

At HOME in TRINITY • 2

THE
MIDWIFE'S CHOICE

DELIA PARR



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*Dedicated to my mother and father,
Evelyn and John,
and all the sweet memories of you*



1

JANUARY 1831

For most folks, a knock at the door meant company had come to call, but for midwife Martha Cade, the past ten years had taught her that each knock was a call to duty that might take her many miles from home to serve friends and neighbors, regardless of the hour or the weather or the state of her own affairs.

Just after dawn, a knock at the back door of the confectionery interrupted the day's baking. Martha glanced at her friends and benefactors and wiped her hands on her apron. "I'll answer. At this hour, it's probably for me," she suggested, anticipating her fourth call to duty in as many days.

Fern, the older of the two Lynn sisters, nodded and continued to twist and knot fresh dough into shape, but Ivy immediately stopped and waved away Martha's words. "Abner said he'd stop by early with cream and eggs," she countered and left to answer the door.

She returned with a stranger. The man was young, probably

in his midtwenties. His cheeks were red with cold, and it was the worried expression he wore that Martha recognized as the call to duty she had anticipated with the knock on the door.

Ivy offered Martha a knowing look. "This is Russell Clifford. Russell, this is Midwife Cade."

He removed his hat, revealing a thick head of brown hair almost the same color as his dark eyes. "I'm sorry to come to fetch you so early. I'm—I'm afraid I woke up Reverend Welsh, too. Didn't know where to find you, but he set me straight. Said you'd probably be up, anyway," he added, as if finding her at work eased his conscience a bit. "It's my wife, Nancy. She had a fall two days back, and she's worried about the babe she's carryin'. We were hopin' . . . that is, I was wonderin' if you could come home with me and see to her. I've got a homestead up on Double Trouble Creek. I'm afraid it's a good long ride from here with all the snow."

"Of course I will. Just how soon is the babe due?"

"Late April, best as she can figure."

"Tell me what happened," she prompted as she began to remove her apron. "How did Nancy fall?"

He swallowed hard. "She . . . well, she was bringin' in some firewood from the barn when she musta tripped on her skirts. She's always been a tad clumsy."

"Any pains? Or bleeding?" she asked, without bothering to reprimand him for letting his teeming wife fetch firewood at all.

He shook his head. "Not before I left this mornin'. She's just bruised up a bit and worried somethin' awful. It's our first babe," he added.

Relief flooded Martha's spirit, and she set her apron aside. With God's grace, she would be able to set the couple's fears to rest and still be home before nightfall. "Nature protects her babes pretty well, but it won't do any harm for me to check and reassure you both. I'll just change and get my bag. Ivy, why don't you get this young man something to eat and a hot drink

to warm him up, then send him over to Dr. McMillan's stable? I'll have Grace saddled by then."

Ivy nodded. "But what about your breakfast?"

"I'm not really hungry," Martha insisted for the second time that morning.

Fern rose from her seat. "Nonsense. You can't ride off on an empty stomach. I'll wrap up a honey bun. You can eat it on the way. Go on. Go get yourself ready," she suggested.

Without posing any argument, Martha went directly to the staircase while Ivy fussed over young Clifford. She mounted the steps and went straight to her room, where Bird, a wounded yellow warbler she cared for, chirped a greeting. She smiled and paused just long enough to add small pieces of molasses cookie to his seed bowl. "I'm off again. Behave yourself while I'm gone," she cautioned and quickly changed into her split skirt.

After donning a heavy woolen cape and sturdy riding gloves, she gathered her bag of simples, herbal remedies she had prepared herself. On second thought, she retrieved the collapsible birthing stool she had inherited from her grandmother from beneath her bed, just in case she needed it.

She hurried from her room, followed the hall to the front staircase, descended, and continued through the shop foyer. Instead of worrying about the difficult ride ahead, she focused on the woman who needed her help.

Martha did not always know the women or children she treated. She just wished she had seen Nancy Clifford before now, if only to have a better feeling about whether concern for the woman and her unborn babe was truly warranted.

Bitter cold air clouded in front of her as she took in deep breaths and exhaled while walking as briskly as she dared on the snow-covered ground. Carrying her bag and stool, one in each hand, actually helped her to keep her balance as she tried to keep her footing while walking into a stiff wind. Once she reached the protection of the covered bridge at the south end

of West Main Street, which crossed Dillon's Stream, she let her shoulders relax and hurried through to the other side.

She reached Dr. McMillan's home and made her way to the stable located directly behind the house. Once inside, she set her bag on the ground, laid the birthing stool on top of it, and shut the door behind her. Grace greeted her with a snort and stomped the ground with a forefoot. Half draft horse and half saddle horse, she was quite sturdy, with a gray coat mottled by splotches of black and white. "Good morning to you, too. And you," she added when she spied her brother's former stable cat, Leech, perched on Grace's back.

He was one nasty cat that much preferred horses to humans, and Martha had a scar on her forearm to prove it.

Leech responded with a customary hiss, then promptly exchanged his sleeping place for one on the back of the doctor's horse in the next stall.

She gave Grace a good portion of oats, which she ate while Martha saddled the mare and strapped on the birthing stool and bag. After leading the horse outside, she resecured the barn door. "If we hurry, and if we're all truly blessed this day, you and I will be home in time for supper," she murmured.

She mounted the horse, tightened the fastening on her hood, and tucked her cape around her as the wind whipped at her split skirt. She leaned forward and patted Grace on the neck. Instead of waiting for Russell Clifford, however, she urged Grace forward toward the confectionery.



A howling, incessant wind and snow-covered terrain demanded all of Martha's attention and made conversation nigh impossible during the lengthy trek with Clifford to his homestead. Long frozen, her breakfast lay untouched in her cape pocket.

Once inside the rustic, isolated log cabin, Martha set her bag

and birthing stool just inside the door and removed her cape. As she struggled to ease the frozen gloves from her hands, she glanced around the room. The furnishings in the great room were meager and crudely constructed, but the wooden floor had been swept clean and the room was neat.

Two chairs nestled against a small table near the hearth, where a large black kettle hung over ashes nearly gone cold. The hooked rug beneath the table provided the only splash of color in the room. Cookware, plates, and utensils sat together on yet another rickety table. No curtains adorned the two windows on either side of the door. A door to her right, apparently to the bedchamber, was closed.

Russell went directly to the hearth and stoked the fire back to life. “We’re just startin’ out,” he apologized. “It’s frightful cold in here. Nancy should have kept this going,” he murmured. “She’s probably still restin’ in bed. Been sleepin’ a lot since she fell,” he explained when Martha cocked a brow.

She warmed her hands in front of the fire. Although eager to see to her patient, she knew better than to go near Nancy with hands numb with cold. Apparently, Russell had also left his wife alone, instead of having one of the neighbor women stay with her. She found that odd, if not troubling. “Where do you come from?” she asked as the warmth from the fire began to bring life back to her hands.

He stood up and slapped away splinters of wood and ash from his trousers. “We left New Jersey early last fall when Nancy and I got married.”

“I suppose you haven’t met many neighbors.”

He blushed. “Not yet. But I try to take good care of my wife. When she said she needed help, I went straight to town to fetch you. Are . . . are you gonna see her now or not?” he asked, clearly anxious about his wife as well as his unborn child.

“Right away.” Martha secured her bag and headed directly to the bedchamber. “Wait here. I shouldn’t be long,” she informed

him, entering the room and closing the door behind her. She glanced quickly around the room. A single trunk anchored one wall. A small table with a pitcher and washbasin sat on the other wall below a single, curtainless window that cast garish light into the room.

Her patient was lying in a double bed with the bedclothes in disarray. Nancy appeared to be quite young, perhaps even as young as Martha's daughter, Victoria, yet here she was, married and already expecting her first child. Strands of limp brown hair lay matted against her thin, pale cheeks. Martha could see no sign of bruising on the woman's face, but there was a bump on her head that would account for her sleeping so much.

Her eyes were closed, and for the moment, she appeared to be resting comfortably. As Martha approached the bed, Nancy groaned, clutched her abdomen, and rocked from side to side. Martha's heart began to pound as she raced forward. "Nancy, I'm Martha Cade. I'm a midwife. Russell brought me here to help you."

Nancy let out a yelp and began to cry. "T-too early. T-too early. P-please help me. Make the pains stop," she pleaded.

Martha took Nancy's right hand into her own and stifled a gasp. In addition to the deep scrapes on the heel of the palm, the middle finger curved up at the middle knuckle and did not lie flat. The small finger jutted out at the knuckle in an odd angle, but neither finger carried any bruises to indicate the woman's hand had been injured in her fall. Martha had seen enough poorly set broken bones to know that Nancy had broken each of her fingers at one time, but she had no time to waste on anything other than the woman's current distress.

Martha placed her other hand on top of the woman's swollen abdomen and tried to hide her concern. "How long have you had the pains?"

"Since . . . since just after Russell left," she managed, then gritted her teeth together.

Martha felt the young woman's abdomen go rigid with another contraction that edged Martha's concern up another notch. All told, Russell had been gone for several hours, which did not bode well for anything Martha might attempt to do to stop the pains. "How long have they been this close?" she asked, but her patient was unable to answer. Both the quick timing and the intensity of the contractions led Martha to believe the pains had shifted from groaning pains to forcing pains, which meant birth was imminent.

When the pain subsided, Martha took a fresh cloth from her bag, moistened it with rose water, and bathed Nancy's face. "How long have your pains been this close?" she repeated.

Soulful brown eyes filled with tears. "I don't know. An hour. Maybe two." She clutched one of Martha's hands hard. "Make them stop. Please. It's too soon. My babe's not due till April. Please help me."

"I'll see what I can do. First, I'll need to examine you. Then . . . well, we'll see," Martha promised. She worked quickly, rolling the quilt and sheet up from the bottom of the bed to form a small mound that rested on the woman's chest. When she eased Nancy's nightdress up from her ankles to her knees, she noticed the bruises on each of her shins, evidence she must have tripped and fallen forward, just as Russell had said. She feared the girl's abdomen, perhaps, had taken the brunt of her fall, which may have caused the premature pains.

Martha rinsed her hands, dried them, and lubricated her right hand. "I'm just going to see how far you've gotten," she explained. Before she could begin her examination, however, Nancy cried out and doubled up with yet another pain. A gush of bloody fluids flowed from her loins and drenched the bedcovers.

Martha caught her breath. Birth was indeed imminent, but the joyful anticipation she normally felt was replaced by sorrow. Born this early, the babe would be too small to survive, and there was nothing Martha could do now to prevent the

tragedy about to unfold. There would be no groaning party, no celebration of new life for Nancy and Russell. Only grief that faith and time would one day heal.

“Russell—come quickly. Bring the birthing stool. Now!” she barked.

Dismayed that she had no assistants to help her, Martha eased her patient into a sitting position. She slid the younger woman’s legs over the side of the bed until her feet rested on the floor, then sat down on the bed and put her arm around the suffering woman’s shoulders while Russell struggled to set the birthing stool into proper position. “It’s too late to stop what nature has begun. I’m sorry. But I’ll do what I can to make this easier for you.”

“My babe!” Nancy cried before she slumped forward and clutched her abdomen. “My babe. My poor, dear babe.”

“We can’t question the Lord’s plans for your babe. He’s probably too small to survive, but we don’t know that. Not yet,” she added. It was not uncommon for a woman to misjudge when her babe was due, especially the first, but the small size of Nancy’s distended abdomen did not offer much hope. “Pray, sweet girl, and trust Him to take care of both of you.”

“No. It’s too soon. I can’t have my babe yet,” she wailed.

Martha held the girl through another pain before guiding her to the stool. “You sit down on the stool first, Russell. That’s right. Nancy, sit right on his lap. There you go. Now hold on to your wife, Russell, while I get my things.”

Within moments, Martha had her scissors and a small towel that would have to serve as a blanket. After she tied her birthing apron into place, she yanked a sheet from the bed to use as a birthing sheet. She put it into place as best she could, knelt down in front of her patient, and tried to offer her a reassuring smile. Tenderly, she eased her hands beneath the nightdress and placed one hand against the soft, moist flesh near the birth canal. “When the next pain begins—”

She never got to finish her instructions. The next pain hit with a vengeance. Nancy screamed, and Martha felt the baby's head emerge. Another pain, and she held a little body in her hands. Within a heartbeat, Martha had the baby boy cradled in her lap. His whole body was tinged a pale blue, but he bore no bruises or any other injuries from his mother's fall.

He lay perfectly still. So very, very still. She wiped his little face and rosebud lips with a corner of the towel before cutting the cord.

"Russell? What's happening, Russell? Why can't I hear the babe cry?" Nancy cried.

"Sh-h-h," he whispered. "It's all right. Everything is going to be all right."

While Russell tried to comfort his wife, Martha worked gently, but firmly, to remove the cord that was wrapped not once, but twice, around the boy's tiny neck. She blinked back tears. In the midst of tragedy, Martha had found a blessing. This baby would have been strangled to death during birth, whether that was now or later. She offered a prayer of thanksgiving that this fact would help to relieve any guilt Nancy might bear for the fall that hastened her son's entrance into this world.

Martha massaged his little body and prayed she could bring life back to his form, if only to have his mother hear him cry. Just once. To give them a few moments of life to share together—moments that would have to last Nancy a lifetime.

But to no avail.

She held his lifeless body, so very small, yet so perfectly formed, in the palm of her hand. "Your sweet little angel boy has already gone Home," she whispered before wrapping him in the towel and placing him in his mother's trembling arms. Choking back her own sobs, she prayed as she delivered the afterbirth. For Nancy. For Russell. And for their little angel son.

Profound sadness enveloped her spirit, and she struggled to embrace this little one's loss as his mother wept. In nearly ten

years of practice, she had lost only four babies to stillbirth, and each still lived vividly in her memory. Still, nothing could ever prepare her for this experience, and she tried with all her might to accept this baby's death as an opportunity for all of them to receive even greater blessings.

Later, she would record today's tragedy in her diary and pray it would be a very long time before she had to do it again.

"I'm sorry, Russell. I'm so sorry. It's all my fault. Please forgive me. Please."

Startled by Nancy's plea, Martha looked up. Nancy cradled her dead child against her bosom with her deformed hand. She began crying uncontrollably, but it was Russell who garnered all of Martha's attention.

With his lips pressed together in a firm line, he held his body stiff. His gaze was hard and unforgiving. Instead of answering his wife, instead of reassuring her that he did not blame her for this accident of nature, he eased her from his lap, stood up, and handed her over to Martha.

"I have a grave to dig," he mumbled and quickly left the room without ever holding his son or offering a single word of comfort to his wife.

Stunned, Martha embraced the young woman. With the tiny boy's body pressed between them, they wept together. Childbearing was indeed a woman's lot, her cross as well as her greatest blessing, creating bonds of sisterhood between all women—bonds most men could scarcely begin to understand. Memories of her own two babies, now resting next to their father in the cemetery, still ran deep.

For many men like Russell, the shock of losing a babe unleashed emotions they would bury deep in their hearts and hide from the world, but in time, she prayed, Russell and Nancy would be able to grieve together, accept their loss as God's will, and forgive the accident that had led to this early, tragic birth.

Nancy was far from home and family, with no mother to con-

sole her, no familiar friends or neighbors to help her. For now, Martha would have to be the anchor that held Nancy and her faith steady. “Give a good cry, sweet Nancy. You are not alone. You are never alone,” she crooned. “I’m so sorry, so very sorry.”

Later, there would be time to offer hope, to speak of the children Nancy would someday carry and welcome into the world with great joy and celebration, but now was not that time. Although this baby had never drawn a single breath or suckled at his mother’s breast, to his mother, he had been real. He had been her baby for many months—months filled with dreams that now would never be fulfilled.

Now was a time for grieving his loss, for forgiving, and for healing, both in body and soul. She cried with Nancy for all that could have been and prayed for healing for this couple—a healing that would bring them closer together, united as one, in faith and in love.