

At HOME in TRINITY • 1

THE MIDWIFE'S TALE

DELIA PARR



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Delia Parr, *The Midwife's Tale*
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*Dedicated to the loving memory of my sisters,
Kathy and Susan*

Wish you'd stayed here . . . just a little longer.

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May all your days be blessed . . . and may you all know the full measure of His never ending love.



1

JUNE 1830

WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

A full two weeks later than expected, the blessed moment had finally arrived.

Surrounded by a cadre of female assistants, midwife Martha Cade knelt before her patient under the watchful gaze of the soon-to-be father. She was fully satisfied, if not pleasantly surprised, at how quickly Diana Tyler's labor was proceeding. At this rate, the babe should be born before breakfast, and Martha would finally be able to head for home.

Martha's hands were steady. Her mind was focused. Her heart was starting to race. In an atmosphere charged with great expectations and high emotion, yet underlined with a respectful dose of healthy concern, her spirit trembled with anticipation. With years of experience to guide her, she knew that soon—very, very soon—she would bear witness to life's greatest miracle.

She glanced up at Captain Tyler, who held his wife on his lap.

A large man, he dwarfed the collapsible birthing stool Martha carried with her for deliveries. Beads of nervous perspiration dotted his brow. His lips were set in a firm line.

When he looked back at her, she answered the unspoken questions in his gaze with a reassuring smile. Then she turned all of her attention to his wife, Diana, a young woman with fine, wide hips and a strong constitution that should make for a quick and easy delivery. Her pregnancy had proceeded perfectly, with the exception of extending well beyond the time the baby had been expected.

Martha knew better than to count on anything as certain when dealing with pregnancy and birth, but for a first-time mother-to-be like Diana, each and every additional day that passed only fueled undue concern for her, not to mention discomfort.

Normally, Martha would simply have visited Diana every few days as her confinement neared an end to reassure her that all was well. The fact that Captain Tyler and his wife lived a full fifty miles from Martha's home in Trinity had made that impossible. When Captain Tyler summoned Martha two weeks ago, expecting birth was imminent, nature surprised everyone but Martha, who always left home prepared for the unexpected.

She did not relish being so far away from home and her daughter, Victoria, now a young woman of seventeen, for so long. Martha's duties as the only midwife and healer in the area, however, carried heavy responsibilities and offered rewards, both monetary and spiritual, that often meant sacrifice—sacrifice she had been forced to make once she had been left widowed with two children to support and raise on her own.

Although burdened with the sorrows of early widowhood more than ten years ago, Martha had been blessed with a supportive family. Her son, Oliver, now lived in Boston, where he

practiced law. She and Victoria shared a room in her brother's tavern in Trinity, which allowed Martha to leave to attend her patients, confident her brother, James, and his wife, Lydia, would provide guidance to Victoria while Martha was away.

Freed from other concerns, Martha had been able to give her full attention to Diana these past two weeks, offering comfort and reassurance. With the birth of Diana's child now truly imminent, Martha was both excited and thrilled, and she studied her patient closely.

Damp tendrils of dark hair framed Diana's face. Her eyes were dulled from pain as she sat on her husband's lap. Martha offered her a broad smile as she lifted the woman's birthing gown and placed her hands on Diana's knees. "When the next forcing pain starts, I want you to push. Hard. One more good forcing pain should do it. This babe is in a mighty big hurry to get here," she teased.

Diana's eyes lit with surprise, and she laughed nervously. "A hurry? He's two weeks late!"

"Well, he or she is making up for lost time. So when I tell you, push. Push hard. And keep your feet flat on the floor. Nature and I will do the rest." She turned and nodded to the women on either side of her who had a firm but gentle hold on Diana's hands. "Our work is just about done, ladies."

When the forcing pain began, Diana's smile quickly disappeared. Her brows knitted together, and she clenched her teeth. Deep groans spurred Martha to action, and she rested her hands on the soft, warm flesh surrounding the birth canal.

"Push!"

Diana's groans turned into one short, shrill scream as the baby's head emerged, and Martha cradled it in the palms of her hands as more fluids emerged.

"Relax. Just relax a moment. That's a good mama. Take a

breath,” she urged as the pain receded and Diana closed her eyes. “Now another good, deep breath. Then one more forcing pain, and you’ll have your baby.”

Diana gritted her teeth and opened one eye. “You said that with the last pain.”

Martha chuckled. “One more. I promise.”

When Diana’s body grew rigid with the next forcing pain, Martha edged a little closer and braced herself. “Push, Diana, push!” One of the baby’s shoulders emerged. “Keep pushing!”

Once the infant slid free, safely captured by Martha’s hands, Diana collapsed against her husband, panting for air, as the echoes of her cries gradually receded.

While the other women tended to Diana, Martha leaned back on her haunches and brought the spewing babe out from beneath the nightdress and laid him on her lap. “You have a son, Captain. A very lusty, healthy son,” she cried, just loud enough to be heard above the baby’s cries, which filled the sparsely furnished bedchamber.

With practiced skill, she made quick work of wiping the baby a bit, cut the cord, and wrapped the baby in a blanket. For several quick heartbeats, Martha gazed at the newborn, mesmerized by the true miracle she beheld, evidence of His love and His power to create life—life He entrusted to Martha to bring into the world and to this young couple to raise according to His Word.

Precious in his innocence, baby Tyler blinked repeatedly until he was finally able to open his eyes. He quieted and stared up at her, all plump and pink and so recently from heaven itself, she half expected to find wings tucked behind his back.

She stroked one side of his downy cheek and smiled at him. “A blessed welcome to the world, child,” she crooned before lifting him up and placing him in his mother’s anxious arms.

With tenderness and awe, Diana cradled her son against

her breast while her husband gazed at his newborn child over her shoulder. His eyes misted before he turned to his wife and nuzzled the side of her face with his lips. "Thank you for my son," he whispered.

Jubilant, but exhausted, Diana leaned toward her husband and pressed her face to his before she looked down at Martha. "Thank you. For staying with me all this time. For coming so far. For helping me so much. All of you," she added as she glanced at the friends and neighbors who had gathered today to offer their assistance.

Martha watched as the newborn typically captured everyone's attention. She let the gathering of women offer congratulations and generous compliments for a few moments before she called them all back to work. As thrilling as the birth of the baby might be, Martha needed to close the loin, and Diana needed to be washed and set back to bed, where she could rest and hold her baby in greater comfort.

"Hilary, why don't you take this young man and clean him up properly while his mama and I finish up? Captain Tyler, we still need you a little longer, so don't go rushing off. I'll need those warming cloths, too, so if one of you ladies could kindly see if they're ready, we should make quick work of the rest."

Diana handed her son over to Hilary with reluctance that touched Martha's heart. Just in time. A series of forcing pains quickly expelled the afterbirth, which Martha examined closely. Satisfied all appeared to be normal, she pressed one of the warm cloths Hilary had secured against the young woman's vulva and had one of the other women hold it in place to prevent air from entering the birth canal and causing infection.

Under Martha's guidance, Captain Tyler got Diana to her feet. When the other women took over, Martha promptly dismissed him. "We'll call you back in very soon," she promised.

He squared his shoulders, keeping a close eye on his wife as well as his son. "I'd rather stay."

Martha got to her feet and wiped her hands on her birthing apron. "I'd rather you didn't. Now, if you don't mind, I still have work to do with my patient."

Rebellion flashed in his eyes.

She tilted her head back to fully lock her gaze with his and put her hands on her hips. "Now, Captain," she ordered in as firm a voice as she dared.

"There isn't a man aboard ship who would try to order me to do anything."

"We're not at sea, Captain. Childbirth is my command, not yours. Now, unless you want to prolong Diana's discomfort, I suggest you follow orders and leave the room. Please?"

He cocked one brow. "Did anyone ever tell you that you are one stubborn, headstrong woman?"

She grinned. "Quite a few," she quipped.

He grinned back at her. "I thought so. I'll be waiting right on the other side of the door." Without further argument, he left the bedchamber, and Martha let out a sigh of relief. Handling her patients was always a far sight easier than dealing with their husbands.

When she turned her attention back to Diana, the young woman was already abed. With a sheepish grin on her face, the new mother beckoned Martha to come to her side with a weak wave of her hand. "Randolph is very protective," she offered by way of explanation.

"So am I," Martha responded. "Right now, young lady, we need to tend to a few things to make sure you're going to recover quickly so you can take care of that handsome baby of yours."

While Hilary and two of the others restored the room to order by removing the birthing cloths and stool and changing

the bedclothes, Martha helped another to bathe Diana before wrapping the traditional bandages around the new mother's thighs and abdomen. She talked as they worked, if only to keep the young woman's thoughts occupied while her son had his first bath. "Does this young man have a name?"

Diana smiled. "Several. Since we couldn't agree on a name, we decided to compromise and name him for both our fathers: Henry William Alexander Lloyd Tyler."

Martha chuckled. "That's quite a big name for such a little baby. He'll grow into it, that's for sure."

As Diana covered a yawn with the back of her hand, Martha tucked the covers up to her chin before handing young Henry, who was now sound asleep, over to his mother. "You did well, Diana. Very well."

Diana nuzzled her son's head before looking up at Martha. "Will you come back next time?"

Caught off guard, Martha furrowed her brow. "Next time? You're already thinking about next time?"

A chuckle. "Of course. Having this baby was much easier than I thought, once he decided to make his appearance, of course." She yawned again and closed her eyes. "He'll need a brother or two, and several sisters," she managed before drifting off into a well-deserved sleep.

Shaking her head, Martha looked around the bed at the women who had assisted her. "I want to thank you all for your kindnesses and your help. If Diana gets her way, I have a feeling we'll all be together again in the next year or so."

A chorus of laughter. "Come on, Martha. Let's celebrate."

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm starving. We have lots of goodies in the other room. Let's get the groaning party started," Hilary suggested.

"If the Captain hasn't devoured all of it," another commented.

“We should have told you to tell him most of it was reserved for us. He listens to you.”

Another round of laughter, but clear recognition of the status Martha carried with her position—a status she clearly enjoyed.

When Martha walked over and opened the door to the bed-chamber, Captain Tyler rushed in, went directly to the bed, and knelt down at his wife's side. The image of this powerful man, brought to his knees by his affection for his wife and child, inspired tears she blinked away. After giving the couple a few moments together, she led them all in a traditional prayer of thanksgiving before escorting her helpers from the room.

Of all the traditions surrounding a successful birth, the groaning party afterward was one Martha enjoyed immensely. The vast variety of foods, some prepared by the new mother during her grinding pains and others donated by neighbors, of course, was always welcome, especially the desserts.

But it was the celebration of sisterhood shared by all those in attendance that gave Martha the most satisfaction. Without the help of other women, Martha's job would be nearly impossible. Without the continued support and guidance of other women, Diana's role as a new mother would be ever more difficult. To that end, the groaning party was testimony to the bonds of womanhood that childbirth reinforced and sustained, for one generation of women after another.

Exhilarated, Martha indulged herself and filled a platter with desserts. Hilary took one look at Martha's plate, giggled, and followed suit while the others tackled a casserole filled with sausages and potatoes.

Seated side by side together at the table in the kitchen with the others, she and Martha nibbled on warm bread pudding and apple tarts drenched with honey. “Will you be leaving for home today?” she asked.

Anxious to get back home, Martha nodded, although it would take a good two days to get back to Trinity. "It's so early in the day, I think I will. Has anyone sent for the afternurse?"

Hilary swallowed down a generous helping of pudding before she answered. "Mrs. Calloway should be here soon."

"Then I'll just wait to make sure she's arrived before I go."

A knock at the kitchen door interrupted the gaiety, and Martha turned, expecting the afternurse. Instead, when one of the women opened the door, a man she did not recognize stepped into the room. Since he could not possibly be the afternurse, she turned her attention back to her plate and started devouring the rest of her apple tart.

"Widow Cade?"

The man's voice sounded almost apologetic, and she said a quick prayer that he had not come to summon her to another birthing. Not when she was so close to going home. Feeling a tad guilty for being selfish, she wiped her lips with a napkin, rose, and approached him.

"I'm Widow Cade."

He tipped his hat. "Jacob Rheinhold."

She cocked a brow.

He swallowed so hard, his Adam's apple bulged in his thin, narrow neck. "I'm a peddler by trade. Heading west. Passed through Trinity a few days back. When folks at the tavern found out I was headed this way, they asked me to bring you this." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a folded document, and handed it to her before he left as abruptly as he had arrived.

More curious than concerned, and relieved he had not come to summon her for a birthing, she unfolded the document. To her surprise, she found herself staring at a badly wrinkled broadside advertising a theater troupe of some kind, replete with a list

of scheduled stops at towns all the way east to New York City, including Trinity.

Why anyone might think Martha was interested in such a theater troupe defied reason, but when she turned the paper over, she read words that literally stole her breath away:

Dearest Martha,

Victoria has run away with the troupe. We tried to find her, but failed. Please forgive me.

Your brother,

James

Shock. Disbelief. Horror. They exploded with such force that they destroyed the gay celebration Martha had been enjoying within a single heartbeat. Martha's body went numb as questions raced through her mind. Victoria had run away? With a theater troupe? Impossible. Totally impossible. Victoria was a difficult young woman at times, but she could not be that irresponsible or that impetuous to just up and run away from home.

When she read James's short note again, her heart began to pound. It was true. It was true! Her daughter had run away! But when? How? Why? Dear Lord in heaven, why?

Nearing a state of total panic, she turned the broadside over and read the schedule of appearances, although her hands were shaking so badly she could scarcely make out the words. According to the broadside, the troupe had been in Trinity about a week ago. By now, the troupe itself was long gone from the local area, but the printed schedule she held in her hands was the key that would lead her to Victoria so she could bring her home.

Hilary approached her with concern etched in her features. "Is it bad news?"

Martha quickly folded the broadside and put it into her pocket. "A note . . . just a . . . note from my brother. Nothing to worry about," she murmured, too ashamed to admit to anyone here that her own daughter had been so unhappy she had run away from home. "I'm afraid I truly must be getting along. Will you stay until Mrs. Calloway arrives?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. I'll just check Diana once more before I leave," Martha suggested. As tears formed and threatened to overflow, she hurried from the kitchen and went directly to the bedchamber. As she walked, she quickly formulated a plan of action. Rather than waste days traveling back to Trinity, she would head straight for the town where the theater troupe was scheduled to next appear, confront Victoria, and force her to come home to Trinity with her mother.

At most, finding Victoria would take a week or two, and her reward from Captain Tyler would surely cover her expenses.

By then, Martha would have complete control of her emotions. By then, Martha would be able to speak to her daughter in a civil tone of voice. By then, Lord willing, she would be ready to hear Victoria's explanation, talk some sense into that girl, and be able to forgive herself for not being at home where she belonged, especially when her daughter so obviously needed her.