby, and another from my baptism, which, as with all Mormon children, had occurred when I was eight. Mother requested copies. They arrived in the mail a few days later. “For Pete’s sake!” Mother said when she opened the envelope. Each document gave a different birth date, and neither matched the one Grandma had put on the affidavit.

That week Mother was on the phone for hours every day. With the receiver wedged against her shoulder, the cord stretched across the kitchen, she cooked, cleaned, and strained tinctures of goldenseal and blessed thistle, while having the same conversation over and over.

“Obviously I should have registered her when she was born, but I didn’t. So here we are.”

Voices murmured on the other end of the line.

“I’ve already *told* you—*and* your subordinate, *and* your subordinate’s subordinate, and *fifty* other people this week—she doesn’t *have* school or medical records. She doesn’t have them! They weren’t lost. I can’t ask for copies. They don’t exist!”

“Her birthday? Let’s say the twenty-seventh.”

“No, I’m not sure.”

“No, I don’t have documentation.”

“Yes, I’ll hold.”

The voices always put Mother on hold when she admitted that she didn’t know my birthday, passing her up the line to their superiors, as if not knowing what day I was born delegitimized the entire notion of my having an identity. You can’t be a person without a birthday, they seemed to say. I didn’t understand why not. Until Mother decided to get my birth certificate, not knowing my birthday had never seemed strange. I knew I’d been born near the end of September, and each year I picked a day, one that didn’t fall on a Sunday because it’s no fun spending your birthday in church. Sometimes I wished Mother would give me the phone so I could explain. “I have a birthday, same as you,” I wanted to tell the voices. “It just changes. Don’t you wish you could change your birthday?”

Eventually, Mother persuaded Grandma-down-the-hill to swear a new affidavit claiming I'd been born on the twenty-seventh, even though Grandma still believed it was the twenty-ninth, and the state of Idaho issued a Delayed Certificate of Birth. I remember the day it came in the mail. It felt oddly dispossessing, being handed this first legal proof of my personhood: until that moment, it had never occurred to me that proof was required.

In the end, I got my birth certificate long before Luke got his. When Mother had told the voices on the phone that she thought I'd been born sometime in the last week of September, they'd been silent. But when she told them she wasn't exactly sure whether Luke had been born in May or June, that set the voices positively buzzing.

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THAT FALL, WHEN I was nine, I went with Mother on a birth. I'd been asking to go for months, reminding her that Maria had seen a dozen births by the time she was my age. "I'm not a nursing mother," she said. "I have no reason to take you. Besides, you wouldn't like it."

Eventually, Mother was hired by a woman who had several small children. It was arranged; I would tend them during the birth.

The call came in the middle of the night. The mechanical ring drilled its way down the hall, and I held my breath, hoping it wasn't a wrong number. A minute later Mother was at my bedside. "It's time," she said, and together we ran to the car.

For ten miles Mother rehearsed with me what I was to say if the worst happened and the Feds came. Under no circumstances was I to tell them that my mother was a midwife. If they asked why we were there, I was to say nothing. Mother called it "the art of shutting up." "You just keep saying you were asleep and you didn't see anything and you don't know anything and you can't remember why we're here," she said. "Don't give them any more rope to hang me with than they already have."

Mother fell into silence. I studied her as she drove. Her face was illuminated by the lights in the dashboard, and it appeared ghostly

white set against the utter blackness of country roads. Fear was etched into her features, in the bunching of her forehead and the tightening of her lips. Alone with just me, she put aside the persona she displayed for others. She was her old self again, fragile, breathy.

I heard soft whispers and realized they were coming from her. She was chanting what-ifs to herself. What if something went wrong? What if there was a medical history they hadn't told her about, some complication? Or what if it was something ordinary, a common crisis, and she panicked, froze, failed to stop the hemorrhage in time? In a few minutes we would be there, and she would have two lives in her small, trembling hands. Until that moment, I'd never understood the risk she was taking. "People die in hospitals," she whispered, her fingers clenching the wheel, wraithlike. "Sometimes God calls them home, and there's nothing anyone can do. But if it happens to a midwife—" She turned, speaking directly to me. "All it takes is one mistake, and you'll be visiting me in prison."

We arrived and Mother transformed. She issued a string of commands, to the father, to the mother, and to me. I almost forgot to do what she asked, I couldn't take my eyes off her. I realize now that that night I was seeing her for the first time, the secret strength of her.

She barked orders and we moved wordlessly to follow them. The baby was born without complications. It was mythic and romantic, being an intimate witness to this turn in life's cycle, but Mother had been right, I didn't like it. It was long and exhausting, and smelled of groin sweat.

I didn't ask to go on the next birth. Mother returned home pale and shaking. Her voice quivered as she told me and my sister the story: how the unborn baby's heart rate had dropped dangerously low, to a mere tremor; how she'd called an ambulance, then decided they couldn't wait and taken the mother in her own car. She'd driven at such speed that by the time she made it to the hospital, she'd acquired a police escort. In the ER, she'd tried to give the doctors the information they needed without seeming too knowledgeable, without making them suspect that she was an unlicensed midwife.

An emergency cesarean was performed. The mother and baby

remained in the hospital for several days, and by the time they were released Mother had stopped trembling. In fact, she seemed exhilarated and had begun to tell the story differently, relishing the moment she'd been pulled over by the policeman, who was surprised to find a moaning woman, obviously in labor, in the backseat. "I slipped into the scatterbrained-woman routine," she told me and Audrey, her voice growing louder, catching hold. "Men like to think they're saving some brain-dead woman who's got herself into a scrape. All I had to do was step aside and let *him* play the hero!"

The most dangerous moment for Mother had come minutes later, in the hospital, after the woman had been wheeled away. A doctor stopped Mother and asked why she'd been at the birth in the first place. She smiled at the memory. "I asked him the dumbest questions I could think of." She put on a high, coquettish voice very unlike her own. "Oh! Was that the baby's head? Aren't babies supposed to come out feet-first?" The doctor was persuaded that she couldn't possibly be a midwife.

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THERE WERE NO HERBALISTS in Wyoming as good as Mother, so a few months after the incident at the hospital, Judy came to Buck's Peak to restock. The two women chatted in the kitchen, Judy perched on a barstool, Mother leaning across the counter, her head resting lazily in her hand. I took the list of herbs to the storeroom. Maria, lugging a different baby, followed. I pulled dried leaves and clouded liquids from the shelves, all the while gushing about Mother's exploits, finishing with the confrontation in the hospital. Maria had her own stories about dodging Feds, but when she began to tell one I interrupted her.

"Judy is a fine midwife," I said, my chest rising. "But when it comes to doctors and cops, *nobody* plays stupid like my mother."

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* While everyone agrees that there were many years in which my parents did not have a phone, there is considerable disagreement in the family about which years they were. I've asked my brothers, aunts, uncles and cousins, but I have not been able to definitively establish a timeline, and have therefore relied on my own memories.